

Equal Pay Day highlights wage gap

By Jessica Lowell

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CHEYENNE - Julie Hunter would like to remind people that the wage gap still exists.

Hunter, president of Capitol City Business and Professional Women, said she has a lot of hope that the gap between what men are paid and what women are paid for comparable jobs can be bridged in Laramie County.

That's because of the economic development that's in the works, including the latest announcement that Wal-Mart plans to build a distribution center west of Cheyenne, which is expected to bring more than 600 jobs.

But in the shorter term, Hunter's chapter, as well as chapters across the country, marked Tuesday as Equal Pay Day.

The organization is encouraging businesses to conduct an equal pay self-audit, to make sure that women are earning wages comparable to the wages that men earn in comparable jobs.

The timing of the day in April shows how many days extra a woman has to work to earn what a male counterpart earned in the previous year.

"We didn't get here overnight," Wyoming Department of Workforce Services Director Kathy Emmons said. "And we won't get out of it overnight."

As the head of the state government department that's charged with developing a workforce in Wyoming that can meet the state's employment needs, Emmons is keenly aware of the difference in pay.

"We are concentrating our resources and training to address the wage gap, and to help women get into nontraditional occupations," she said. Those occupations include construction trade jobs, which typically pay a higher wage than many service-industry jobs.

In 2002, Emmons said, Wyoming ranked 51st in the nation in the gap between what men and women earn.

In many cases, women choose lower-paying jobs, so narrowing the gap can be accomplished by educating them about better-paying opportunities, she said. That education could start as early as junior high, she said.

"It's good to have this recognition," Wyoming first lady Nancy Freudenthal said. Freudenthal has promoted the Wyoming Family Economic Self-Sufficiency standard released earlier this year.

The report details the wages needed to be self-sufficient.

"Everyone needs to focus on their pay," Freudenthal said, particularly negotiating a starting wage.

"If you start behind, you end up substantially behind as your career progresses."