



# VIEW*S* & VISIONS

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## Attracting and Retaining Young Talent in West Virginia

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Natalie Roper has been the executive director of Generation West Virginia since October 2014, working with local and state partners to strengthen statewide programming and infrastructure needed to attract, retain and advance young talent in the Mountain State.

Roper received her undergraduate degree and master's degree in public policy from the University of Virginia. She is a 2016 "Wonder Woman," awarded by *WV Living* magazine; a 2015 West Virginia Woman Rising Star; and, a proud alumna of the 2015 Leadership West Virginia class.

I had never traveled across the country before by train. I was born too late to enjoy a time when you hopped on rail and didn't get to your destination for days. But, in August that changed. I boarded a train in L.A. bound for the East. As the executive director of Generation West Virginia, I represented the Mountain State on the Millennial Trains Project and was joined by 25 other young leaders from across the world.

I set out to study how cities like Denver, Milwaukee, Detroit and others are attracting and retaining young talent. I saw a common theme: Successful cities know that young talent attraction and retention is the best economic development and revitalization strategy.

I'm not saying that West Virginia should strive to be Denver or Detroit. But, West Virginia, like these cities, must recognize that success doesn't happen alongside young talent attraction, but because of it.

West Virginia has lost an average of 44 people per day from 1950 to 2000, according to U.S. Census data. By 2030, nearly one in four West Virginians will be more than 65 years old, according to a 2014 population trends report by the West Virginia University Bureau of Business

and Economic Research. We have to reverse these trends in West Virginia. If we don't, these demographic patterns will put a strain on the state's budget, limit our ability to attract business and put West Virginia's economic growth at risk.

In this 21st century, knowledge-based economy, West Virginia must have an abundance of young, energetic and highly-skilled people to be attractive to potential businesses and to help spur a growing economy that will allow our people to stay and thrive in the state they love.

That's where Generation West Virginia (GWV) comes in. GWV was founded in 2007 with the mission of attracting, retaining and advancing young talent in the Mountain State. We are working toward a vision of West Virginia where challenges are seen as opportunities, young people are drivers in our state's future and where the Mountain State is a destination for young talent to live, work and thrive.

Through my work with Generation West Virginia, I've learned that the solution is not in a singular program or policy, but instead a network of local- and state-level policies, community planning and programs that, together, create a place that's more attractive to the next generation.



*Senate President Bill Cole speaks at Generation West Virginia's Broadband Day, co-hosted with AARP. Broadband Day drew more than 100 attendees showing their support for increased broadband access in the state*



*Generation Kickstart attendees after a full day of discussion, learning and meeting new friends*



*Generation West Virginia board member Jake Dougherty asks a question to a panel at a Generation Kickstart event in Fayetteville, West Virginia*

Internship and fellowship programs are important tools, as research shows they are “sticky.” They connect young people to the region’s employers, increase their future work opportunities and boost the likelihood that they will stay in the region. GWV’s Impact West Virginia Fellowship creates jobs for young West Virginians, engages them with projects in their community and expands the internal talent pipelines of some of the state’s most innovative companies.

**Young people stay in vibrant, innovative places where they can be an active participant in realizing the community’s potential.** The benefit of living and working in West Virginia is that you can build your network quickly. Our network of chapters strive to make it even easier for young people to build the relationships they need to become quick leaders.

Our statewide chapter network is made up of 12 volunteer-led chapters that serve as hubs of connection, engagement and development for more than 400 West Virginians younger than 45.

**Young people stay in places where they feel like their ideas are heard and valued.** If we want to keep young people, we must also be a state that listens to and values their interests and motivations. GWV serves as a voice and a source of action for young people to inform policy at the local, state and federal levels.

We know that we are not in this alone. Our mission is one that must be shared with policymakers, community and economic developers, employers, educators and all who are working toward a better West Virginia.

The next generation of driven West Virginians stands at the center of something we all hope for: a West Virginia that is a place of economic success, a place where we can choose to raise our family in the rolling mountains without having to sacrifice a good job, a place where we want to get invested, a place that we’re happy to call home. ▽

This is what we know:

**Young people stay in places where they feel invested both as a professional and as a community leader.** Leadership and professional development serve as important tools for young attraction and retention.

More than 100 young people have participated in Generation Kickstart, GWV’s pre-conference series for young professionals. These events offer opportunities for young West Virginians

to connect with each other and access top leaders in the state. And, we’re making it happen in a condensed, affordable setting to make leadership development more accessible and engaging.

**Young people stay in places with a diversity of high-quality job opportunities.** GWV is committed to serving as a talent pipeline accelerator to generate job opportunities for young West Virginians and expand the talent pipeline for employers in the state.