



Helping Women Return To Our Workforce & Supporting Women Businesses

Val Arkoosh's Priorities For Getting Women Back Into The Workforce

We have long known our economy fails to value certain work, including child care and caregiving, and the COVID-19 pandemic made matters worse, leading to a record number of women leaving the workforce, chipping away at advancements made to add women to the workforce over the last several decades. And unless we course correct, our economy will continue to struggle.

Drawing on her experience as a mom, physician and public health expert, and six years of governing, Val knows that one-off solutions simply don't work. To succeed, we must acknowledge the full range of challenges that working families face. Val supports a number of related proposals to help women return to our workforce, to invest in child care and caregiving, and to support women business owners. These are not only good policies for our entire economy, they support working families, help our children get off to the best possible start, and are also the right thing to do.

Investing In Working Families & Expanding Economic Security

Workers are our greatest asset, but the fact is, our economic and labor policies have led to inequity for women, especially women of color. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the fact that workplaces and society have failed working people and families. In order to address these failures, Val supports a number of ways to invest in workers:

- **Raising the minimum wage:** Val has long supported raising the minimum wage, and is proud that as Chair of Pennsylvania's third-largest county, she raised the minimum wage for county employees to \$15 an hour. Similarly, she supports raising the federal minimum wage to \$15, eliminating the so-called tipped wage, and automatically adjusting it for inflation each year.
- **Achieving pay equity.** Across the country and in our Commonwealth, women earn less than their male counterparts for equal work. According to the [National Partnership for Women and Families](#), Pennsylvania women earn just 79 cents per dollar when compared to men. And that gap is even larger for Black and Hispanic women. Val supports closing that gap by passing the Paycheck Fairness Act.
- **Permanent expansions of the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit.** Together, the Child Tax Credit and Earned Income Tax Credit help lift families and workers out of poverty. In fact, the American Rescue Plan's Child Tax Credit expansion benefitted families of more than [2.3 million children](#) in Pennsylvania, lifting tens of thousands of kids out of poverty. Val supports the expansion of these tax credits under the American Rescue Plan and their permanent expansion so they can continue to help families.

- **Creating paid family and medical leave.** No one should have to decide between collecting a paycheck and caring for a sick parent or child. And no one should have to go to work sick or cut their recovery from medical care short for fear of losing their job. We know the lack of paid leave is one of the reasons so many women left our workforce during this pandemic.

Right now, too many workforces do not have paid family leave, sick days, or parental leave. Val thinks we ought to change that. At the county level, Val implemented gender-neutral paid parental leave for county employees for the birth, adoption, or fostering of a child. She supports federal policies to provide paid family leave, parental leave, and paid sick days to ensure that every worker can take care of themselves and their loved ones.

As a physician, Val understands that this issue isn't just an economic one, it is also critical to public health. According to the [National Partnership for Women and Families](#), "people without paid sick days are 1.5 times more likely than those with paid sick days to report to work with a contagious illness like the flu or a viral infection." Emergency paid sick leave was found to be a "[highly effective](#)" tool in flattening the curve around the time it was implemented last fall, making it clear these policies are essential in the fight against COVID-19 and other viral illnesses that could emerge in the future.

- **Protecting and expanding health care access for women.** In order for women to thrive economically, they must have the tools to take care of themselves and their health. Val is proud to have worked to pass the Affordable Care Act, which helped make sure women couldn't be discriminated against by health care providers for being women or for having a pre-existing condition like asthma, breast cancer or even having a C-section. The law also made sure that a wide range of preventive care was made available to women at no cost to them. She believes we ought to build on the success of the Affordable Care Act and address health disparities, including high rates of Black maternal mortality. To do that, Val supports the expansion of both pre-natal and post-natal Medicaid access, policies to improve access to healthy food, and appropriate workplace accommodations for pregnant people. Val also understands that these inequities have been particularly acute when it comes to Black perinatal and maternal mental health services, and is committed to finding community-based, data-driven solutions and investments to improve the quality of Black perinatal and mental health care. She's also expressed her commitment to expanding access to contraception and abortion access at no-cost, including through repealing the Hyde amendment.

Making Child Care More Affordable & Supporting the Child Care Workforce

As a physician, Val understands that the earliest years of children's lives and the economic and social factors they are exposed to early on are critical to their overall health and development. That's one of the reasons that Val helped make grant funding available for child care centers and families in response to the pandemic. In meeting with child care providers around the Commonwealth, Val has developed a bold vision for our child care and early education system that addresses the needs of the whole child, like primary health care, and supports parents and entire communities.

Recently, the [New York Times](#) reported that the United States is "an outlier" when it comes to investing in children and their early care. In fact, "Rich countries contribute an average of \$14,000 per year for a toddler's care, compared with \$500" in the United States. Even before the pandemic, the U.S. has lacked the child care infrastructure needed to adequately support families, and the pandemic has driven the situation further into crisis, contributing significantly to the number of women who have left the workforce without an affordable alternative. And the way this country has undervalued early childhood instructors is a driving force in that dynamic. Creating a stronger child care system that includes paying those in child care and early learning what they deserve is foundational to our nation's economic recovery and equity, the future of women's ability to advance in the workforce, and ensuring children get off to the best possible start in life. While the American Rescue Plan included emergency funding for child care programs, we need permanent solutions to make child care universally available. At the federal level, Val supports:

- **Ensuring universal child care access.** No matter where a family lives or how much they make, they should have access to quality, affordable child care that works for their families, from the time their child is born and into the early years of their education. But right now, many parents spend thousands of dollars on child care per year, putting it out of reach for too many families. According to the [Economic Policy Institute](#), the annual cost of infant care in Pennsylvania is more than \$11,800 and child care for a four-year-old child costs more than \$9,700.

To make child care more affordable, Val supports ideas put forth in the Universal Child Care and Early Learning Act to create a nationwide network of locally-run child care, early learning centers, and family child care homes supported through federal investments and unique to the needs of their communities. She also supports efforts through that bill to lower costs, including by creating a sliding scale for child care costs based on income and making care free for families earning at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty line, or about \$53,000 for a family of four. She will push for continued investment in Head Start and Early Head Start, including support for full-school-day and school-year Head Start extensions.

- **Improving quality of care and making programs more inclusive.** Making sure that child care and early learning centers offer the highest quality support for children is of the utmost importance. To meet that goal, Val backs efforts to help cover licensing costs for new providers, and supports expanding access to training and professional development opportunities for the workforce. As a physician who raised children while working 24-hour, in-hospital shifts, Val understands that parents need child care at all hours of the day. That's why she will also fight for policies that support those who need child care at non-traditional hours or for second shift workers. In order to ensure that families of infants and children with disabilities have access to high-quality care that meets their family's needs, Val believes we must increase funding through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

- **Paying child care workers what they deserve.** Val has convened conversations with child care providers across the Commonwealth and the most common concern she hears is the fact that child care providers are underpaid. It is a barrier to the quality of care that children receive and to recruiting qualified caregivers and providers. It is long past time we pay these professionals what they deserve.
- **Funding integrated community services that address the needs of both families and children.** Val has seen child care centers in our Commonwealth do tremendous work to make child care and early education more holistic through providing integrated services that set up children, families, and entire communities for success. By engaging parents through opportunities to expand their parenting skills so they complement the techniques used in their kids' classrooms, we can support children and families in making healthy choices early in life and into adulthood. This can include everything from teaching parents about behavioral techniques used in their children's classrooms, to learning about nutrition and food preparation. Val believes we must strive to make preventive care services and health screenings convenient and accessible to children and families by integrating them directly into their existing child care. Easy access to hearing and vision screenings, and preventive and dental care, will help keep kids healthy and ensure early intervention when a student is struggling to see or hear while they learn.

Investing In Our Caregiving Workforce

In addition to paying child care workers what they deserve, it is clear that we need to work to strengthen the care economy to support home health and community-based care for aging Pennsylvanians and Pennsylvanians living with disabilities. Too often, these workers have been overlooked and undervalued -- and if this pandemic has taught us anything, it's that our communities and our families are strongest when we invest in the folks that keep us safe and healthy. Val supports:

- **Investing in our caregiving workforce:** Our caregivers, often women of color, are undervalued. We need to increase wages for home health aides, nursing home aides, and other caregivers. We also need to make sure they have the training and protections they need to stay safe on the job and keep their clients and patients safe and healthy. In addition, we need to continue to ensure they have PPE and other critical supplies needed to care for patients and clients.
- **Implementing safe staffing:** We know that our nurses, nursing home aides, and home health aides are experiencing high rates of burnout in the midst of the pandemic, asked to work long hours and often isolated from their families early on in the pandemic. It has taken an emotional toll on health care workers across our Commonwealth. One of the solutions Val has heard from nurses and nursing home aides is the need for safe staffing ratios, which she supports in order to better care for patients and to reduce burnout.
- **Making sure the entire caregiving economy can organize and bargain.** Val supports efforts to ensure that every care economy worker can join a union and bargain for better wages and protections.
- **Helping families access home and community-based care:** Val supports federal investments to ensure that families can more easily access caregiving services, from adequately funding home-based options to expanding long-term care services available under Medicaid.

Supporting Women-Owned Businesses & Workforce Training Opportunities

During her campaign and as a Commissioner, Val has had the opportunity to hear from women-owned business leaders, including minority women-owned businesses, and women leaders in manufacturing. She understands there is work to do to better support businesses and manufacturers, and to ensure they have the workforce they need to be successful.

- **Ensuring women entrepreneurs have access to capital.** Women struggle to access capital to start and expand their businesses when compared to men, and that is especially true for women of color. It is a concern Val's heard at roundtables around our Commonwealth from Erie to Philadelphia. She believes we need additional grant funding for women entrepreneurs, and to support minority women starting or growing their businesses, she specifically supports strengthening the Minority Business Development Agency so it can more effectively serve women of color looking to launch and grow their businesses. We can also better support women business owners by investing in the supports and organizations meant to help them, like the Office of Women's Business Ownership and other programs that make robust peer-to-peer mentorship possible.
- **Investing in workforce development and creating more training opportunities.** Val has also heard that businesses want to invest in their workforces, but might not have the funding to do so, particularly small businesses. Val would work to advance robust funding for workforce development and training, including loan forgiveness for workforce development efforts. Val has also heard that greater public-private partnerships, including effective relationships between employers and community colleges, will help prospective employees learn about and train for new opportunities. We should also recognize that changing technology could lead to job losses for women, which is why we must expand and increase funding for women to learn new tech skills in their existing workplace.
- **Passing bipartisan infrastructure legislation.** Another recurring theme Val has heard is the need for infrastructure investment, with one business leader saying getting workers to their business each day was one of the barriers to hiring more workers. By investing in infrastructure, including public transit, we will create good-paying, union jobs for women, while also opening up access to major work opportunities for workers as well as opportunities for employers to hire.

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