2015 Legislative Agenda: Opportunity, Economic Security, Healthy Families

Income inequality continues to grow in the United States. Public policy decisions since 1980 have facilitated the concentration of wealth and power, enabling the top 1% to claim almost all the benefits of economic growth. Stagnant incomes and increasing insecurity for the majority of households diminish health, well-being, and opportunity, exacerbate racial and gender inequality, reduce public revenues and undermine our national economy.

The economic crash of 2008, the slow recovery from recession, families squeezed for time and teetering on the economic brink, crushing debt and limited opportunities for younger generations – these are the results of trickle down economic policies.

Washington state can be a leader in enacting policies that begin to reshape our economy so that it works for everyone – to provide better health and opportunity for working families, greater stability for businesses, and shared prosperity that benefits the whole community.

Women’s Economic Security

Women make up nearly half the workforce and earn a majority of college degrees, yet still earn less than men in every occupation and remain the primary care providers for children and sick or aging family members. In Washington state in 2013, median income for women working full-time year-round was 80 cents for every $1.00 for men – $10,600 less income each year to spend in the local economy. Women of color face even greater challenges. Lower wages mean women have a harder time saving for their own or their children’s education, are more vulnerable during a health or other crisis, and have less income if in retirement. Children particularly suffer from women’s lower incomes. Four in ten single moms – and their children – live in poverty.

The limited availability of access to paid leave adds to economic insecurity, undermines individual and public health, and compounds economic and social inequality. These components of a Women’s Economic Security agenda build health and economic security for women and men, children and seniors, workers and community businesses:

• **Raise Washington’s minimum wage to $12 in 4 years.** Washington was the first state to institute annual cost of living adjustments to its minimum wage in 1998, and for the past decade has had the highest state minimum wage in the country. Still, in 2013 nearly 50,000 people in Washington worked full-time, year-round and still lived in poverty. If minimum wage had kept pace with inflation since 1968, it would be close to $11 in 2014, rather than $9.32. If low-wage workers had benefited from productivity growth, rather than most of the benefit going to the super wealthy, minimum wage would be over $18. We know from experience that raising the minimum wage increases incomes for low-wage workers, while supporting job and business growth.
• **Promote paycheck fairness with wage transparency and equal access to jobs and career tracks.** Job and pay discrimination are already illegal, but remedies are minimal, and too often employers prohibit employees from discussing wages and track men into higher paying jobs and career tracks. A Washington Paycheck Fairness Act will protect all workers from retaliation for discussing or inquiring about compensation or job assignments; and provide women effective recourse when differences in pay and job opportunities are not based on bona fide factors like education.

• **Ensure workers statewide have access to paid sick and safe leave.** Everyone occasionally needs to take a few days off – to recover from the flu, tend to a sick child, or take an ailing parent to the doctor. Yet 4 in 10 workers don’t get a single paid sick day, including many in restaurants, retail and even health care. Patterned after Seattle’s successful law, paid sick and safe leave will assure workers in firms with more than 4 employees the right to earn paid leave for illness, preventative care, or other health needs of the worker or a worker’s family member, or to deal with the consequences of domestic violence, sexual assault or stalking.

• **Provide paid family and medical leave, financed through payroll premiums.** When a new child comes into a family or a serious illness strikes, people need longer periods of time off. Several states already provide programs so all workers have income during those times when caring for family or health must come first. Washington’s FAMLI Act will provide income when workers must take extended leaves of up to 12 weeks for the birth or adoption of a child, or the serious health condition of the worker or a close family member, financed through low-cost payroll premiums. We know that in the long run babies have better health, and stronger social and intellectual development when they have high quality nurture in their first weeks and months of life. And with our senior population rapidly increasing, providing families with the tools to help their elders age with dignity is a growing necessity.

**Educational Opportunity**

Too many kids start out behind and never catch up. The Economic Security Agenda above will give all kids a stronger start and help maximize their health and educational opportunity. These additional tools will promote educational opportunity for all:

• **Provide financial incentives for child care providers and teachers with higher education certifications.** High quality childcare makes a big difference in preparing children for success in school. Yet most often childcare teachers receive low wages and have little incentive to pursue specialized training or stay in their career.

• **Enable students and families to avoid the tuition-and-debt system with income-based graduate contributions.** Most of the high-wage jobs of the future will require some post-secondary education. The current model of higher education financing perpetuates existing class differences. Need-based grants are limited, and often unavailable to students from working families. Cuts in public budgets have resulted in skyrocketing tuition at public institutions. Pay It Forward provides an alternative that opens the possibility of going to college to every kid.
Take steps to reform Washington’s tax structure to amply fund education from preschool through higher ed and provide essential services for shared prosperity. Washington has the most regressive tax structure of any state and with our sales-tax dependent structure, public revenues grow much more slowly than our economy and the incomes of the wealthy. Meanwhile education from preschool through universities is grossly underfunded. We cannot provide our kids with a 21st century education with a revenue stream designed for the economy of the 1930s.

Health Care Access

In the U.S health care has been rationed by price for far too long. The Affordable Care Act (ACA) set us on a path toward better access but we still have a ways to go. As ACA implementation continues, we must identify persistent gaps in access to insurance coverage and health care and pursue policies to fill those gaps.

- Identify gaps in quality, affordable, accessible health care and solutions to eliminate those gaps. While policy solutions, such as the Basic Health Option, are currently available to Washington, it is important to first have a clear assessment of where we stand in access to care since implementing the ACA. The legislature can direct data collection across the Health Benefit Exchange, the Health Care Authority and other agencies to ensure coordinated efforts to identify gaps. Further, the legislature can act to implement solutions to ensure continuity of care and address inequitable gaps in access to care.

- Establish intent to have universal health care in Washington. Health care is a human right and should be equitably available to all residents. Washington’s legislature can take important leadership in setting a goal of universal access to care.

Retirement Security/Small Business Prosperity

- Establish a state-administered retirement savings plan for workers in small businesses. Half of U.S. workers do not have access to a retirement plan at work other than Social Security. We must continue to fight in Congress to strengthen that fundamental program, but other forms of retirement savings will remain important for long-term economic security, especially as our population ages. The modern workforce is highly mobile among jobs, making portability key. The START (Save Toward a Retirement Today) Plan will enable small businesses and their workers for whom the current private sector options are too complex and pricey, to begin retirement savings.