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Attracting, Retaining, and Advancing West Virginia's Workforce



Alex Weld
Generation West Virginia

Alex Weld is the Executive Director of Generation West Virginia, a statewide nonprofit dedicated to attracting, retaining, and advancing young people in West Virginia. Having been born and raised in West Virginia, the organization's mission is close to Weld's heart. She has been with Generation West Virginia since 2021 and, under her leadership, has grown the organization and significantly expanded the number of West Virginians it serves. Weld lives in Wellsburg and serves on the West Virginia Workforce Development Board, the board of the Regional Economic Development Partnership (RED), and the YWCA Wheeling board.

For decades, many of West Virginia's young people have made the decision to leave the state. Oftentimes, leaving was a necessity. While they would have preferred to put their talents to use in their hometowns, the job opportunities they sought existed outside of our borders.

But it's no secret that we're seeing a shift in West Virginia. Longstanding businesses are expanding. New companies are choosing to open their doors in West Virginia, with record investments frequently making headlines. And, of course, that means more opportunities for West Virginians, with thousands of new jobs on the way.

At Generation West Virginia, we're working to ensure that young West Virginians are aware of and ready for these opportunities. Through our training, retention, and advancement programs, we're helping young people choose to stay and live in West Virginia. While we're helping these West Virginians find fulfilling lives, we're also aware of the long-term effects of this work. By 2030, Millennials and Gen Z will make up more than 65% of our country's workforce. For West Virginia to be a place future generations call home, it is critical that we invest in our young people today.

New career pathways

One key way we're helping young people find meaningful careers is through our NewForce program. Software developers are in demand

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throughout the state, but training programs can be costly and out of reach for many West Virginians. That's why we launched NewForce, our fully remote, tuition-free coding school. We train people with no prior coding experience, prepare them for their first tech job, and connect them with open, entry-level software development jobs here in the Mountain State. NewForce students are West Virginians from all different backgrounds – teachers, fast food workers, house painters, and accountants, just to name a few.

The tech industry is constantly changing, so we adapt our program constantly, based on employer feedback to ensure students are ready to continue on day one of their software development jobs. And because we are committed to the total success of our students, NewForce offers a comprehensive career preparation curriculum as well.

We currently train 40 West Virginians annually through this six-month program, and within six months, 85% of our graduates are working in a tech role, with a starting salary of \$56,000. Many employers who hire our graduates are in the Ohio River Valley – like Core10 in Huntington, Infor in Charleston, and Bravo Consulting in Morgantown. But even if a tech employer isn't in their region of the state, our

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graduates are often able to work remotely, giving them the opportunity to find a fulfilling career without having to leave the community they love.

Building connections

Tech is just one of many growing industries in West Virginia. As opportunities grow in the state, we regularly hear from young people that they aren't aware of the open roles here in West Virginia. And, conversely, employers tell us that they have difficulty finding applicants for their roles. Generation West Virginia's Career Connector program aims to address that challenge. We're working with companies across the state to get

their job opportunities in front of more people, and we're helping West Virginians with their resumes and interview skills.

From a Machinist Technology Instructor at Marshall Advanced Manufacturing Center in Huntington to a Communications Manager at Wheeling Heritage in Wheeling, we feature new opportunities throughout the state every day. Our goal is to bridge the gap between employers and young people in West Virginia, so that more young people can choose to stay. On average, we're seeing about 21,000 people interact with the career opportunities we share with our network of young people.

Developing the next generation

What makes a job a career? For a young employee, the answer is often the meaning behind the work and their relationship with the company. Young people are increasingly looking for ways to learn and grow, ranking "professional growth and development" as the most important factor in their decision to stay at a company – a factor they rank higher than any other generation. In order to help our young people grow at careers in West Virginia, we run the GWV Fellowship program. This annual program provides up to 30 young West Virginians the opportunity to learn from leaders throughout the state as they participate in virtual and in-person sessions designed around professional development and adventure.



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Companies across West Virginia nominate their young employees for this program, through which they visit various regions of the state and complete a professional development program focused on in-demand skills. In October, Fellows headed to Morgantown, where they learned about the challenges and opportunities around education in West Virginia, and also completed a training on strengths-based leadership that they can immediately apply to their work. This immersive cohort learning model has proven effective in helping young people advance in their careers and bring valuable skills to the companies where they work.

There is real momentum and opportunity in West Virginia today. By investing in our young people now, we're ensuring a brighter future for years and generations to come. **W**