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SC group asks next gov to put more women in charge

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The GOP nominee seeking to become South Carolina's first female governor said Thursday she won't sign a pledge to put more women on boards and in charge of state agencies.

The nonpartisan Southeastern Institute for Women in Politics, which works to narrow South Carolina's political gender gap, has asked GOP Rep. Nikki Haley and Democratic Sen. Vincent Sheheen to agree that, if elected, they'll use their appointments to increase gender diversity.

South Carolina consistently trails the nation in women in government leadership positions, with none in Congress or statewide office.

"It goes without saying that Nikki loves the idea of getting more women involved in public service," said Haley campaign spokesman Rob Godfrey. "That said, Nikki is not going to make any pledges in reference to appointments, other than this one - she will always choose the highest qualified person for the job without regard to race or gender."

Sheheen, however, will attend the initiative's launch next week and sign the pledge, said campaign spokesman Trav Robertson.

"Simply put, it's just the right thing to do," Robertson said, adding that women pay taxes and should be adequately represented on boards and agencies that make decisions about tax dollars.

Women make up more than half of the state's population, according to the Census.

But South Carolina continues to rank last in the percentage of women in the Legislature, at 10 percent, and is the only state with no female senator. Women lead four of 15 Cabinet agencies under Gov. Mark Sanford's control. And women fill 35 percent of 510 gubernatorial appointments on boards listed in the legislative manual. Several of the state's most prominent boards have one female among 10 or 12 members.

Government needs a more balanced perspective, said Candy Waites, director of the institute's Gubernatorial Appointments Project, or GAP. South Carolina is the 11th state to launch such a program, she said.

The group is seeking resumes of women who are interested and willing to serve, to be forwarded to the governor-elect.

"Governors tend to say we couldn't do it because we didn't have a list of women with experience and credentials for the position," said Waites, who calls her six years in the House, from 1988-94, an eye-opening experience on the imbalance. "This takes away the excuse that we didn't know who the women were, we didn't have the access."

Sanford spokesman Ben Fox called the resume collection a great idea, considering the roughly 1,800 seats on boards and commissions the governor must fill.

"Anything to help speed up that process would be helpful," he said.

About one-third of all of Sanford's appointments have been women, which is in line with former Gov. Jim Hodges, and better than the roughly one-fourth of appointments by former Govs. David Beasley and Carroll Campbell, according to the governor's office.

A signer of the GAP pledge is not obligated to pick among the resumes, but does agree to "make an active effort to seek out and appoint qualified women."

"Appointing the best-qualified person for a position is my mission, but I also know highly qualified women in this state are being overlooked. I believe it is time we give these women fair consideration," reads the pledge Sheheen will sign.

Similar successful projects include one in New Jersey, launched in the '80s, and in Massachusetts, where former Gov. Mitt Romney - who endorsed Haley in the primary - signed and his female lieutenant governor made happen, said Debbie Walsh, director of the Center for American Women and Politics at Rutgers University.

Nine states - none in the Southeast - have laws requiring or encouraging gender parity on state and local boards, according to the center.

"A lot of implementation of policy and oversight happens with boards and commissions," Walsh said. "Having women there matters."