


Medicaid numbers reflect women's income inequality - Delaware Newszap

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By Jen Rini Delaware State News

DOVER — It's not favoritism, just fairness.

Even though the Equal Pay Act of 1963 was signed into law by President John F. Kennedy 51 years ago, income inequity is still a reality for women in the workplace, according to statistics.

Recent statistics from the Delaware Department of Health and Social Services found that women make up 67 percent of the newly expanded Medicaid population. That is about 2,285 out of the total 3,411 Medicaid enrollees through an expanded eligibility criteria adopted as part of the state's health care reform effort in early 2014.

Traditionally, Delaware's Medicaid population leans toward higher female enrollment, said Steve Groff, director of Delaware's Division of Medicaid & Medical Assistance. The split is about 55 to 45 percent female to male, of the 215,450 Medicaid enrollees.

With the expansion of Medicaid, per the Affordable Care Act, to 138 percent of the federal poverty level, the agency has seen an influx in enrollment. Now for a single person, the income threshold is \$15,856 annually to ensure coverage.

"I think that among the newly eligible population, we are seeing a very small sliver of our society which is really low-income workers. These people are clearly earning income but they are not earning enough income to get them far out of poverty," Mr. Groff said.

Health officials are still diving deeper into the statistics to gain a clear picture of the causal effects, but the population does seem to remain consistent, he added.

"I would imagine that it would associate other demographics among women being single parents, heads of households, not having the same opportunities in the workforce, especially if it's a women associated with children."

Medicaid historically began serving low-income women and children, Mr. Groff said, but as the population aged, more people needed long-term care services, eventually reaching to serve individuals with disabilities as well.

"There was no reason to expect any true gender bias there," he said.

Currently, the publicly funded program covers more than 62 million people. It covers more 1 in 3 children and some of their parents, and 40 percent of all births, according to the Kaiser Family Foundation.

Medicaid will always be expected to be a safety net for vulnerable populations, Mr. Groff said, and will continue to serve predominantly women and children. On average, an individual will stay on Medicaid continuously for nine months, but cumulatively many will be on much longer Medicaid enrollments.

“It just varies so dramatically,” Mr. Groff said. “For households that are really on the margin and working jobs where income fluctuates, we have a lot of movement in and out of the program.”

Data from payroll records in 2013 show that the average monthly salary for men is about \$5,106. For women, that number is only \$3,605. For new hires, men on average receive \$2,883 or \$1,955.

George Sharpley, Delaware’s chief economist, said there are a variety of factors that account for the wage discrepancy. In part the wages may reflect social norms that separate the occupations men and women traditionally choose, experience level or discrimination, he said.

“It’s not just any single thing,” he said. “It comes down to the choices being made and the industries, which will have different concentrations of gender. It’s pretty broad-based.”

For instance, there were 14,465 men holding jobs in the construction sector as of 2013, but only 2,625 women. Their monthly wages were \$4,228 and \$3,278, respectively. In the health care sector, over 50,000 women have jobs in health care and social assistance jobs like nursing aides in senior centers, and make roughly \$3,547 a month.

Only 13,000 men, by comparison, work in the same health care field, but make on average \$5,489 a month.

“In the past men would be steered more toward engineering and science, and women would be steered in softer disciplines,” Mr. Sharpley said.

It’s the idea that men would be doctors and women would be nurses.

“That is changing ... but those changes take time to get fully incorporated into the labor force,” he added. “I’m pretty sure we can see this gap narrow in the future ... It’s the product of past choices, but choices may not have been fully free in the past.”

Data also suggests that in 2012, there were 8,565 households in Delaware where a single male was head of a household with children younger than 18, but there were 24,486 households where a female was head of household with children younger than 18.

That data also relates to Medicaid enrollment, Mr. Groff added. Women may have a stronger incentive to get coverage than single men in order to have secure plans for their children and have access to preventative care.

But women on Medicaid oftentimes are not able to find stable employment long enough to continue the health care.

“Women are put in a position that are in most cases part-time. We have a lot working against us,” said Kathleen Jacobs, a business professor at Wesley College and a member of the Delaware Commission for Women.

The roadblock, however, is not lack of education, Ms. Jacobs said. According to the Department of Education, women have earned 9.1 million more degrees than men, 41.9 million compared to 32.8 million, since 1982.

Still, on a national level, in 2012 women working full-time, year-round made only 77 cents for every dollar that men made — resulting in a wage gap of 23 cents. African-American and Hispanic women working full-time, year-round made only 64 cents and 54 cents respectively for every dollar that non-Hispanic white men made, statistics from the Delaware Commission for Women show.

“It is hurting our economy because a lot of women are holding single households, they are supporting children without a male in the home and this really hurts the economy,” Ms. Jacobs said. “By discriminating against women and holding them down in a low-paying position, it’s really hurting the economy.”

The commission strives to educate women, she said, on navigating the job market and learning to empower themselves in a sometimes dire economic situation.

But ultimately, it comes down to breaking traditional stereotypes. Ms. Jacobs mentioned the Blue Collar Task Force, a legislative commission that features local stakeholders to brainstorm ways to jumpstart blue-collar job sector, but women are often left out of the discussion.

“Women are being locked out of these blue-collar jobs. We have a particular state government that has developed this commission where they are looking at blue-collar jobs, but again you don’t hear anything about females being included. Policy has a lot to do with it and I think politicians need to wake up,” Ms. Jacobs said.

“I’m not saying they are doing it intentionally,” she added. “I think sometimes politicians forget that women are among us.”

Women have made progress over the years, catapulting themselves into high-paying jobs in the corporate world, she said, but it is not enough. As an example, she pointed to Mary Barra, the newly appointed chief executive officer of General Motors.

“I want to know who’s working on the assembly line, who are the people who are really carrying General Motors. I always tell my students the most valuable asset you will ever have is your rank-and-file employers,” Ms. Jacobs said.

She encouraged state and local officials to be brave enough to foster change for the women in Delaware and around the country.

“We don’t want favoritism, we just want fairness,” she said.

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