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# Harnessing Workforce Development for Equitable Economic Growth in West Virginia



**Carol Phillips**  
West Virginia Women Work

Carol Phillips is the Executive Director of West Virginia Women Work (WVWW), a pivotal force in advancing workforce development in West Virginia. Her leadership at WVWW includes enhancing programs like Step Up for Women, which provides comprehensive training and supports the entry and advancement of women in non-traditional fields. Under her guidance, WVWW also champions the SAFE (Safety, Equity, Fairness, Equity) initiative, fostering inclusive work environments across industries. Carol's dedication to creating equitable opportunities in workforce development is instrumental in preparing West Virginia for a sustainable economic future.

Amidst a significant influx of federal funding through initiatives like the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) and the CHIPS Act, West Virginia stands at a pivotal crossroads. These programs provide an unparalleled opportunity to reshape our workforce, particularly in crucial sectors like construction and manufacturing. Yet, the successful transformation of our workforce landscape hinges on addressing systemic inequities that disproportionately impact women in our state.

West Virginia's economic indicators reveal deep-rooted challenges. With a poverty rate of 15.8% – significantly higher than the national average of 11.4% – the need for robust economic initiatives is clear. The state also ranks unfavorably in terms of gender wage disparity: women earn 35% less than their male counterparts, and 34.5% of employed women are relegated to low-wage jobs, according to the Status of Women in the United States report by the Institute for Women's Policy Research. This places West Virginia last in the nation for women's employment and earnings, receiving grades of F for Employment and Earnings, and a D- for Poverty and Opportunity in the report.



**West Virginia Women Work**  
Equity. Empowerment. Education. Enrichment.

to the national average of approximately 10%. This stark underrepresentation not only highlights a significant gender gap but also underscores the critical need for targeted training and development programs that can facilitate the entry of more women into these high-demand fields.

At West Virginia Women Work (WVWW), we are committed to bridging these gaps through comprehensive training and advocacy. Our Step Up for Women programs offer more than skill development; they provide a gateway for

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In the construction and extraction sectors, which are vital for the state's infrastructure and economic growth, women make up only 3.3% of the workforce in West Virginia, compared

women to enter and excel in non-traditional fields. By equipping women with the necessary tools and resources, we prepare them for immediate job opportunities and ensure they receive the support needed to sustain their



careers. This integration of training with practical support is crucial, particularly in regions like ours where educational resources can be sparse and economic disparities profound. The value of our programs extends beyond the women we train. It represents a significant advantage for employers throughout the Mountain State, many of whom face ongoing challenges in finding skilled workers. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics projects that construction and manufacturing sectors will experience some of the highest rates of employment growth over the next decade. By developing a pipeline of qualified, ready-to-work personnel, WVWW helps local businesses thrive while addressing these critical workforce shortages.

Moreover, our Respectful Workplace initiative, highlighted by the Safety, Equity, Fairness, Equity (SAFE) program, is essential for retention and career progression. This program is designed to collaborate with businesses to promote inclusive and supportive work cultures, increasing the likelihood of retention and progression within these industries. SAFE provides training and resources to ensure that workplaces not only welcome women but also actively support their advancement and address any challenges they face. This proactive approach has proven effective in creating environments where women can succeed and thrive, further enriching the workforce with diverse talents and perspectives.

Despite the promising potential of federal initiatives like the BIL and CHIPS Act to enhance workforce development, direct funding allocations to organizations like WVWW and others with similar missions have been limited. This shortfall occurs despite the fact that these federal programs allocate billions of dollars designed to support not just the physical infrastructure projects but also the human elements essential to these initiatives. State governments have a significant role to play in this context, as they possess the capacity to direct portions of this funding towards comprehensive workforce development. Such development initiatives extend beyond mere job training

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to encompass essential supportive services that are crucial for sustainable employment. These services include childcare, which is often a barrier for many women entering or returning to the workforce, and other barriers such as transportation, work attire, and tools. The allocation of federal funds to these areas, and to the organizations that provide these services, is not just a matter of logistics but of strategic importance to the overall success of workforce initiatives.

By investing in supportive services, state governments can enhance the effectiveness of training programs like those offered by WVWW, ensuring that individuals who are trained are also fully equipped and supported to take on new roles in the workforce. This holistic approach to workforce development helps bridge the gap between training and actual employment, leading to more sustainable job placements and a more resilient economy.

Given West Virginia's unique demographic and economic challenges, the importance of equitable workforce development strategies cannot be overstated. We urge state policymakers, community leaders, and industry stakeholders to recognize and support initiatives that foster such development. By directing a portion of federal funding to targeted workforce programs, we can ensure that these initiatives transcend mere job filling and become robust pathways to meaningful, sustained employment.

As we continue to navigate these transformative times, let's commit to workforce strategies that not only meet the immediate needs of our economy but also build the foundation for a diverse and inclusive future. With targeted support and collaborative effort, we can transform our workforce to truly reflect the capabilities and potential of our region. **V**