

Today, Tuesday, April 17, 2012, is recognized as Equal Pay Day in the United States. While final Census pay data for 2011 are not yet available, this date symbolizes that women must work far into 2012 to earn what men earned in 2011.

According to 2010 statistics from the Census Bureau, women are paid, on average, about 77.4 cents for every dollar their male counterparts are paid. Here in Oregon, we are just on the low side of that average – 77.3 cents per dollar. As a group, full-time working women in Oregon lose approximately \$5,201,238,735 each year due to this gap.

National statistics for women of color are even more disheartening: in 2009 African-American women got 61 cents for every dollar earned by white non-Hispanic men, and Hispanic women only 52 cents.

This problem has persisted for generations despite Congress' passage of the Equal Pay Act in 1963, which made it illegal to pay men and women different wage rates for equal work on jobs that require equal skill, effort, and responsibility, and are performed under similar working conditions.

Progress has been slow. In 1963, American women earned on average 58.9 cents for every dollar earned by men. The gap has been closing at the rate of approximately one-half cent per year. At the current rate of progress American women can hope to achieve pay parity with men in 2055, when the college class of 2012 reaches the age of 65.

The Oregon Commission for Women, in its role as advocate for the women of Oregon, recommends four strategies to close the gap:

**1. Qualified women must have access to education, jobs, and promotion opportunities.**

“Affirmative action” simply means that colleges, universities, and employers must take steps to ensure that women receive equal consideration for positions *for which they are qualified*.

**2. Employers must make a robust good-faith effort to comply with fair pay laws.** The US Department of Labor offers employers access to tools, including equal pay self-audit guidelines. The guidelines are online at <http://pay-equity.org/cando-audit.html>

**3. Women need to stand up for their legal right to equal pay.** In a tough economy, standing up can be difficult, but women who do so make the workplace fairer for everyone. When seeking work, women should look for positive signs that the prospective employer pays men and women equally, including written pay and benefit policies, job descriptions, and evaluation procedures.

What can a woman do if she finds out she is underpaid for her job? First, she must try to work it out with her employer. If the workplace is unionized, the union can help. If not satisfied with employer efforts, she can consult the Civil Rights Division of the Oregon Bureau of Labor and Industries (BOLI) at <http://www.oregon.gov/BOLI/CRD/index.shtml>.

**4. Finally, we believe that additional legislation can help address this problem.** The Lily Ledbetter Fair Pay Act, passed in 2009, makes it easier for women to recover back wages when

they discover long-term wage discrimination. The Paycheck Fairness Act, first introduced in 2009, would require employers to demonstrate that wage discrepancies are based on actual job distinctions, protect employees from being fired for discussing their pay with colleagues, prohibit employers from engaging in retribution against workers who raise issues of pay parity, and provide for additional research into the causes of this intransigent problem.

Oregon women have always worked at least as hard as the men in their families and their communities. It is long past time we made better progress toward compensating them equally for their labor.