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Report shows how low-income women can move from “Surviving to Thriving”

DENVER – Low-income women and single mothers in Colorado continue to face more barriers to self-sufficiency than other groups, according to a new report released by the Colorado Center on Law & Policy.

Funded by a grant from the Women’s Foundation of Colorado, “[Surviving to Thriving: Pathways to Opportunity for Low-Income Women](#)” reveals the obstacles low-income women and single mothers encounter in their struggle to make ends meet – and the risks of perpetuating the cycle of poverty with their children.

“You feel like you can’t win,” said one participant in a series of focus groups CCLP conducted among low-income women last year. “I try to do everything I’m supposed to do and it’s still not enough.” Women comprise nearly half of the labor force and are essential to the economic engine of the state. Yet, women continue to face disparities in income and opportunity and are more likely to live in poverty than men. Taking a detailed look at the economic and educational challenges facing women and their families, the report found:

- **Median annual income is lowest among single mothers.** The median annual income among single mothers in Colorado is \$28,500. Single-mother families earn only 68 percent of the income earned by single-father families and just one-third of married couple families with kids.
- **Gender discrimination in pay is persistent.** Women earn less than men in Colorado at every educational level and the gender wage gap widens with increasingly higher levels of income. Women with a graduate or professional degree earn just 71 percent of their male counterparts with a similar education.
- **Colorado ranks as one of the top 10 most expensive states in the country for full-time coverage at a day care center.** The annual cost of licensed child care in Colorado is higher than average annual in-state tuition and fees at a public Colorado college or university. Full-time child care for an infant could consume nearly half of a single mother’s income and one-third of her income for a pre-school age child.
- **Women are overrepresented in the low-wage labor force.** Women comprise 46 percent of the Colorado labor force but make up 65 percent of low-wage workers (defined as earning less than \$10.10 an hour).
- **Low-wage workers have less access to paid sick time.** Nationally, only 21 percent of low-wage workers have access to paid sick days compared to 90 percent of high-wage workers.

Along with identifying obstacles, the report also highlights a package of policies that recognize the realities of women’s lives at home and in the workplace and give women and their families a fair shot at getting ahead.

- **Aligning training and education with the needs of employers.** A significant number of jobs in science, technology, engineering and math require knowledge that can be gained from on-the-job-training or through targeted skills training programs or associates degrees. The report found that five of the top 10 STEM jobs provide significant employment opportunities for those without bachelor’s degrees and these jobs pay on average 10 percent higher than jobs with similar educational requirements.
- **Creating affordable and available child care options that work for women.** While the Colorado Child Care Assistance Program (CCCAP) subsidizes the cost of child care for low-income families who are working or enrolled in the Colorado Works program, the need for subsidized child care in Colorado far eclipses the availability. Providing more support for CCCAP and full-day preschool and kindergarten programs would help.
- **Supporting workplace policies that foster productivity, growth and upward mobility.** Our lives have changed but the workplace has been slow to adapt. More women than ever before are the main breadwinner for their families. Yet, women—particularly those working in low-wage jobs—still do not have access to paid sick and family leave.
- **Boosting the incomes of low-wage workers so that full-time work equals earnings sufficient to support a family.** Nearly 60 percent of minimum wage workers in Colorado are women. Although the minimum wage in Colorado is higher than the federal minimum, at \$8.23 an hour the annual full-time income totals only \$17,118 — below the federal poverty level of \$19,790 for a family of three.
- **Developing and strengthening social capital support networks** – Research shows that low-to-middle class communities with strong connections help residents achieve upward economic mobility over time.

“The challenges for low-income women are daunting, but not insurmountable,” said Claire Levy, executive director of CCLP. “This report shows the work that needs to be done to provide women a fair shot at economic security. I’d like to thank the Women’s Foundation of Colorado for providing the funding to make this meaningful and important project possible.”

“Surviving to Thriving” is [available online](#). A limited number of print copies are also available by request. For media queries or other requests regarding the report, contact Bob Mook, CCLP’S communications director at bmook@cclponline.org, or by phone at 303-573-5669, ext. 311.