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## Some legislators fear pay-equity fund may be halved

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CHARLESTON, W.Va. -- Women in West Virginia earn less than in any other state, and their wages compared to men's are lower than in most of the country, according to the Institute for Women's Policy Research. Now, some legislators fear that a fund meant to help equalize pay in civil-service jobs could be slashed in half.

Gov. Joe Manchin's proposed budget for the upcoming fiscal year reduces the Pay Equity Reserve from \$250,000 to \$125,000. The money helps supplement the salaries of state workers at the bottom of the pay scale -- workers who are usually women.

The Legislature is set to approve a \$4.2 billion budget Sunday, after trimming \$200 million in response to the recession. On Friday, a committee that worked out differences between the Senate and House budget proposals agreed to keep the Pay Equity Reserve at \$250,000, said Chairman Harry Keith White, D-Mingo.

But Manchin could still reduce the Legislature allocation.

Delegate Virginia Mahan, D-Summers, questioned why the governor proposed a 50 percent reduction for the fund when most areas received cuts of 2 to 10 percent.

"In my opinion, this is probably the worst possible message we can send to women workers in West Virginia," she said.

In 1998, Mahan and Delegate Barbara Fleischauer, D-Monongalia, sponsored legislation to create the fund.

"The idea was to make ourselves obsolete at some point, and that is not going to happen for a couple decades," said Mahan, who also is chairwoman of the Equal Pay Commission.

At the current funding level, the state Women's Commission estimates it will take more than 30 years to achieve pay equity, she said: "This is a pretty inadequate fund to begin with."

Manchin spokeswoman Sara Payne Scarbro said the governor understands the importance of equal pay for equal work.

"Several women serve in the Governor's Cabinet as well as in his senior staff and their pay is equivalent to their male counterparts," she wrote in an e-mail.

Many reserve accounts had to be adjusted to balance the budget, she said. The budget recommendation "in no way reflects our intentions to not follow through with the recommendations of [the Equal Pay Commission]."

"This administration has tried to act as compassionately as possible when it comes to revisiting this budget," she said. "Unfortunately, when making these tough decisions, some reserve accounts had to be adjusted."

But Mahan said the fund is "a small amount of money that does a lot of good," adding that adding that West Virginia will lose out on matching federal dollars if the fund is reduced.

"If you're a working woman and trying to support your family -- and that's the case in many households in West Virginia -- then this is important to you," she said.

Over the past nine years, the fund has made an \$8 million impact, said Sam Hickman, director of the state chapter of the National Association of Social Workers.

His association closely follows pay-equity issues because social work is a female-dominated profession. For example, a Division of Highways worker could make more than a Department of Health and Human Resources social worker even though they require comparable qualifications.

"The work requirements and qualifications are essentially similar, but because there are more men in that pay grade, they tend to have a higher median salary," he said.

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