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The motherhood gap: Town hall meeting discusses women's workplace concerns and proposed national legislation to address solutions



Eliza Benz, 1, traveled with her mother, Leah Benz of Marin County, not shown, to a town hall meeting Friday with the members of the California Legislative Women's Caucus and Rep. Lynn Woolsey on the challenges that working women face. The meeting was held in Santa Rosa at the Steele Lane Community Center, Friday August 24, 2007. (KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat) 2007 (Photo by - Kent Porter) Photos by KENT PORTER / The Press Democrat

By CAROL BENFELL
THE PRESS DEMOCRAT

Forty years after the women's rights movement first sought equal pay for equal work, employers continue to discriminate against women

with children, speakers said Friday at a town hall meeting sponsored by state women legislators.

The featured speaker was Joan Blades, an activist mother who helped launch MoveOn.org and then created MomsRising.org, which tackles mothers' issues.

A key topic was federal legislation introduced by Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Petaluma, that seeks to address inequities in the workplace and improve day care and health care for children.

"Very few people are aware of the huge workplace gap, not between men and women, but between men and mothers," said Blades, who earlier this year launched FamiliesRising.org to include fathers' workplace issues.

Nationally, employers' groups have long pointed to women's divided concerns between family and home as an explanation for their slower advancement and lower pay.

But the tight job market in Sonoma County is leading employers here in another direction, said Karen Sommer, head of the Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce government review council.

"Employers are desperate to find good, well-qualified people, no matter who they are," Sommer said. "We're at a point now where we're not looking at men or women. The baby boomers are retiring, young people can't afford to stay here, and we're looking for qualified people, period."

The town hall meeting at Steele Lane Community Center in Santa Rosa was sponsored by the California Legislative Women's Caucus, 34 state assemblywomen and senators.

Participants included Woolsey, state Sen. Patricia Wiggins, D-Santa Rosa, and Assemblywoman Noreen Evans, D-Santa Rosa.

The town hall, attended by about 50 people, is one of several being held across the state to find out what legislation might be needed to address working women's concerns.

Lori Siebler, a Santa Rosa mother of three, said child care was a huge issue for her.

"It's the difference between being able to work or not. If I don't have that, I can't do anything else," Siebler said. "I've had to miss work from my son not being able to be in child care. I've had to call friends and family and move him from one place to another, and I don't feel very good about that."

The 2½-hour town hall focused on women's issues, but speakers acknowledged that fathers also are challenged to juggle work and family life.

"Women respond to the challenges of motherhood and work in a different way than men," Evans said. "That's not to denigrate the challenges men face, but we need to focus on the unique challenges of women in the workplace."

Employers frequently feel it's a plus for a man to have a family. But a woman with a family is often assumed to have less interest in her job, Evans said.

"Employers' perceptions of a working mother are very different than their perceptions of a working father," Evans said. "Mothers are often assumed to be putting less into their work. I've personally experienced this, and it's very frustrating."

Woolsey's legislation -- HR 2392, the Family and Workplace Balancing Act -- is gender-neutral. It seeks to help both fathers and mothers by expanding paid family leave time; improving child care training and upgrading child care facilities; and providing universal voluntary preschool and after-school care, among other things.

"Working parents shouldn't have to choose between doing a good job for their family or their employer," Woolsey said.

The cost of implementing the bill, which is slated for a hearing this fall, has not yet been determined by the federal Office of Management and Budget. But Woolsey said the long-term benefits would outweigh the short-term costs.

"We will have healthier children, who are better learners, and fewer people in prisons," she said.

Mike Hauser, Santa Rosa Chamber of Commerce president, said he

couldn't speak to the Woolsey legislation because he had not yet reviewed it.

But he said many employers have already become convinced that offering support to working mothers and fathers, through such things as child care, is the best way to keep skilled workers.

"Whether there is legislation or not, I think many employers are now trying to figure out how to provide more life-balance options for all workers," Hauser said. "They realize that to keep good employees, they need to have as many support options as possible."

By 2008, women will account for 48 percent of the labor force nationally, compared with 45 percent in 1988, according to estimates by the federal Bureau of Labor Statistics. Today, 80.2 million men and 69.4 million women are on the job. An estimated 75 percent of working women have children.

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