



Moving Rhode Island Forward

An Interview with The Honorable Gina M. Raimondo, Governor of Rhode Island

EDITORS' NOTE On January 6, 2015, Gina Raimondo became the 75th Governor of Rhode Island and the first woman to hold that office. She graduated with honors from Harvard and won a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford University where she earned a doctorate. She later graduated from Yale Law School, and then clerked for U.S. District Judge Kimba Wood, and served as a founding employee and Senior Vice President at Village Ventures. Raimondo co-founded Point Judith Capital and was involved in dozens of successful start-up companies. In November of 2010, She was elected to serve as General Treasurer of Rhode Island, where she tackled the state's estimated \$7 billion unfunded pension liability and propelled the passage of the Rhode Island Retirement Security Act of 2011.



The Hon. Gina M. Raimondo

Will you discuss the current state of the Rhode Island economy and the focus your administration has put on training for the jobs of the future?

Our economy is improving and we have remarkable momentum right now. In the past few years, we've gone from the highest unemployment rate in the country to being at or below the national average. Much of this has to do with the fact that we are investing in our people with job training programs, apprenticeship programs and career and technical education. Making sure people have the skills they need to get good jobs is clearly paying off.

How critical is small business to driving economic growth in Rhode Island and how is the 10,000 Small Businesses Initiative helping?

It's critical. Most Rhode Islanders work in a small business, and so much of the growth for the economy is coming from those small businesses. This program expands access to capital and provides practical business education for small business owners.

I have had the opportunity to speak with many business owners who are in the program and without exception, they love it. These are people who get into business because they are good at what they do, but they might not know much about how to run or expand a business. This program can really help them with this.

What focus have you placed on K-12 education reform?

This focus is at the top of the list for our state. With the right education, kids flourish, so we can't let anyone fall behind.

Right now, we are on track to be one of the first states in the country to teach computer science to all public school kids, sometimes starting as early as kindergarten. That is an incredibly important initiative because digital skills are critical in today's world.

We also recently became only the fourth state to allow every high school graduate to go to our community colleges for two years tuition-free.

The economy is changing so fast that the only way to secure a good job is to have the right education, and we need to make sure that everyone has equal access to this.

How critical is the strength of the state's university system to businesses interested in moving into Rhode Island?

Rhode Island is blessed with more than our fair share of top universities and colleges. We have the best design school in America, the Rhode Island School of Design; Brown University has one of the top computer science programs in the country; University of Rhode Island is making huge investments in their engineering programs and they have a world-class oceanography program; and Salve Regina has one of the best cyber programs in the country. We are chock-full of top notch public and private schools, and that is a real competitive advantage for our economy.

Is the right dialogue taking place to address the challenges in healthcare reform?

No, and it's horrible what is happening. In Rhode Island, the Affordable Care Act is working. We have nearly universal coverage and we have many good choices on our exchange. Premiums on the exchange even went down last year.

I have 100,000 people here who rely on the Affordable Care Act for their coverage. I understand that it may not be working as well in many states, so we need to have a serious dialogue about how to improve it, but we haven't seen that so far. We have just seen a president hellbent on cutting taxes for the wealthy and rushing through an irresponsible healthcare package to find money so he can afford to find tax cuts for the top 1 percent.

Many Republican governors have even agreed that unwinding the Affordable Care Act would be bad for their states.

How important is addressing infrastructure investment in Rhode Island?

It's essential. One of the things I'm most proud of is that we have put into place the state's first ever 10-year infrastructure plan and we are working hard to fix our roads and bridges, as well as our airport.

It's one of the most important things we can do to improve our economy.

Do you believe that much of the real change in the U.S. is going to have to occur at the state level?

I'm very frustrated with the lack of action and results coming out of Washington. There is too much politics and not enough work. Governors and mayors are in the unique position of being close to their constituents so they can hear their concerns and take action, solve problems and make things happen.

However, that can't last forever. The federal government needs to step up and provide funding for infrastructure and other areas such as mental health treatment. I've done what I can to protect our DACA students, but the federal government needs to do its job and fix the broken immigration system.

Governors are on the frontline and we're not letting dysfunction in Washington slow us down, but they need to show up and do their jobs.

What is the importance of putting an emphasis on transparency for your administration?

It's critical to the process of reconnecting people with their government. We need folks to trust us and have confidence in us. Transparency is the foundation for that. If they know what is going on and have a say in it, they will have more confidence in it, which is what they deserve.

What do you tell young women today about the opportunities that exist for careers in public service?

I tell them to go for it because we need them. The best antidote for the sexual harassment stories we are hearing lately is to get more women in positions of leadership. I encourage them to run because we need their talent at the table so we can make things work for everybody. ●