

# Changing the Economic Story for Vermont Women

by Susan Z. Ritz

Did you know that in Vermont that 43 percent of women who work full-time do not earn enough to cover basic living expenses as defined by Vermont's Joint Fiscal Office? That single women with minor children are nine times more likely than women who are married to live in poverty? That the median annual Social Security income for women in their senior years is only \$10,000—half that of men?

These and other startling statistics were recently revealed in "2016 Status Report: Women, Work and Wages," a new brief released in January and produced by Change The Story (CTS), a multiyear initiative dedicated to significantly improving women's economic status in Vermont. Spearheaded by the state's three most active and influential women's organizations—the Vermont Women's Fund, the Vermont Commission on Women, and Vermont Works for Women—it aligns philanthropy, policy, and program to dig deep into the underlying reasons why women continue to lag behind their male counterparts in almost every area of economic activity and to uncover key leverage points and gender issues that should be considered in future planning for education, employment, and state spending.

The Vermont Women's Fund is providing three years of base funding, beginning with an initial grant of \$89,000 this year. The Commission on Women brings connections to the legislature, businesses, and nonprofit organizations throughout the state. Vermont Works for Women shares its long experience in workforce training for low-income women.

## The Power of Collaboration

"We are the three primary organizations in Vermont focused on women's economic security. So coming together and joining forces helps us tackle the problems from lots of different directions," explained Cary Brown,

can we move the needle on women's economic security farther and faster?"

CTS has also assembled an impressive group of advisers including State Auditor Doug Hoffer, State Treasurer Beth Pierce, Mathew Barewicz, chief of Vermont Department of La-

## Women's Wages Crucial

A series of excellent graphics with accompanying sidebars lay out the brief's findings, clearly demonstrating gender inequity in a wide range of areas critical to the health of Vermont's

ply due to women's predominance in low-wage fields. There are substantial salary differences within occupations. For example, female judges, lawyers, and judicial workers earn 51 percent less than their male counterparts. Women nurses, technologists, and

Rather than concluding with recommendations, the brief ends with a series of questions to stimulate discussion and thought around long-range investments in workforce development and the crafting of economic policy decisions and priorities.



photo: Susan Z. Ritz

Change The Story steering committee at work: (left to right) Lindsey Lathrop-Ryan (CTS staff), Linda Markin (VWW board), Susan McCaslin (VWF council chair), Eileen Boland (VCW commissioner), Cary Brown (VCW ED), Tiffany Bluemle (CTS director), Jen Peterson (VT Community Foundation, VWF) (absent: Meg Smith, VWF Director).

bor, Economic and Labor Market Information, Michael K. Smith, former president of Fairpoint Communications and political analyst at WCAX, and several other equally well-placed consultants. In addition, the initiative engages the business, education, and political sectors to help understand the deep-rooted issues that keep women from fully participating in the state's economy.

"Change The Story is the connec-

economy. Findings show that the gender wage gap cuts across all occupations, and women disproportionately live below the poverty line.

Women are significantly more likely than men to live in poverty or economic insecurity. Fifty-seven percent of women have incomes that fall below \$30,000, while 57 percent of men have incomes above that number. While 7 percent of Vermont families live below the poverty line, that number doubles when there are minor children in the home and is five times higher—37 percent—when a woman is head of the household.

Though the profile of men and women working full-time is remark-

technicians earn 17 percent less than men in the same fields. The narrowest wage gap seems to be in occupations where women are a distinct minority, with women earning only 4 percent less in computers and mathematics and 5 percent less in engineering. In addition, the report shows that the wage gap narrows to 14 percent for women who have a college degree but increases to 23 percent if they have minor children in the home.

Why does this matter? Because, the brief states, women's wages aren't supplementary; they are essential, contributing 40 percent of income in one-third of Vermont families. Ad-

## Getting Women into STEM

In addition to producing the data-driven briefs, CTS has already been instrumental in changing the story in higher education and the business community. In February, Vermont Technical College (VTC) held a press conference with Vermont Works for Women and CTS to announce the creation of a new initiative aimed at recruiting more women students in science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM).

"Employers are beating down the doors of our college for employees. We have a shortage of STEM workers in this

**“Women's wages aren't supplementary; they are essential, contributing 40 percent of income in one-third of Vermont families.”**

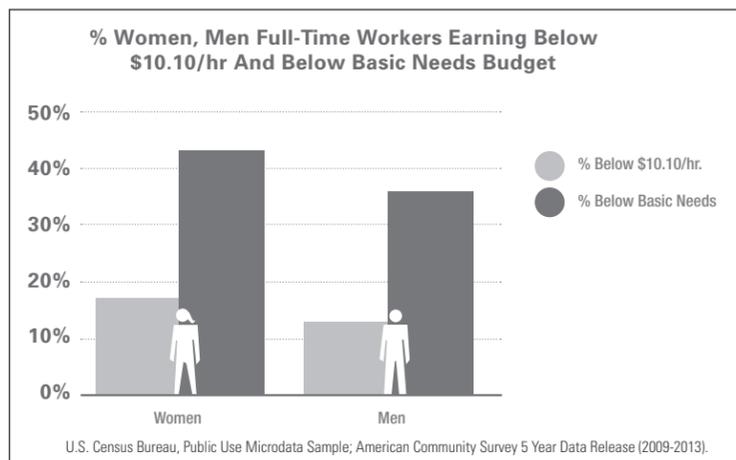
executive director of the Commission on Women.

The CTS team, made up of staff, board members, and commissioners from each partner organization, meets once a month with plenty of follow-up work between meetings.

"It's time consuming, but we all embrace the idea of collaboration, though we're still learning what that means," said Tiffany Bluemle, director

tive tissue," explained Lindsey Lathrop-Ryan, CTS adviser of Community Engagement, who is working closely with Vermont businesses and other relevant organizations, including Advance Vermont, Let's Grow Kids, and Main Street Alliance.

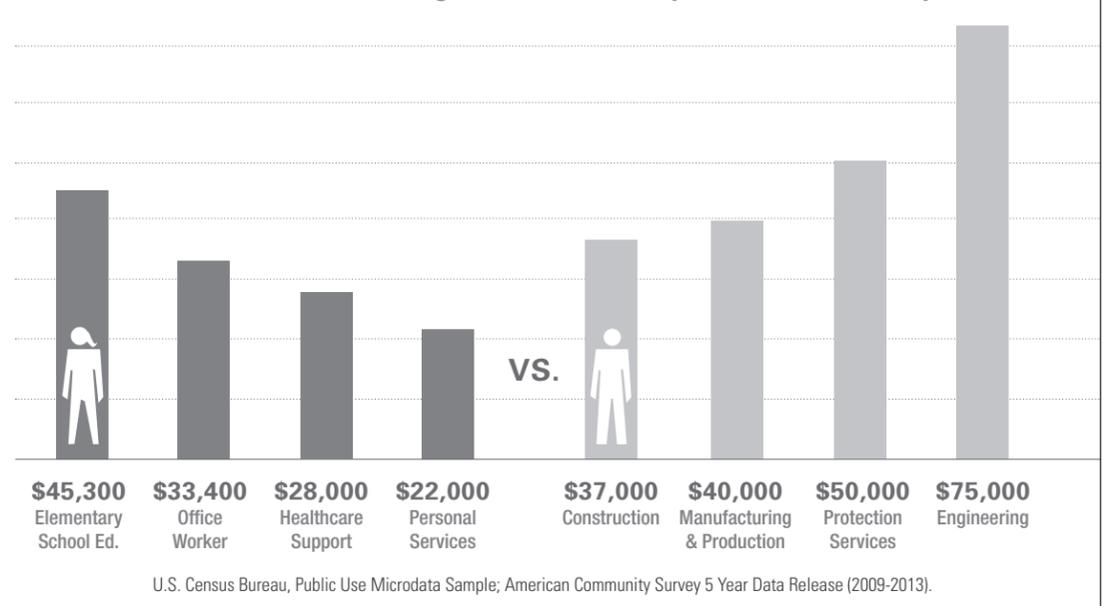
After less than a year, CTS has already made an impact. The aforementioned brief is the first of a series focusing on the wage gap, occupational



of CTS and former executive director of Vermont Works for Women. "We don't check our organizational hats at the door, but we do hold them in our laps, trying to keep our eyes on the big prize. What's our common ground and how can we have the greatest impact? How

segregation, and women's leadership. The report contains statewide statistics and data not regularly collected and published that are critical to understanding the current situation of women in the workforce and how that affects Vermont's economic future.

## Median Annual Earnings In Predominantly Female/Male Occupations



ably similar in terms of age, education, and marital status, the median annual wages in occupations where women or men constitute at least 75 percent of the workforce are strikingly different. Part of this wage gap can be explained by the fact that fields where women have been traditionally clustered, such as elementary school teaching (\$45,300), office work (\$33,400), and health-care support (\$28,000), pay lower wages than traditionally male occupations, including engineering (\$75,000), protection services (\$50,000), and manufacturing (\$40,000).

The wage gap, however, is not sim-

ditionally, women's lower wages over their lifetimes put them at risk as they age. At \$15,500, women's median retirement income falls well below the \$23,000 needed to cover basic expenses, putting pressure not only on seniors and their families, but also on subsidies and benefits in a state already struggling with growing budget deficits.

"I'm not sure we've done enough as a state to consider the costs associated with the wage gap implications, given our growing elderly population. This is a public conversation that needs to happen," said Bluemle.

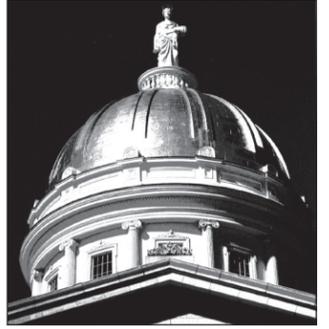
state," said VTC president Dan Smith. "In many of the Vermont careers and industries that are supported by Vermont Technical College, where wages are high and jobs are available, there is a workforce shortage. At the same time, women are underrepresented in those programs and those fields. It's going to be a steep climb to meet that challenge if we're leaving half the talent on the table."

VTC professor Mary O'Leary added that women can bring valued skills to the workplace. "Women tend to be collaborative, communicative, have great management skills, all of which are needed

continued on page 7

# EYES OF CERES

## The Legislature Tackles the All-Payer Model and Siting of Energy Projects



by Kate Mueller

### Siting Alternative Energy

In response to concerns surrounding the process of how alternative energy projects are sited in communities, Sen. Christopher Bray (D-Addison) proposed S.230 in January. The bill aims to give communities more of a say in where projects are sited and combine land use planning with energy generation planning. The bill passed the Senate the last day of March, with 22 yeas and 3 nays. Although hailed as a measure that improves collaboration between the state and local municipalities, not everyone is happy with the results. Several amendments proposed by Sen. John Rodgers (D-Essex-Orleans) were rejected, which included removing certification requirements from town and regional plans, requiring acoustical monitoring of wind towers over 200 feet tall, and allowing non-lawyers to represent parties before the Public Service Board. Some feel the bill does not sufficiently empower communities and protect their interests. The bill now goes on to the House.

### Carbon Tax

The carbon tax, H.395, proposes adding 10 cents per gallon to the price of gasoline, which would gradually increase over a decade to 88 cents per gallon. Among the groups pushing for the initiative is VPIRG, the environmental

advocacy group. The tax is, however, considered regressive because it is a flat tax, not calibrated to income, and certain to impact low-income Vermonters more. However, as part of this proposal, the money raised would be used to reduce the state sales tax by \$1 billion over the next 10 years, cut the sales tax by \$600 million, save state employers \$850 million, and provide \$270 million worth of energy-saving improvements to low-income Vermonters, which proponents of the tax argue mitigates its negative aspect. Furthermore, tax rebates and credits will be based on income levels, with proportionately larger rebates and credits going to lower-income people, along with assistance to low-income residents for efficiency measures such as home weatherization. The bill, whose key sponsor is Rep. Christopher Pearson (P-Chittenden-6-4), is at the beginning stages of being reviewed. It was read for the first time in the House on March 10 and has been referred to the Committee on Natural Resources & Energy.

### All-Payer Model

Governor Shumlin's proposed all-payer model, endorsed by the Green Mountain Care Board (GMCB), has been in the works for more than a year. GMCB board chair Al Gobeille and Shumlin want to get away from fee-for-service care, with its emphasis on quantity of care, to a system that rewards quality-based care focused on keeping Vermonters healthy. Health-

care providers would be made responsible for health outcomes, rather than for services—such as tests and procedures that are costly to patients but may not necessarily be effective.

The state's proposed all-payer model would encourage almost every health-care organization in the state to work under one big accountable care organization (ACO) that would help doctors and other providers coordinate care, reduce unnecessary procedures for patients, and use data to improve patient outcomes. GMCB would be the regulator of this ACO.

In 2015, with Act 54, the legislature authorized the Shumlin administration and GMCB to negotiate with the

will codify the birth control benefit of the Affordable Care Act. The Vermont bill takes it a step further by including vasectomies for men, leaving only condoms not covered. In addition, the bill directs the Department of Vermont Health Access, which acts as the state's insurer for Medicaid, to increase how much Medicaid pays doctors to insert long-acting birth control such as intrauterine devices. The bill passed on a voice vote on March 24 and is now in the Senate, where it has been referred to the Finance Committee. Planned Parenthood notes that Vermont's current 49 percent rate of unintended pregnancy poses a burden to women, families, and communities, making

and Physical Health," on page 19.)

### Paid Leave Passes

A boon to workers happened this legislative session with the passage of H.187, an act relating to absence from work for health care and safety, known commonly as paid sick leave. Shumlin signed the bill into law on March 9, 2016, with the provisions taking effect in January 2017. Vermonters who work full-time are now guaranteed at least three paid sick days from work each year, which will increase to five days starting in 2019. With the signing of this law, Vermont became the fifth state in the nation to require employers to offer paid sick days.

## Emily's List Endorses Kesha Ram



*Emily's List, the nation's largest resource for women in politics, endorsed Kesha Ram, who's running for lieutenant governor in Vermont to continue her lifelong fight for women and families. The endorsement comes on the heels of Ram courageously taking a stand on the state house floor and defending the expansion of access to contraceptives for women.*

*"We are proud to support her in her historic bid to serve Vermonters as lieutenant governor. Ram has been a champion for early childhood education and access to women's reproductive health care, and will continue her extensive track record of advocating for Vermont's women and families as lieutenant governor," said Muthoni Wambu Kraal, senior director of state engagement and development for Emily's List.*

*Ram, the daughter of a Jewish mother and a Hindu father, currently serves as a Vermont state legislator and as the public engagement specialist for the City of Burlington Community and Economic Development Office. Ram has served in the state legislature for eight years, during which she has sponsored bills to close the pay gap, criminalize cyberexploitation, establish a support system and resources for human trafficking victims, and protect survivors of sexual violence. She has also focused on legislative efforts to ensure domestic violence survivors receive unemployment compensation and has worked to expand access to paid maternity leave.*

## change the story

continued from page 6

in our classrooms and in our industries."

Working in collaboration with CTS and VWW, the program projects a 15 to 25 percent increase in its female enrollment over the next three years.

### Women and Business

The Business Peer Exchange is another concrete example of CTS's growing influence. Kicked off by Beth Sachs, co-founder of Vermont Energy Investment Coalition (VEIC) and longtime Vermont Works for Women board member, with support and guidance from CTS's Lindsey Lathrop-Ryan and Jessica Sabich, the exchange brings together 11 local businesses, including Green Mountain Power, Casella Waste Management, Logic Supply, and SunCommon, plus the Main Street Alliance, for monthly meetings to share ideas and talk about gender diversity in the workplace.

"Some are there because they can't recruit enough women. Others feel they don't have enough women in leadership positions with women segregated into customer service and not in management," explained Lathrop-Ryan.

Encouraged through these meetings, one business has already brought male employees together to talk about the wage gap. Another now holds women's luncheons to talk about the CTS brief, while others are creating unconscious bias trainings and are auditing their own websites to see how women are portrayed in their companies. Meanwhile, several other companies are now interested in beginning their own roundtables to emulate the work of the Business Peer Exchange.

"Businesses are the key driver in moving women into positions of leadership, encouraging them to pursue nontraditional careers and to draw attention to labor needs that women are going to have to fill," said Bluemle.

"They also have influence on the legislature that we nonprofits just don't have."

Sachs and Lathrop-Ryan have also initiated a job shadowing program at VEIC, allowing five high school girls from Chittenden County schools to shadow different departments. "We made an effort to reach out to those lower-income girls who don't normally get a chance like this, but whose futures could be most affected by exposure to higher-paying, nontraditional jobs," said Sachs.

Change The Story is also changing the conversations VCVW's Cary Brown hears in the State House. "I'm hearing things I didn't hear a year ago. Last year there was a bill to encourage the Government to consider gender balance in appointments to boards and commissions. This year another bill emerged that would require it." Though neither bill has passed, the ideas are percolating.

"We are planting seeds with our data to see what sprouts," said Bluemle. "We're in this for the long haul. Even though we might be done after three years, if we've done our job well, then others will be talking about these things and carrying the ball beyond us. It's time to change the story for Vermont women and girls!"

The Vermont Women's fund will be holding a benefit for CTS on Tuesday, May 3, 2016, 5:30–7:30 p.m., at the Davis Center, University of Vermont, Burlington, featuring *New York Times* award-winning journalist Jodi Kantor. For more information about that and Change The Story and to download the brief "Women, Work and Wages," visit [www.changesthestory.org](http://www.changesthestory.org).

*Susan Z. Ritz lives and writes in Montpelier. She currently serves on the board of Vermont Works for Women and is a former council chair of the Vermont Women's Fund. □*

US Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services to set up an all-payer system. Under the all-payer model, all sources of health care funds—Medicare, Medicaid, and commercial insurance—would be channeled into one stream and all doctors and hospitals would be paid the same. But to make this work, Vermont needs an increase of Medicare dollars from the feds.

If the feds agree, Vermont would be the first state to use an all-payer reimbursement model for all health-care providers. Getting all providers, both hospitals and doctors, to participate is another potential hurdle: participation in the model would be voluntary.

### Coverage for Contraceptives

On March 23, lawmakers voted overwhelmingly in the House, 128–15, in favor of H.620, an act relating to health insurance and Medicaid coverage for contraceptives. Rep. Ann Pugh (D-Chittenden-7-2) is the main sponsor of the bill, which expands access to birth control, by requiring insurance companies to cover every form of birth control with no copayment; this

access to contraceptive services essential to women's health and equality.

### Dental Bill

The dental bill, S.20, an act relating to establishing and regulating dental therapists, has inched closer to being passed. Last May, it passed the Senate and made it to the House, where it was read for the first time. It was first moved to the Committee on Rules and then to the Committee on Human Services, which continues to hear testimony. The bill would allow midlevel dental providers to perform routine dental care, such as placing fillings and doing minor extractions. These providers would receive training at Vermont Technical College. Proponents argue that it would bring needed dental care to low-income people or people living in rural areas. A broad coalition of lawmakers and organizations support the bill, including Voices for Vermont's Children and VPIRG. According to VPIRG, one in six Vermonters cannot get the dental care they need because they can't afford it, or they simply can't find a dentist. (For more on dental care in Vermont, see "More Than Just a Pretty Smile: Oral

### Legalizing Marijuana

In 2004, Senate bill 76 became law, removing state-level criminal penalties on the use, possession, and cultivation of medical marijuana. People diagnosed with a "debilitating medical condition," such as HIV or AIDS, cancer, and multiple sclerosis, could legally possess up to two ounces of marijuana and cultivate up to three marijuana plants.

Now the push is on to legalize recreational use of marijuana in Vermont, a move supported by Governor Shumlin. Some predict that before the end of the year, recreational weed will be legal in the Green Mountain State.

A major step was taken on February 25 when, after weeks of testimony, the Vermont Senate voted 17–12 to pass S.241, an act relating to regulation of marijuana. It is now in the House undergoing deliberations. The bill would make it legal for Vermonters ages 21 and over to possess up to one ounce of marijuana; nonresidents could have up to a quarter of an ounce. And the bill would create a regulated and taxed system for marijuana production and sale. □