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SUMMER 2024



Chelsea Ruby
West Virginia
Department of Tourism

Chelsea Ruby was appointed Secretary of the West Virginia Department of Tourism by Governor Jim Justice in March 2021. This appointment marked an elevation of the West Virginia Tourism Office to a cabinet-level department, where Ruby served as Tourism Commissioner for four years. As Secretary, Ruby leads efforts to unify and promote the state's Almost Heaven brand, advance tourism development, and promote the Mountain State to a broader audience, featuring West Virginia as a year-round travel destination to both national and international travelers.

Building West Virginia's Next-Generation Tourism Workforce

West Virginia tourism has a problem.

It's not one you might expect. Our mountains are still majestic, our country roads still welcoming, our small towns still charming. We have more trails, more premiere events, more exciting attractions, and a more vibrant culinary scene than ever before.

Our problem, rather, is an exceptionally good one to have: Tourism is growing so fast that our workforce is straining to keep up with demand. But help is on the way. Under Governor Justice's leadership, the state has launched an array of programs to accelerate the industry's workforce development and continue growing this foundational component of our economy.



\$7 billion annually. As one of the fastest-growing tourism economies in the nation, West Virginia saw a 17% increase in visitor spending compared to pre-pandemic levels, far higher than the United States' overall 1% post-pandemic tourism recovery.

Today, West Virginia's leisure and hospitality sector supports over 70,000 jobs, and is predicted to see 21,000 openings every year through 2030. Even more impressive is that

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The story of how we got here is a remarkable one. Tourism has grown dramatically during the Justice administration. Unprecedented investment in both marketing and infrastructure has led the state to shatter every record for spending and visitation on the books. Not only that, West Virginia is now one of the most acclaimed travel and tourism destinations in the world. Leading publications such as Travel + Leisure, National Geographic, AFAR, Forbes, and Outside all recognize the Mountain State as a top travel location.

It's been an incredible run. The industry boasts an economic impact of more than

10,000 of those annual opportunities—nearly half—will be management-level positions. A shortage of tourism professionals risks stifling this rapid growth, so we are meeting that challenge head-on through new training, education, and marketing initiatives called Tourism Works. This program is funded by a \$5.1 million grant awarded by the U.S. Economic Development Administration.

Our long-term workforce strategies begin with getting students and their parents interested in hospitality jobs in West Virginia. I often joke that no child (besides mine, perhaps) says they want to work in tourism when they grow up.

It's not because there aren't jobs or because the jobs don't pay well, but because we've failed to highlight these careers. We are working hard to change that.

Through a momentous partnership with the West Virginia Department of Education, we now have a tourism curriculum in all 55 counties for the first time in our state's history. And the work with our schools doesn't stop there. We're also building new career pathways for students to begin earning credits and certifications that can be applied toward higher education. This tourism curriculum has been carefully tailored to meet the industry's current needs and will serve as a pipeline to foster a robust workforce for the long haul.

The grant has also allowed us to fund the creation or enhancement of four college-level tourism and hospitality programs, which eligible students will be able to access for free through the West Virginia Invests program. With visitation growing in all 55 counties, it's vital that we continue growing our statewide network of training programs to meet the needs of hospitality businesses. Thankfully, the West Virginia Higher Education Policy Commission has stepped up to ensure we are preparing for the demands of tomorrow.

As we welcome more and more visitors to the state, we also must consider how we, as West Virginians, are preparing for that growth. We want all West Virginia businesses to be equipped to meet and welcome visitors to their communities. To tackle this challenge, the Department of Tourism partnered with Blue Ridge Community & Technical College to develop a widely accessible online certification program in basic hospitality customer service. This free, for-credit resource is being designed with all types of tourism ambassadors in mind—everyone from baristas and ski instructors to service station clerks and tourism entrepreneurs. It will launch later this year.

Equally important is making sure our existing tourism businesses have the resources they need to train their current employees. To that end, we've joined forces with the West Virginia Department of Economic Development to provide free and low-cost professional development and training opportunities to tourism and hospitality businesses across the state. Eligible industry partners can apply for and redeem up to \$2,000 per employee for training and education that will allow the businesses to expand their capacity and offer more services and amenities to visitors. The Department of Economic Development has successfully offered similar programs for manufacturing for years, and the tourism industry can now benefit from that commitment.

We've got a big task ahead of us, but we are making tremendous progress. The Department of Tourism is

fortunate to have an outstanding network of partners who are wholeheartedly committed to inspiring the youth of our state to not just believe in, but also dream about, the abundant opportunities in Almost Heaven, West Virginia.

For more information about Tourism Works, visit WVtourism.com/tourismworks. 

