



## Poverty & policy: A woman lawmaker's perspective

*Dispatcher: 911, what's your emergency?*

*Caller: America's healthcare system is broken and people are dying! (ambulance siren)*

Welcome to **Code WACK!**, where we shine a light on America's callous healthcare system, how it hurts us and what we can do about it. I'm your host, **Brenda Gazzar**.

(music)

This time on **Code WACK!** Longtime nurse advocate, single mother, and now California **Assemblywoman Pilar Schiavo** was the only Democrat to unseat a Republican incumbent in the assembly last November. What inspired her to get into politics and what are her priorities when it comes to the three H's she champions – health care, homelessness, and housing. We're highlighting Schiavo's impressive story today in honor of Women's History Month. This is the first of a two-part series with the assemblywoman.

**Welcome to Code WACK!, Pilar!**

[\(00:46\)](#):

**Schiavo:** Thank you.

[\(00:47\)](#):

**Or I should say Assemblywoman Schiavo.**

[\(00:50\)](#):

**Schiavo:** <Laugh>. Thank you.

(00:51):

**Q:** *During this Woman's History month, we're celebrating women lawmakers who tell our stories and transform our lives for the better. That means we're celebrating you. Congratulations on winning District 40, which includes the historically conservative Santa Clarita Valley, California. You've been sharing stories about people suffering for years as a nurse advocate. Now let's look at your story. Tell us a bit about yourself and your background. What inspired you to get into politics?*

(01:15):

**Schiavo:** You know, I never had the goal of going into politics and certainly not running for office <laugh>, but I have always been really driven to fight for my community, for people who are struggling, for working families. And so that's really how I got into political work. I originally worked for a tribal Head Start program and learned how, you know, all this new early brain development research was coming out talking about how the economics of a family impacts every aspect of a child's development, math skills, social skills, language skills and I really wanted to help at-risk youth and kids and so I felt like if I really wanted to help kids, I needed to change the economics of their family. And growing up in a working class family that had struggled when I was younger and knowing how stressful that is, it really resonated with me. And so I found my way to the labor movement and that's where I worked for 20 years.

**Tell us about that.**

**Schiavo:** My work in the labor movement was a lot of political organizing, fighting for legislation for health care, for equal pay, for living wages, fighting for contracts that guaranteed retirement security and healthcare benefits.

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You know, I saw in my own family, my dad finally got a union job when I was in college and it made a huge difference in our family and I saw for the first time we had comprehensive healthcare benefits. We had never had those before. You know, he could be sick and not have to worry about missing a day's pay, and it gave a little more security so that our collective family could take a breath, you know, and breathe and relax a little bit. And I saw what a difference that made in our family too. And so I loved that work and I loved doing that work, but I was always happy being in the background. I worked for a legislator and it was the same thing. I would

write talking points. I would, you know, prep when I worked for the California Nurses Association for almost 13 years. I prepped a lot of nurses to speak to the media and push them out in front or to speak at events and was always happy to be in the background.

[\(03:12\)](#):

And then you know, at a certain point I just really got frustrated that more wasn't happening in Sacramento and felt like there was an opportunity in this district to be able to take this district back. We were the only race to unseat a Republican incumbent in the state.

**Amazing.**

**Schiavo:** But it was very scary. I had to quit my job that I loved at CNA as a single mom, and it was a very big scary leap. And you know, fortunately it worked out. We worked really hard and it's very exciting now to be on the other side of the work around, you know, fighting for good policies and being able to push that button to vote and help craft the laws that can make a difference in people's lives. So it's been amazing and it's been really wonderful, but it's never something that I set out to do.

[\(03:59\)](#):

***Q: Wow, what an inspiring life you've had. Thank you. It's 2023 and women still face inequities and challenges around housing and health care, especially reproductive care, housing and health care have been defining issues for you for some time. Why is that?***

[\(04:14\)](#):

**Schiavo:** So health care became a big issue for me, obviously because of my work directly with nurses at California Nurses Association is where I really learned so much about how broken our healthcare system is that medical bankruptcy is the number one cause of bankruptcy and what kind of profound impact it has on people. When I was, you know, working on my campaign, I talked to a bunch of people about health care and was talking to folks who are paying more for health insurance than they are for their mortgage. And you know, it's just insane how unaffordable health care is and everybody needs it, you know, and so after hearing those stories from nurses, you can't not passionately care about fixing the system. So I've worked to guarantee healthcare for over a decade and fought for that and believed that we can win that and should win that in California.

(05:12):

And, you know, housing and homelessness really became a huge issue because like everyone else, I really saw our increase in homelessness and just how heartbreaking it is to see people struggling really at the, you know, the most extreme form of poverty is when you have to live on the street. And, and I think a lot of people, you know, like I felt before just wanted to help but didn't know what to do or how. And then a permanent supportive housing development, which is housing with wraparound services, was proposed right near my daughter's school. And I started getting involved to support that project with my daughter who was supporting the project too and organizing other community members. And ended up co-founding an organization working on homelessness. And it started, you know, as a kind of advocacy organization fighting for housing and real solutions to homelessness.

(06:00):

And then when the pandemic hit, we started bringing food out to folks because everything had shut down and there was really no food available and became what's now the largest homeless outreach program in the San Fernando Valley.

***That's great.***

**Schiavo:** And have done outreach and talked with folks who were experiencing homelessness and just became really focused on how many of our solutions are band-aid solutions that move people from sidewalk to sidewalk but don't actually solve the problem. And you know, this is one of the things that motivated me to run for office, just being so frustrated to see politicians say we're doing something, but it's not actually solving the problem, it's not getting to the root causes of homelessness and needing those bold solutions in Sacramento. And so when there was an opportunity to run and have an impact on that issue, you know, that along with health care were the two really guiding issues and, and things that motivated me to run and feel like I could make a difference in Sacramento.

(06:53):

***Q: Got it. The L.A. Times reported last summer that in LA County, 53% of women spend more than half their income on housing. Can you talk about why this is and what policies could help?***

(07:07):

**Schiavo:** Well, you know, we just had equal pay day a couple days ago and it's, you know, mid-March and that's the day where women finally catch up to the pay that men made the year before. So it takes, you know, another three months basically for women to make the same amount as men. So I think a lot of it has to do with lower and stagnated wages for women who make less. So the proportion of their, you know, paycheck that they have to pay on housing ends up being a lot more. And you know, and I think housing is just a crisis for everyone. It's, it's so expensive, you know, the home that I bought five years ago, I could not afford to buy now, and everybody is really being faced with it. But I think women have even more of a burden when it comes to more often than not being paid, less than male counterparts and then having to spend more than of their paycheck on housing just to survive.

(08:02):

***Q: Right. Great point. Thank you. Being housed is critical to being and staying healthy, but so is access to affordable care, including reproductive care. What do you see as California's biggest obstacle to making health care available to everyone who needs it?***

(08:20):

**Schiavo:** There's a few things that are really the big challenges, I think around guaranteeing health care. One of them is obviously the very deep pockets of insurance and pharma, and they're not afraid to pull millions of dollars out of those pockets and use it often against politicians. It was certainly used against me and my race. I was attacked for, you know, all the lies that they spread. You know, when, when you talk about guaranteeing health care, and we know, you know, so many countries do it, they cover everyone, they pay less, and we could do it here, but they make it about, you know, raising people's taxes, destroying Medicare, taking away your doctor and your medical insurance. And so we have a really broken political system, unfortunately, when it comes to campaign finance. And so I know a lot of people focus on, you know, how much insurance or pharma is donating to politicians, but really I think the thing that gets in the way is how much are they going to spend against you in your campaign, because that is unlimited.

(09:23):

It's not just limited to a \$5,500 campaign donation. They can spend half a million dollars, a million dollars against you in a campaign.

***Yes, the corporate influence in elections.***

**Schiavo:** And so there has to be to counter that a lot of organizing at the grassroots level to make sure that voters in our community are informed. I think that, you know, we also need to make sure that we're educating legislators because I think, you know, there's a lot of folks who this is not in their wheelhouse and don't have a whole lot of information. And so without having a strong base of knowledge, it's easy for misinformation to throw people off course or scare them from being supportive. And so I think there both needs to be deep organizing and education in our communities and also deep organizing and educating within the legislature and, you know, and then honestly, there needs to be other ways to fundraise and fight for candidates who are going to fight for this and defend them when they are champions and being attacked by these deep pockets. So it's not, it's not easy, it's not an easy path, but I think those are really huge challenges that we have politically to get to where we need to get, to get bills passed and to really win in California.

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***Q: What about women's healthcare, specifically reproductive care?***

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**Schiavo:** You know, I think that we've actually had a lot of success in California around women's reproductive healthcare. We've been leading the nation. We passed 13 bills last year and a constitutional amendment to protect the right to abortion. We have a bill package of 17 bills this year that are sponsored by the Women's Caucus and the FAB council, which has come together to fight for reproductive care and the right to abortion. And you know, I think that we have an opportunity to pass a number of those bills. I'm carrying one of them. So, you know, in a lot of ways I think California is leading the way for the nation on women's health and reproductive health. And you know, unfortunately the terrible decision by the Supreme Court, the Dobbs decision, spurred people into action. And so we've been able to put in place a lot more protections and rights for women and women's health care than ever before.

([11:43](#)):

It's going to take some time for us to see the benefits of that and, you know, hopefully those benefits will be showing soon. And also with the budget last year, you know, we had a very big budget and we're able to invest a lot in women's health. And so it's also going to take time for those dollars to get rolled out and really have an impact. But I'm hoping that we really see a big difference soon on that and that California is making sure that we prioritize women's health in a bigger

way than we ever have before. That being said, we still have a whole lot to do and you know, I have a bill that I'm carrying to expand perinatal services from 60 days to 90 days and make sure they're covered for women and children after birth. And, you know, around birth, we are seeing higher death rates than we've seen in the past of birthing moms and during birth. And so there's a lot of work that we need to do, but I know that there's a lot of political will around this issue, specifically in Sacramento and a lot of opportunity for us to make a difference, which is exciting.

(12:51):

***Oh, that's great. I hope the bill passes.***

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**Schiavo:** Thank you.

(12:55):

***Q: So what new policies around health care would change the game?***

(12:59):

**Schiavo:** I mean, obviously guaranteeing health care for all would change the game <laugh>, and that's ultimately where we need to get to. You know, I know that there's a lot happening in the healthcare space as it does every year around lowering cost, increasing access, you know, ensuring that people are getting culturally competent care, which has become a big new focus, which is really important. And you know, people are getting care in the language that they need care in, all of those things, you know, we should have been doing for years and haven't been really prioritizing. And so I think really making sure that we're focusing on that and really focusing our investment and our policy changes in the areas where, you know, people are struggling the most to get health care – lower income folks, communities of color who have traditionally not had access to health care or been, you know, the most negatively impacted around inequities in our healthcare system, that is the area that we really need to focus on. But ultimately, you know, almost anyone can be bankrupted by healthcare when it comes down to it. And so until we get to the point where we guarantee health care, where everyone, you know, pays a little bit of what they can afford to make sure that we have healthcare for everyone that that's really where we have to get to, to make sure that we are addressing health inequity.

(14:21):

***Thank you Assemblywoman Pilar Schiavo. Next week, we'll talk to the assemblywoman about the special challenges women face running for office.***

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