

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

You are listening to Work in Progress. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Work in Progress explores the rapidly changing workplace through conversations with innovators, educators and decision makers. People with solutions to today's workforce challenges. I'm here at the Aspen Ideas Festival with Wes Moore, Governor of Maryland West. Thank you for joining the podcast.

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

My joy. Great to see you again.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Yeah, great to see you. Last time we talked it was for SXSW EDU and you were heading the Robin Hood Foundation.

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

That's right, that's right.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

So, I'm glad to have you in your new role, and be able to talk to our audience about workforce, and workforce development and the importance of how the government can work with local leaders, nonprofits, educators, really to create a really strong workforce in your state in this example, or your city in other examples. So, thank you very much.

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

Thank you so much. And I think even my past, working past experience, has just showed me the importance of that. I'd never run for public office before. Running for governor was the first elected office I've ever run for. And I knew that we had to go in and take a different type of approach. That we were not in competition with philanthropy or the private sector, that we were partners with philanthropy and the private sector. And I always, when I was running Robin Hood, I always thought about the benefits of leverage capital. Of the things that we invested in were always ... The thing that I always loved to invest in were the things that there was going to be leverage capital, where there's going to be additional supports. Because it increases the probability of success.

And so really what we tried to do in the mentality, that we've tried to bring to state government, is saying, where can we find the right partners to create leverage capital and increase probability of success? Places that have been investing in things for years, and they've essentially de-risked it and they now know that this is now a qualified best practice that's now ready to go public.

And so I think that background and that experience has been really helpful as I've made this transition into the governor's role.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I like that idea because we talk a lot about these partnerships. We talk about how you can't do it alone. So as you just rightly said, you can't just be a nonprofit that goes in and say, I want to fix this. If you don't have your community involved in it, you need them.

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

And there will be organ rejection. There will be a situation where your altruism will not be viewed as that, that your altruism will be viewed as paternalism. You cannot go into communities and tell them what they need. You have to go and listen to communities and have them tell you what they need and then you all work together to be able to address that issue.

Those who are living in poverty, those who are living in places where there's housing insecurity, places where there's food insecurity, places where you do not have sustainable educational assets, you don't need to tell them that. They know that and they feel it every day. The best thing that we can do is go listen and be prepared to act and respond to what we're hearing. And so it is important that people feel that sense of engagement and also just that sense of belonging in the work that's being done.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Do you think some of that is a mistrust? You say you can't go in and tell people what they need because they know it, but do you think there's a mistrust of government or the agencies that are there to try to help them?

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

Absolutely, because I think that for many people, the lack of sustainable services or supports has been generational. For many people who are living and existing in poverty, for example, that's not a new phenomenon. Because we looked at this because in Maryland we just passed a piece of legislation called The Enough Act, which standing for engaging neighborhoods, organizations, unions, governments and households or everybody, and it's a first of its kind in the country, place-based investment strategy that a state is going to help lead on to be able to address the issue of concentrated poverty and concentrate child poverty. The reason I bring that up is this, if you look at the heat map in the state of Maryland of where child poverty exists in 2024, it looks exactly the same as it did in 2014, which looks exactly the same as it did in 2004. The map hasn't moved. And that's part of the problem. And so when you go to communities and you're saying, "We are here to help," a lot of community will look back at you and say, "But you've been part of the problem."

And so there has to be that sense of trust that then gets built up in order for you to have effective results.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

One of the things that can help of course is workforce development, connecting people in the community with the opportunities that they need, whether it's training or education credentials. What is being done? I should mention that I do know that Baltimore in particular is a workforce hub. So how are you working to connect the community with that money that's coming in that's going to help them?

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

There's been a tremendous amount of capitalists come on board and give a lot of credit to the Biden Harris administration for making that happen and for trusting local jurisdictions to be able to disseminate that capital smartly and wisely. I know in Maryland we've taken full advantage of it. Where we really have focused and made historic investments in things like trade programs and apprenticeship programs and job reskilling initiatives.

And part of it's because we have some of the best four year colleges in the country, in the state of Maryland, something we're very proud of. But we also are going to end the myth that every single one of our students need to attend one of them in order to be economically successful. That we're actually

going to work with employers to be able to identify what are the skill sets that you're looking for, and then making sure we have an education system that's preparing young people for those jobs. For us to be able to think through how are we doing a better job of creating a greater entrepreneurial culture and an ownership culture. Because I want our young people to be trained not just to how to be employees, but how to be employers. And so it really is a whole reshaping and rethinking that's taking place over these past 18 months about how we're thinking about our work in Maryland.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

If no one knows Maryland really specifically or in depth, what are some of the industries that are thriving there and that need those workers?

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

We'll see a lot of what Maryland has been and has been known for, have been the anchors that we've always been known for, as we call it, it's the Ed, the Feds and the Meds. So we've relied on a federal government, we've relied on our institutions, our medical institutions. That we've relied on our institutions of higher education. But the thing that we know, and in this moment, we've got to be able to diversify our economic stretch, where if you look at the assets that we have in the state of Maryland, there's no reason that we should not be the national leader in cyber. I mean, we're literally the home of US Cyber Command. We're the home of Fort Meade and cyber needs your help, and they need our help. And the new home of the FBI building, which is coming to the state of Maryland.

So we have to be able to tailor our economy to actually make sure that our balance sheet matches those aspirations. So whether you're talking about cyber, whether you're talking about life sciences or data sciences, whether you're talking about AI or quantum, these are all growing industries that Maryland has a unique competitive advantage, but we've got to be able to move fast in order to capture that.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And part of the workforce hub money is going to infrastructure. So there's a lot of construction that's coming out of the bipartisan funding bills. So there's a lot of infrastructure not only to build, but also to refurbish and make things climate resilient. So what is going on in Maryland, in Baltimore area, with this money?

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

So there's a few different things, and we've been the beneficiary of about \$12.7 billion for the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act. We've been the beneficiary of over \$276 million when it came to the IRA, the Inflation Reduction Act. And so we've really been using that capital wisely to be able to say, all right, if we're going to make sure that Maryland, we quadrupled our offshore wind goals. So now we have a goal of 8.5 gigawatts of offshore wind, that'll be enough to power over 3 million homes in the state of Maryland. That'll be enough to turn Maryland into a net exporter of clean energy instead of being a very expensive net importer of clean energy. And so our ability to be able to leverage those federal dollars to be able to create those type of pathways, has been something that we've centered our work on. We've also been very clear about the importance of mass transit and how are we coming up with doing a better job of structuring mass transit investments, both because it's important to move people from where they live to where they work or where they live to where they worship.

But also it's better for the environment if we can have more mass transit options. And so being able to invest in things like the Frederick Douglass Tunnel, which is going to be responsible for 30,000 new jobs,

being able to put the Red Line back online, which is going to invest not only in thousands of jobs but create the first sustainable mass transit option that we've had in the city of Baltimore in generations. And so these are all things where we say we can be really thoughtful and also just very consistent on being able to finish top projects on time and on budget. But they're also very consistent with not only our values, but where the capital of the federal government is lining in as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And as you said, job creation. This is going to be putting people to work in jobs and a lot of these are unionized jobs, so those are good paying jobs with benefits.

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

And jobs that won't just be jobs. There'll be jobs that will turn into careers. And that's exactly what we're hoping for. When you have this large pipeline of projects that we have coming on board, we know that there are going to be workers who will go from one project to another project to another project, which is exactly what we want. We want to make sure that people are entering into careers that are long-lasting, that are sustainable, and that can make sure that they're taking care of their family as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

That is the key to economic mobility is to get in that door and then be able to take that and as you say, make it a career. Don't make it just a one-off. And one of the other things I did note too, there is the apprenticeships that are coming out of that. And again, earn-and-learn is an important way to learn a skill because some people can't afford to just go, "Okay, I'm going to stop. I'm going to go take a class or get a credential."

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

Most people can't. And it's an incredibly unfair ask to ask people and say, "Well, we want to train you up, but you're not going to be paid for it." It's not sustainable. That's not a real opportunity for the vast majority of people in our communities. We became the first state in this country that now offers a service year option for all of our high school graduates, where all of our high school graduates now have a chance to have a year service to the State of Maryland. They can choose however they want to do it. They can work in the environment, they can work in education, they can serve veterans, they can serve returning citizens. It's completely their choice. But it's a year to have a paid opportunity making \$15 and getting a \$6,000 stipend at the end of it to be able to go out and define that thing that makes your heartbeat a little bit faster and go after it.

We did it because we believe in experiential learning. We did it because we believe in paid financial cushions. And again, giving people a financial incentive for the work that they're doing is the only way to democratize it. We did it because we believe in this time of political divisiveness and vitriol that service will save us. But also this has become a remarkable workforce development tool, where some of the first people that signed up have actually been the private sector who said, "We'll take three of them." And so when you think about that, the ability to democratize these opportunities by making sure that they are paid opportunities, really is crucial for any type of thing we're trying to get done.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I like the experiential learning part of it too, because some companies won't hire you if you don't have the experience, but if you don't have the opportunity to get the experience, you can't get hired.

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

You can't get hired. That's exactly right. And that leaves so many people in this conundrum where they have the ambition, but it's consistently met with roadblocks. And so we just want for our state to be the place where ambition and opportunity actually have a chance to meet one another.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I like the purpose part of it too, because not everybody works for a giant paycheck. Some people work because they want to serve their community while they're taking care of their family. So the idea of saying, "If this is what I want to do, you're giving me the chance," I think that's a wonderful opportunity.

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

That's exactly right. And letting people know that we're not telling you what to do. We're not telling you how to serve. We just want to give you the opportunity to serve because it's also something that's going to create lifelong bonds and a sustainable skillset that people then can then take for whatever they want to do next.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And one of the other things that you did recently was you did this mass pardon. Largest in history for people with marijuana convictions. Why?

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

Because we have a growing and a thriving recreational cannabis market in the State of Maryland that the people voted for. That people voted for by 70%, that we were going to have a recreational cannabis market, that we were going to decriminalize cannabis. And we now have a growing industry that people are doing very well with. That if you look across the country, we now have a new multi-billion dollar industry. And we have people who can't find employment because of a cannabis record. We have people that can't get a student loan because of a cannabis record. We have people who cannot get a small business loan because they have a cannabis record. There's something so fundamentally unfair about that, that people continue to be punished for something that is no longer illegal, and in fact is an initiative that's actually being supported.

And so by doing the largest mass pardon of cannabis convictions in the history of the United States, I think we sent a really important message, that when we say leave no one behind, we mean that. And you cannot celebrate the benefits of legalization if you're not willing to address the consequences of criminalization. And so we think this was a really important move. It was a really important first step that our state made on this issue, and we will have more. But I think it was an important message also to send to the rest of the country as well.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And in terms of justice impacted, that is an issue that we have taken up at WorkingNation, talking about the pathways to reentry, trying to help the decline in recidivism. Now, these are minor convictions, right? We're not talking about 30-year-sentence for a drug lord, but people with criminal records are also facing that barrier to entry into the workforce. Are you working with them in other ways in that-

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

We are. We've been focusing on, you can't make every sentence a life sentence, but unfortunately we have a criminal justice system that really does accelerate that and support that. And so we are. In addition to the work that's being done around the misdemeanor cannabis pardons, we're also very focused on being able to take a look at how our criminal justice system has been used and frankly misused in prior histories, as a way of being able to pull people back from being able to expand their opportunities. If we are really going to be a society that believes in second chances, if we're really going to be a society that believes that we are not going to be defined by our worst moments or worst mistake, then we actually have to believe that and reinforce it. And so I think this was an important first step for us to do it. But I want to be clear though, our state's not done.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

And I think it's important too because at a time when employers are saying "We don't have enough workers," if you're excluding a large part of the population for either a conviction or even an arrest, then you are hurting the economy.

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

Correct. A growing economy is a participatory one. A stagnant and stalled economy is one where you have huge swaths of society that is not participating. It doesn't make ... forget a moral sense, it doesn't make economic sense for us to be able to do that. So our ability to be able to address the fact that right now in the state of Maryland for every person falling for unemployment, there's two available jobs because there's a disconnect in skillset. For our ability to make sure that those who are returning back into society, that they have an opportunity to be able to be gainfully employed and support our economy.

It just makes sense for our ability to be able to help people who are transitioning from the military, and coming back in and helping to figure out, okay, how does the skillset that they learn from the military, how does that correlate and translate into the workforce needs of now, that benefits everybody. And so I think this is really how we've got to start thinking about economic growth, because for me, you're absolutely right. This is jobs, this is economic growth. This is the reason we're investing the way that we are, because a growing economy is a participatory one.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I was listening to you here at the festival yesterday, talk about being a veteran yourself and kind of that ethos that you have used within your own government. I thought it was really good. It's that no man left behind it attitude. So it translates into the economy as well.

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

Absolutely. And it's a great lens on how we should view our work, where when I was 17, I learned that in the military, leave no one behind. There's a reason for it. It's not just because it's important psychologically, it's important for mission accomplishment, that it's a core criteria for mission accomplishment. So if you continue to have a society where huge swaths of people are being left out, if you continue to have areas and communities where you essentially have these deserts of economic activity, that's not benefiting anybody. It's not benefiting that local jurisdiction is not benefiting the state that local jurisdiction exists in. For me, this is a very selfish ask when I say I want everybody participating in our economic growth. Because if you can find a Maryland where everyone is participating, I can tell you right now, you're showing me a Maryland that no state in this country has a chance to compete with.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I want to turn to one more thing in the news before I let you go. We all have a busy day. You have a very busy day. I know you have another panel coming up. The Key Bridge, it's responsible, I think the number was 13% of your economy it's tied to it. Where are we at in correcting that problem?

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

I remember that first morning and looking at the damage and seeing the fact that we, at that point when I first got down, realizing that we were hours away from tens of thousands of people waking up and realizing that they didn't have a job to go to. And when I was getting first initial estimates, I said, "How long is it going to take for us to clean up the Patapsco River where the ship was caught?" And they were saying, the divers were telling us that they couldn't see a foot past them because the amount of debris that was in the water, and they were saying this thing could take up to a year.

And I remember saying, "This can't. I have tens of thousands of workers. I cannot tell them that it's going to be a year before they can go back to work." And we just started working around the clock with our federal partners, with our local partners, with the private sector, with nonprofit community, making sure that those who were directly impacted were supported. I give a huge shout-out to members of the private sector who said we won't lay off our workers. And even the ones who said they had to redirect their work to another port, said as soon as the Port of Baltimore reopens, they'll bring it back on board. And the heroic work of Unified Command and the Coast Guard and the Navy SUPSALV and the Army Corps of Engineers who were literally working around the clock to remove the steel from the water, even though we were thought it could take up to 11 months, we reopened the channel in 11 weeks.

And not only is the full channel, Federal Channel, now completely reopened, the concern that many people had about the unemployment rate for the State of Maryland, what could it be when you have something so catastrophic and so deadly that thousands of people now lost their jobs? The answer was for the month of April, and now looking back, we're getting back numbers for the month of May too, that once again for the 12th straight month in a row, Maryland maintained amongst the lowest unemployment rates in the entire country. And in fact, for the month of April, actually gained 7,000 jobs.

So I'm so inspired by the way this team has worked so well together. I think what Maryland has just executed has been a case study on how you do disaster response. I also know that until I can look up and see the Key Bridge rebuilt, our mission's not over.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Continued good luck on that. It looks like you're making a lot of great progress. And also just in putting people to work and keeping people in the state employed.

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

Our people deserve it. They're the best in the country and they deserve that. So it's been my honor.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

Thank you, Governor Moore.

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

It was a pleasure having you sit down with me again.

Gov. Wes Moore, Maryland:

It was a joy sitting down with you again. Thank you.

Ramona Schindelheim, WorkingNation Editor-in-Chief:

I've been speaking with Governor Wes Moore, Governor of Maryland. I'm Ramona Schindelheim, Editor-in-chief of WorkingNation. Thank you for listening.