

History

Pennsylvania Women Work (PA Women Work) is a not-for-profit 501(c)3 organization that provides job training and employment services to displaced homemakers, single mothers and low-income heads of households. PA Women Work has been a vocal advocate for women's employment issues since its founding in 1993. With nearly two decades of experience in working with state legislators, raising community awareness and reaching out to underserved local populations, PA Women Work is uniquely qualified to help women in Pennsylvania achieve economic self-sufficiency.

The idea of creating an agency solely dedicated to women's employment began in the 1970s, when divorce rates in the United States began climbing toward their present-day average. In the process, many women found themselves "fired" from their jobs as homemakers. Among those affected were Laurie Shields, a 55-year-old widow, and Tish Sommers, a 57-year-old divorcée, who found it difficult to reenter the workplace after spending so many years away from it. Shields and Sommers, like many women that made up this rapidly-growing population of displaced homemakers, were too old for youth programs but too young to receive Social Security payments. These displaced homemakers also weren't poor enough to receive welfare, but they barely had enough money to support themselves. To raise awareness of these unique problems, Shields and Sommers assembled a national coalition of activists that was formalized as the Displaced Homemakers Network in 1979. The group successfully lobbied 39 states and Congress to take action, resulting in a federal grant, allotted to the states, that provided funds for career development programs for women.

Pennsylvania's displaced homemaker programs began operating in the early 1980s under the national Displaced Homemakers Network. When the national network disbanded, a dedicated group of women, headed by Mary Ann Eisenreich, incorporated as Pennsylvania Women Work. Based in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, PA Women Work provides oversight to 12 locations across the state that provide career development services through New Choices classes. Pennsylvania Women Work also hosts New Choices classes in four Pittsburgh area locations.

Since its founding, PA Women Work has helped over 50,000 individuals in transition overcome the economic, educational and emotional obstacles to achieving successful employment that pays a living wage.

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New Choices

Pennsylvania Women Work (PA Women Work)'s signature program is New Choices, a series of career development classes that teach unemployed individuals the soft skills they need to search for a job, ace an interview and retain employment that pays a family-sustaining wage. The program focuses on the needs of single mothers, displaced homemakers and women in transition, though many men have attended the classes as well. Individuals come to the classes because they need to learn the following skills: (1) resume writing, (2) interviewing techniques, (3) cover letter writing, (4) stress management, (5) time management and (6) conflict management. Students also take skill assessment tests that help to match them with potential careers that might interest them, and they also take computer classes, where they become proficient in programs such as Microsoft Word, Microsoft Excel, Microsoft PowerPoint and Internet Explorer.

What truly makes New Choices unique, however, is not just its comprehensive curriculum but also the individual attention and care that each participant is given by PA Women Work's staff. PA Women Work's career development instructors and program manager meet with every student to enable them to create personalized career goals and a step-by-step plan for accomplishing those goals. These plans take students' interests and talents into account. Students also take the Culture-Free Self-Esteem Inventory, a statistically valid and reliable indicator of self-esteem. As long-term unemployment has been correlated with low self-esteem and depression, many participants need not only new skills but also a nurturing environment in which they feel cared for and special. The one-on-one assistance that each participant receives builds up her self-esteem, giving her confidence in her own abilities and her job search. As one New Choices student, who is now a graphic designer, stated, "New Choices accepts us all the way we are, and then we blossom. It changes our lives!" Through the support of the New Choices classes, over 85 percent of students have gone on to further education and careers that pay a family-sustaining wage.

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