

PUTTING PEOPLE FIRST

**Policies to Strengthen
Every West Virginia
Community**

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Introduction

West Virginians have always worked hard, though today that work might look a little different than it once did.



For generations, West Virginians logged the timber that built our nation's railroads and mined the coal that powered America. Today, our people's labor is still the essential force behind our economy, though the work now often looks more like providing caregiving for children or the elderly, working in construction, cooking or serving food, or driving a bus or truck—all of it a hard day's work.

Despite all our hard work, most West Virginians aren't receiving the economic security that should come with it. Paychecks aren't enough to pay the rent, put food on the table, and cover medicine—forcing many to forgo something essential. Job security is increasingly scarce. This instability should be a flashing warning sign. The ability of families to afford the basics like housing, child care, and health care shows how well our economy is working.

The rural communities that West Virginia families have lived in for generations are increasingly ignored—facing loss of industry and good-paying jobs, the closure of their neighborhood schools and hospitals, brown tap water, and failing infrastructure. And rather than addressing these critical needs,

some politicians tell constituents their communities are too small to spend the necessary money to continue providing these basic public services.

West Virginia has long been viewed as a poor state, but that is not entirely true. Even after so much timber, coal, and natural gas have been extracted, immense wealth remains beneath our feet and on our land. But for far too long, that wealth, like our fossil fuels and minerals, has been extracted to benefit corporations and wealthy investors outside of West Virginia, rather than the people who live and work here. Tax cuts that overwhelmingly benefit the state's wealthiest households and corporations have eroded the budget, gutting our ability to invest in schools, infrastructure, and programs that make life more affordable for everyday people.

It doesn't have to be this way. An honest day's work could provide the pay and benefits that allow families to meet all their basic needs without having to scrape by. Every community—even the most rural ones—could have a well-resourced public school, clean drinking water, resilient infrastructure, and job training and work opportunities nearby for the families who have built their lives there. Workers whose labor drives the economy could have the same benefits and job security as their bosses and company shareholders. And all could be paid for by fixing our state's upside-down tax system and ensuring those benefiting from our resources pay their fair share.

This is a bold but actionable blueprint to harness West Virginia's wealth to benefit our own workers and families. Our labor, caregiving, and purchases power the economy, and our people deserve financial stability, security, and confidence that their families can thrive in the communities they've built.

Provide Good Jobs for All

Good jobs benefit workers, families, employers, and the broader economy. We define a good job as one that:



PROVIDES A LIVING WAGE



COMES WITH BENEFITS AND JOB PROTECTIONS



OFFERS ROBUST TRAINING



ENSURES SAFE WORKING CONDITIONS

All jobs create value in our economy and, as such, should contain the four key components highlighted above. Rather than seeing some jobs as “entry-level” or stepping stones that are not worthy of these components, all jobs could and should be good jobs. Along with policies that ensure all jobs are good jobs, lawmakers could take meaningful steps to create new job opportunities for workers in all corners of the state, particularly where job availability is currently limited due to decades of disinvestment.

Increase Worker Wages and Benefits

In West Virginia many jobs pay too little, come with few benefits, and offer unstable hours. It has now been a decade since the last time the state’s minimum wage increased, the longest period without an increase

in more than 50 years. Increasing the minimum wage to \$17 per hour would give over 25 percent of the workforce more money in their pocket, bolstering the wages of 186,000 West Virginia workers, increasing their economic security, and providing more money to the local market. While it is a common misconception that minimum wage workers are teenagers with entry-level jobs, over half of the beneficiaries of a minimum wage increase are married and/or parents, and three-fourths are over the age of 25.¹

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Advancing Affordability for Families

When working families cannot afford the basics, our economy cannot thrive. Fortunately, policy choices can prioritize affordability for families. **There are two sides to the affordability equation: how much things cost and how much money people have to buy them.** While policymakers can and should work to address the cost of goods and services (policies supporting this are featured in the “Prioritize Affordability” section), they should also emphasize the importance of increasing and protecting workers’ incomes.

It's been
10 years 
 since West Virginia's minimum wage increased, the longest period without an increase in over
50 years

The state can also protect West Virginians' hard-earned wages by strengthening and enforcing worker protections. That includes cracking down on wage theft by ensuring employers cannot misclassify workers as independent contractors to avoid providing minimum wage and overtime pay or contributing to payroll taxes and unemployment insurance. West Virginia must also strengthen child labor laws, which protect the safety of children in the workplace against injury and death.

All jobs should also come with benefits including paid sick days and paid family and medical leave, which improve morale, productivity, and retention, benefiting employers and workers alike.

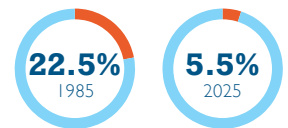
Build Back Worker Power

Throughout our history, people have seen wages rise the most when workers were organized and unionization rates were high as a counterbalance to ownership's power. It was organized workers who fought for and won

the right to a minimum wage, paid sick and vacation days, the forty-hour workweek, and safer working conditions. Over the last decade in West Virginia, lawmakers have repeatedly attacked workers' rights, making it harder for workers to come together and fight for their own well-being.² Research shows that anti-union, right to work states are not creating more jobs than labor-friendly states, but wages are lower for workers in right to work states—on average, \$1,670 less per worker per year.³ And the attack has been successful in reducing workers' collective power. West Virginia has seen the largest decline of private sector union membership rates in the country over the last forty years, going from representing 22.5 percent of all private sector employers in 1985 to just 5.5 percent in 2025.

West Virginia should repeal its right to work law and restore prevailing wage which ensures high quality in publicly funded projects. Policymakers should reinstate civil service protections for public sector workers and give them collective bargaining rights, while expanding protections for those in the private sector by banning anti-worker non-compete agreements and enacting "just cause" protections against unfair firings.

PRIVATE SECTOR UNION MEMBERSHIP DECLINE IN WEST VIRGINIA



What is "Right to Work"?

So-called "right to work" (RTW) laws prohibit union security agreements between employers and labor unions. Despite sounding relatively innocuous, these laws are explicitly designed to diminish workers' collective power by barring unions and employers from negotiating a contract that requires employees who benefit from the union's representation to pay into it. All workers in a unionized workplace benefit from the contract negotiated by the union whether they are members or not, creating a free-rider problem that makes it much harder for workers to form, join, and sustain unions because the funding that provides the union's support is constantly at risk. It is also much easier for employers opposed to the union to undermine.

Research shows workers in RTW states have lower wages, reduced access to health insurance and retirement benefits, and higher workplace fatality rates.⁴

Utilize State and Federal Public Infrastructure Dollars to Create Good Jobs

Over the last decade, West Virginia has seen zero net job growth.⁵ While policymaker attention recently has primarily focused on private sector job creation via corporate tax breaks and deregulation, those policies have only made workers less safe and eroded the revenue needed to invest in public services that help families and workers thrive.

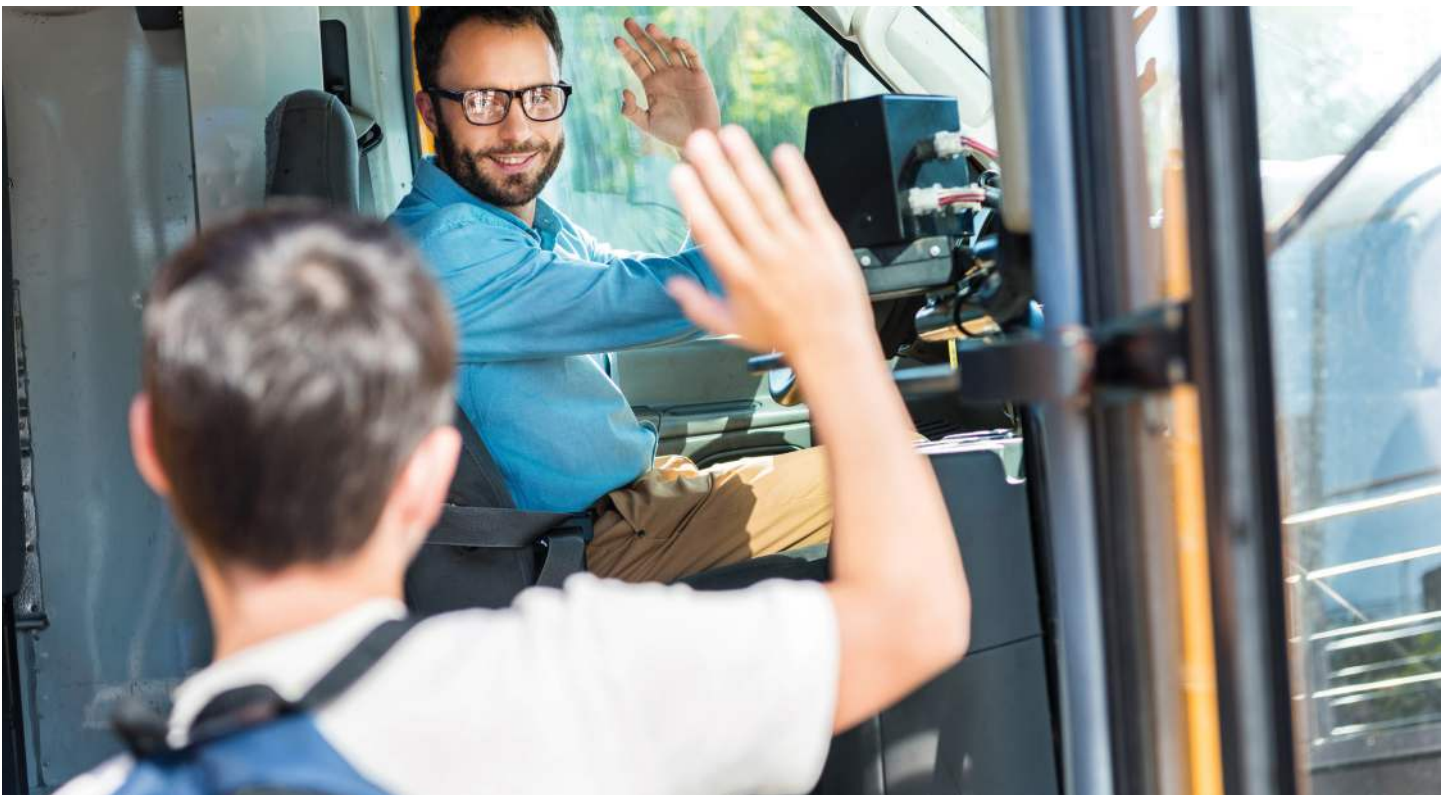
Policymakers have much more power over the number and quality of public sector jobs. Since February 2020, 9,700 state and local public sector jobs have been lost.⁶ West Virginia can maximize state and federal dollars to simultaneously serve two purposes: completing much-needed infrastructure projects that benefit all residents and businesses while putting industrious West Virginians to work doing these jobs. This is not a new concept—West Virginia can model an infrastructure building program after successful programs like the Tennessee Valley Authority, a federal initiative created as part of the New Deal that still exists today, providing flood control, electricity generation, and economic development in its region.

9,700 public sector jobs lost 
in West Virginia since Feb. 2020

Historic Public Projects in the Mountain State

In West Virginia, Coopers Rock State Forest and Watoga State Park were created by Civilian Conservation Corps workers, another federal New Deal initiative. Both remain today, nearly 100 years later, for our residents to enjoy and as local economic drivers.

After years of rural disinvestment, the greatest infrastructure needs and highest unemployment rates are found in the same communities. This creates a synchronous opportunity to build infrastructure and create jobs in the most rural towns and across the state.



Prioritize Affordability for Children and Families

The labor, caregiving, and consumer spending of families drive our economy.

When families can afford the basics, our economy is stronger and families can better withstand challenges as they arise. But in recent years, programs that support children and families have shrunk or not been enacted at all while policymakers have prioritized tax cuts that mostly benefit the wealthy and industries. These priorities have taken dollars out of our local economy and sent them out of state, rather than benefiting us here at home.

While West Virginia does receive an outsized share of federal funding due to chronically high levels of poverty, it is not enough to overcome state disinvestment. West Virginia has one of the highest rates of child poverty in the country, provides no child tax credit or child allowance to help families afford the basics, and is one of just seven states that does not spend any state dollars on child care beyond those required to draw down federal funds.⁷ Another concerning reality proving the state's failure to adequately care for children and families: West Virginia has the highest rate of children in the foster care system of any state nationwide.⁸

Help Families Afford the Basics for Children

West Virginia has the fifth highest child poverty rate in the country with more than one in five children living below the poverty line.⁹ Child poverty is associated with long-term negative outcomes, including poorer educational attainment, chronic adult health issues, and lower employment levels and wages in adulthood.¹⁰ West Virginia should enact a refundable child tax credit of at least \$1,500 annually per child to help families better afford the cost of their children's basic needs.



Enhance Child Care and Child Welfare

A study in the American Academy of Pediatrics found that state spending on programs that support children (e.g., housing assistance, health coverage, and cash supports like tax credits) is inversely proportional to child welfare system involvement.¹¹ In other words, states that invest in these programs experience fewer costly and traumatic family separations. If West Virginia invested more in these up-front family supports, our state would have to spend much less on foster care and adoption services, and many families could be kept whole.

14 percent of foster care entries in West Virginia are due to “inadequate housing.”

Oftentimes an economic hardship—difficulty paying for food, housing, utilities, or medical care—is a factor in child welfare system involvement. In fact, 14 percent of foster care entries in West Virginia are due to “inadequate housing.”¹² The state should invest funding and resources into programs that help keep families

economically secure, including child allowances, housing assistance programs, Medicaid, and the Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP).

While state lawmakers passed major legislation related to child care assistance in 2026, they failed to invest any new funding despite West Virginia's outlier status in providing no state funding beyond the federal required minimum.¹³ More than 200 child care providers have closed their doors in West Virginia over the last two years alone, while more than 20,000 children under age six lack access to child care.¹⁴ Lawmakers must fund child care assistance in the budget at a level that allows the state to serve all families who need access and pay adequate reimbursement levels to providers—doing so would have the added bonus of freeing up federal Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) dollars to invest in other key child welfare priorities.

Address Rising Health Care Costs

Health care costs consistently rise faster than wages and inflation, heavily impacting workers, employers, and people who are uninsured. Nearly half of all Americans worry they won't be able to afford health care in the coming year.¹⁵ West Virginia has among the highest rates of residents with medical debt, at 13.3 percent.¹⁶ Recent changes by Congress making the largest cuts to Medicaid in history and allowing enhanced subsidies that helped self-employed people, retirees, and small business employees afford the cost of health insurance premiums to expire will only exacerbate these issues.

While holistically addressing health care costs will require a nationwide approach, West Virginia can take several



WHAT'S AFFECTING WEST VIRGINIANS

20,000+ children

under age 6 lack access to child care

13% have medical debt,

one of the highest rates nationally

20% of households

are considered cost-burdened, spending more than 30% of their income on housing

steps to help people afford doctor visits and medicine. Policymakers must protect Medicaid access by increasing state budget funding to offset Congress' provider tax changes, otherwise benefits will be slashed or coverage will be lost entirely. The state could also broaden Public Employees Insurance Agency (PEIA) eligibility to provide affordable health coverage options to small businesses, self-employed people, and others who need it.

Additionally, West Virginia can use its regulatory power to confront hospitals and providers who overcharge patients by enacting greater price transparency measures including banning facility fees, requiring hospitals and providers to publicly list their prices for common services, and conducting oversight of hospital acquisitions and mergers that often increase health care prices while reducing access to specialty services.

Action must also be taken to address West Virginia's growing rural health care crisis, wherein families are forced to travel farther and farther to access basic services. Nowhere is this more evident than in maternity care services; alarmingly, over half of the state's birthing units have closed over the last two decades.¹⁷ West Virginia can increase access to prenatal and maternity care by permitting Certified Professional Midwives to provide this vital care outside of a traditional hospital setting where gaps currently exist.



Improve Housing Affordability

Housing supply and affordability play major roles in economic opportunity, local employment, and quality of life. West Virginia faces distinct housing crises in different parts of the state: a lack of affordable housing supply in proximity to employment, services, and tourist destinations in the Eastern Panhandle and resort destination towns, and aging housing stock in need of repair and renovation in other places. But the result is often the same—lack of affordability for families across income levels. Statewide, 20 percent of households are considered cost-burdened, spending more than 30 percent of their income on housing, while 10 percent spend over half of their income on housing.¹⁸ This often results in households' inability to afford housing without sacrificing other basic needs.

On average, West Virginia spends less state and local dollars per capita on housing than the nation or our region. **Tackling housing affordability as a whole requires addressing and investing in four key components:**

- ✓ **increasing the housing supply** through a combination of public dollar investments and removing administrative barriers;

- ✓ **strengthening renter protections** via emergency rent assistance, access to legal representation, and eviction protections;
- ✓ **limiting excessive housing costs** via rent regulation and stabilization policies and cracking down on short-term rentals that reduce stock for residents; and
- ✓ **sustainably resolving homelessness** by expanding permanent supportive housing and increasing connections to mental and other health services.

Invest in Job Training and Higher Education

For too many West Virginians, the cost of higher education or job training is unaffordable, barring them from access to the support they need to provide for themselves and their families. Due to state disinvestment, college tuition costs have skyrocketed, while tuition support and scholarships cover less each year. West Virginia should renew the Promise Scholarship so that it once again covers the full cost of tuition at in-state colleges and universities. The state should also expand access to job training by increasing funding for career and technical education programs and safe union apprenticeships that prepare students for trade careers.

Invest in Every Community



Because state policymakers have long focused on corporations rather than our people, prosperity and economic growth in West Virginia has been confined to select counties.

This has led to disinvestment in most other places where loss of industry has hollowed out communities, infrastructure has crumbled, hospitals and schools have shuttered, and few jobs are available. This dynamic can be hard to escape, but lawmakers can choose to invest in all corners of West Virginia with evidence-based

policies that allow people to remain in the communities where they are rooted.

Invest in Infrastructure

A 2025 report card for West Virginia's infrastructure gave the state a "D," citing significant funding gaps, key infrastructure like bridges aging beyond their intended design lives, and increasingly frequent extreme weather events.¹⁹ All 55 of West Virginia's counties have a high risk of flooding, and the state has one of the highest rates of inland flooding and landslides in the country.²⁰

West Virginia can simultaneously create jobs putting residents to work while addressing years of infrastructure neglect by prioritizing projects that fix our roads and



crumbling water and sewer infrastructure, modernize the electricity grid, reclaim and clean up land used in coal mining and natural gas extraction, and improve infrastructure resiliency against flooding and other extreme weather events. These are good-paying jobs that require transferable skills from coal mining and other professions prevalent in West Virginia. And the completed projects would make our rural communities safer and more attractive to families living there and businesses looking to relocate or expand, boosting job creation and the local economy.

Save Neighborhood Schools

More than 70 public schools have closed in West Virginia since 2019, despite protests from an overwhelming majority of community members.²¹ When a school closes, the community is often never the same—losing jobs, specialized services for students, a community gathering space, and even its local identity. But school closures are not inevitable. West Virginia can update the school funding formula to prioritize keeping neighborhood schools open and to better serve students with unique needs, including those with disabilities and those living in high-poverty districts, who need more resources to succeed.

 **70+** public schools have closed in West Virginia since 2019

For the same anticipated cost of the Hope Scholarship this year, over \$245 million, West Virginia could double funding for special education; provide five percent raises to all classroom teachers and student support staff; provide seven percent raises to all cooks, bus drivers, and maintenance workers; hire 800 new teachers and student support staff; increase transportation funding by 10 percent; and put \$50 million per year toward PEIA to reduce premiums and copays.²²

Decrease Incarceration

West Virginia can strengthen public safety, stability, and fiscal responsibility by reducing reliance on incarceration and investing instead in the conditions that help communities thrive. Every dollar spent expanding jails, prisons, and punishment is a dollar taken from treatment, housing, education, victim services, roads, or economic opportunities. Lawmakers should oppose new criminal offenses and reject laws that lengthen sentences, while also working to reduce pretrial detention so fewer legally innocent people are jailed simply because they cannot afford bond. Detaining people before trial destabilizes families, employment, and housing. A fairer system would rely less on wealth-based detention and more on court reminders, supportive community-based services, and other methods proven to ensure appearance without unnecessary incarceration.

Lawmakers must also enact a Second Look Sentencing Act so judges can review lengthy sentences that no longer serve any constructive purpose. Detaining low-risk individuals for extended periods drains public resources that could otherwise be directed toward more effective strategies that promote safety for everyone.



Pay for It by Modernizing West Virginia's Tax System

The policies above will come with economic benefits, in many cases paying for themselves through increased economic activity, better health and jobs outcomes, and less spending on incarceration and the child welfare system.

The remaining revenue needed can be raised by modernizing West Virginia's upside-down tax system and ensuring that the extractive industries that benefit from our natural resources pay their fair share.

Over the last decade, the wealthiest 20 percent of households have received state and federal tax cuts totaling \$2.2 billion each year—even as their incomes and wealth explode.²³

West Virginia can claw back some of these tax cuts by:

- ✓ modernizing the personal income tax brackets;
- ✓ restoring 2009 corporate net income tax levels;
- ✓ increasing the severance tax on coal and natural gas; and
- ✓ enacting a wealth proceeds tax that treats passive income the same as earned wages.



The wealthiest 20%

of households received state & federal tax cuts totaling

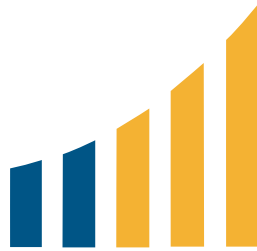
\$2.2 billion

each year



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