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## Group partners with college to increase female board members

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A 2002 article in a local publication detailing the lack of female leaders in Milwaukee prompted a group of professional women to begin conducting monthly meetings to address the disparity.

The group became Milwaukee Women inc and eight years later, they've been instrumental in moving the needle, albeit slowly, to get more women on corporate boards.

"We could have chosen so many areas to focus on, but injustice is injustice and the one area where we feel we can make an important difference is bringing awareness to the issue of having more women on corporate boards," said Mary McCormick, executive director of the Rotary Club of Milwaukee and vice chair of Milwaukee Women inc.

Milwaukee Women inc's latest project also has to do with increasing female board leadership, but is taking a more national approach.

The group is partnering with the Kellogg School of Management at Northwestern University, Evanston, Ill., to have Milwaukee-area women added to a database that the Kellogg Center for Executive Women maintains to assist corporate boards in their recruiting practices.

The Greater Milwaukee Committee has maintained a list of board-eligible women for several years. Those women will now be added to the Kellogg database.

"What we think we've done is create a resource for corporations so if they are looking for a particular woman to add to their board, they'll have the highest likelihood of having someone board-qualified and board ready," said Tracey Klein, a shareholder of Reinhart Boerner Van Deuren SC, Milwaukee, who is heading the project for Milwaukee Women inc's board resource committee.

Milwaukee Women inc currently is asking the women in the GMC's database if they are willing to participate and Klein hopes to have their names integrated with the Kellogg system within 60 days.

"I think this brings a higher degree of professionalism to the search process and is a nice adjunct to a Fortune 500 or a top Wisconsin 50 company looking for a candidate rather just going on a hope and a prayer," Klein said. "It's also incentive for the GMC to add additional women to its list."

Milwaukee Women inc is putting together its 2010 annual report detailing the number of women on corporate boards at the state's 50 largest companies and expects to release the results in November.

Last year's report was discouraging. According to the group's research, women made no net gains in the executive suites and boardrooms of Wisconsin's largest companies in the past two years.

From 2007 to 2009, there were 12 women added to boards of directors. However, 12 women also left boards during that time period.

Thirteen companies in the 50 largest Wisconsin companies had no women directors in 2009 and 21 companies had no female executives.

That report showed just 12 percent of the 391 director seats overseeing the 50 companies were held by women.

Alliant Energy Corp., Madison, had the most female board members with four of its 10 directors being women. Alliant also had the most women executives in 2009 with four of the company's eight top seats held by women.

Meanwhile, a July 2010 analysis by The Business Journal Serving Greater Milwaukee found only 30, or 11.2 percent, of the 269 board seats of the largest publicly owned companies in the Milwaukee area are held by women. That number was up slightly from 2004 when 8.8 percent of the seats were held by women.

McCormick said while Milwaukee Women inc doesn't get involved with placing women on boards, the group tries to expand opportunities offered to women, which is part of the reason for the involvement with Kellogg.

From 2002 through 2009, Milwaukee Women inc operated as a monthly organization that met to work on annual reports uncovering which Wisconsin companies were open to putting women on their boards.

Last year, the group decided it needed more structure and its own board of directors.

"In 2002, you could have made the argument we didn't need to do this forever," McCormick said. "But we realized change comes slowly so we've affirmed our commitment to staying with this for the long term."

And while the group's name is "Milwaukee Women," McCormick wants to make it clear they don't want to exclude men. In fact, she said many men in the business community and business groups such as the GMC and the Metropolitan Milwaukee Association of Commerce have been very supportive of their efforts.

"This is not a women's issue, it's a people's issue," McCormick said. "We want to find concrete ways to make sure men feel included in our effort and we think it's something we can do best by working together."