

On Equal Pay Day, Women's Fund Announces Task Force to Build a Roadmap for Women to Economic Security



Our mission is to promote educational attainment and economic security for women and girls in the region.

The Women's Fund of Southeastern Massachusetts announced a newly formed task force with a goal of creating a clear path for women to become economically self-sufficient. The Task Force on Pathways for Women to a Living Wage brings together local community members and leaders, including experts on women, employment, education and social issues, to discuss the obstacles to women's economic self-sufficiency and to recommend solutions.

"Today we reflect on the fact that there is still a significant wage gap – and much higher rates of poverty for women. It is also a day to recommit to closing that gap, which is even wider for women of color." said Valerie Bassett, Executive Director of the Women's Fund of Southeastern MA, which is convening the 50-plus member task force, some of whom joined the group for the announcement. "Part of the premise of this task force is that by improving women's economic health,

we will improve the region's overall educational and economic success. By closing the wage gap, we could cut women's poverty in half. "

The task force is meeting monthly to examine facts, discuss options, and develop recommendations to be released in the fall of 2015. The Women's Fund has committed to target more of its funds towards the solutions developed by the task force. Task force members will also consider commitments their own institutions can make.

New Bedford Mayor Jon Mitchell affirmed his support for this initiative, "I have assigned a representative from my office to serve on the Task Force, learn more about these issues and find ways that the City can expand opportunities for all women. We can't afford to leave women's talent behind in the regeneration of the New Bedford economy."

"We can do this if we come together, but it's not a quick fix." said task force co-chair Jean Fox of the Bristol County Commission on the Status of Women. "There are many factors in addition to the most obvious ones of the minimum wage and wage equity. We need to make a better pathway for girls and women, beginning with early learning and child care, and continuing through high school, and education and training after high school, as well as to make broader policy issues from housing to welfare."

Thousands of women in New Bedford struggle every day to put food on the table for their children, let alone achieve the American dream of upward mobility. According to Census numbers analyzed by the University of Massachusetts- Dartmouth Public Policy Center, one-quarter of women in New Bedford and Fall River live at or below the federal poverty level. That includes 12 percent of employed women in New Bedford and 9 percent of employed women in Fall River, who are working and still living in poverty. Close to half of the households with children in both Fall River and New Bedford are led by single mothers – and half of those households are living in poverty.

This is double the statewide rate of female poverty and single mother-headed households.

“Because of the high rates of women’s poverty and single female-headed households in this region, we are not just focused on wage equity, but on increasing the percentage of women earning a living wage – enough to support them and their families,” added Ms. Bassett.

A single mother of two school-age children in New Bedford needs to earn somewhere between \$25- \$30 per hour or \$52,872-\$60,722 annually to be self-sufficient, according to the Crittenton Women’s Union Economic Independence Index and MIT Living Wage Calculator. The median income for all women in New Bedford is \$33,397 – well below this amount.

“It’s the Women’s Fund’s 15th anniversary this year, and we are reinvigorating our approach to understanding and improving women’s economic security in the region. The goal of this task force is quite simply, to figure out what it will take to move the needle, and then, it will be up to us as a community to move the needle,” said Bassett.

The purpose of the Bristol County Commission on the Status of Women is to advance women toward full equity in all areas of life and to promote rights and opportunities for all women. The mission of the BCCSW is to provide a permanent, effective voice for women across Bristol County that facilitates and fosters community and inclusiveness among women. The Commission stands for fundamental freedoms, basic human rights and the full enjoyment of life for all women throughout their lives.

The Women’s Fund of Southeastern MA raises funds, takes action and invests in solutions to increase women’s economic independence. Our mission is to promote educational attainment and economic security for women and girls in the region.

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