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Wyo. women face income challenges, first lady says

By **KATIE SPRINGER**
News-Record Writer

Most women break into the job market with baby-sitting. When they are a little older, they might work as hotel clerks, cleaning ladies or waitresses.

But do they ever stop to ask how much their time is worth?

No, and why should they? That's what those jobs are worth. Right?

"We've been raised in a culture that thinks it's impolite to ask for more money," Wyoming first lady Nancy Freudenthal said Saturday in a speech at the Women to Women Festival in Gillette.

When these women become adults they don't

ask for raises or negotiate better wages. What happens when these women don't make enough money to feed their families or pay rent?

They live in poverty.

One-quarter of families in Wyoming are headed by a single parent, Freudenthal said. Seventy percent of those families are headed by women.

"Wyoming has the worst wage gap in the U.S., including Puerto Rico," she said.

Women make 63 to 67 cents on the dollar of what men earn. More than one-third of the women in Wyoming live in poverty. They have to work more hours, more than one job and spend less time with their children.

"Many people say Wyoming is a great place to

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Freudenthal: It takes \$6.74 an hour pay to live here

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raise a family. I'm not so sure I agree with them," Freudenthal said.

The Wyoming Standard for Family Economic Self-Sufficiency (FESS), a study led by Freudenthal and other Wyoming professionals, calculates how much money working adults require to meet their basic needs without subsidies of any kind. The study has taken into account the varying costs of living and working by family size and the communities they live in.

A specific study was done for Campbell County, researching real costs of good purchased in our marketplaces.

For one adult to live in Campbell County at "bare-bones minimum" the person must have a job that pays at least \$6.74 an hour, according to the study. If the adult is a single-parent of an infant the person has to make at least \$10.63 an hour.

The more children added to the list, the higher the minimum wage that is needed to survive increases.

"It's the first time this information has been available on a family model basis," Freudenthal said. "It gives a measure to identify with. No matter where we are, we can see where we need to go."

The numbers in the study don't include eating out; they assume every-



News-Record photo by Bill Hefton

Wyoming first lady Nancy Freudenthal addresses the gathering at the Women to Women Festival on Saturday in Gillette.

one gets home to make a meal from scratch. Child-care cost is enormous, taking almost as much money for an infant as it does rent.

"Low wages cause families to scrimp in other areas, putting children in less than decent child care," she said. "It causes them to decide, 'Is someone

going to be there, or will I be able to feed them?'"

Employers can use the FESS to challenge to do better, Freudenthal said. "Employers need to compare the cost of providing decent wages and benefits with the cost of not providing those and risking higher turnover costs, training costs and potential for lost customers, opportunity and market share."

Why would Wyoming want to bring a company into a community that doesn't pay enough for a person to live on? The state becomes "poorer for it," she said. "We need to see food stamps and child-care supports not as a stigma, but as a public support to help get people's career path on higher ground."

Freudenthal sees the study as giving opportunities. "It may help us to get better workforce training in areas where it is needed. Our families are our future. I believe it will open people's eyes to just how difficult it can be to earn a living," she said.

"So many people think it's their fault when people live in poverty. This shows that that just isn't true."

■ **Net FYI:** The Wyoming Standard will be available Feb. 16 at <http://wyoming.gov/governor/policies/people.asp>.