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SPRING/SUMMER 2021

# Priming the Opportunity Pipeline



**Natalie Roper**  
Generation West Virginia

Natalie Roper is the Executive Director of Generation West Virginia. In this role, she works with local and state partners to strengthen statewide programming and infrastructure needed to attract, retain and advance young talent in the Mountain State. A West Virginian by choice, Roper is motivated each day to help make the state a place where the next generation can choose to stay.

It's no secret that West Virginia has the highest rate of population decline in the country. Too many people feel they have to move away to find fulfilling careers and communities. And with over 50 percent of counties in the state ranking in the worst 25 percent in the country in unemployment and poverty rates, it's clear that a lot of people who can't or don't want to relocate are limited by lack of opportunity here. While these statistics paint a bleak picture, they're only half of the story.

At Generation West Virginia, we know for a fact that our state has a wealth of opportunities. West Virginia has everything from thriving small businesses to global tech giants like IBM. While, on the one hand, we hear young people struggling to find quality jobs here, leading them to consider moving elsewhere to find work in



young people who are excited to contribute to their field. We've started two programs to help bridge the gap between young people and fulfilling careers in West Virginia: the Impact Fellowship, which connects skilled workers with existing jobs in their field, and NewForce, a six-month school that trains people in software development and connects them with their first tech jobs in the state.

The Impact Fellowship partners with local organizations that employ Fellows in innovative work for the fellowship year. Through this program, dozens of Impact Fellows have started

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**“At Generation West Virginia, we know for a fact that our state has a wealth of opportunities . . . we act as a connector between in-state employers and young people who are excited to contribute to their field.”**

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their field, we also hear these companies citing challenges filling open jobs, thus leading them, too, to consider relocating. Clearly, West Virginia doesn't have an opportunity problem; it has a pipeline problem.

We address this problem by creating career pathways to jobs that are already here. Employers in West Virginia already have good jobs to offer in a wide range of industries. At Generation West Virginia, we act as a connector between in-state employers and

West Virginia-based careers in engineering, community development, communications, business, technology, architecture, finance, and more. Through the quality jobs available through this program, Fellows are able to stay in West Virginia, move to the state for the first time, or come home after having left.

In addition to gaining experience in their field, Fellows spend every Friday volunteering with local nonprofits across the state. We often talk about the program's Volunteer Fridays as the





“secret sauce” to its success. Since launching in 2017, 1,145 people have applied to be an Impact Fellow, most citing the exciting opportunity to volunteer once a week as the reason they were most interested. The program is not only getting interested applicants, but quality applicants, too – 87 percent of Impact Fellows receive offers to stay with their host employer after the conclusion of the Fellowship year.


Community engagement is also key to the program’s success in retaining 80 percent of Impact Fellows in West Virginia after the program ends. The more connected someone is in their community and the more opportunity they have to be an active part of making change in that community, the more invested they are in staying.

## NEWFORCE™

NewForce is a six-month, tuition-free software development training program. A program in partnership with the Mountwest Community and Technical College and the West Virginia Community and Technical College system, NewForce takes people with no background in code and prepares them for jobs as junior software engineers through an immersive, project-based curriculum and mentorship. Our curriculum is informed by the expertise of local tech companies and our sister program, the successful Nashville

Software School. When students graduate, we connect them with their first tech jobs with one of our in-state employer partners.

So far, 86 percent of our job-seeking NewForce graduates have found work as developers in West Virginia within six months of graduating, making an average salary of \$45,000 right out of this fast-paced training program. Like what we’ve seen through the Impact Fellowship, this program’s success is not just due to the quality workforce development it provides but also the connections to community. If you ask any NewForce alumni, they’ll tell you that the best part of NewForce was the community they found through the program.

While the problems that face West Virginia are real, one solution is right in front of us: the incredible people who choose to call our state home. We believe that with the right connections, and the right training, we can build pathways to jobs that move West Virginia forward and help us grow into the kind of state where we all want to live. If you’re interested in applying to be an Impact Fellow or serving as an employer partner through either program, make sure to check out our website at [www.generationwv.org](http://www.generationwv.org). 

## GENERATION WV IMPACT FELLOWSHIP

# 39

JOBS HAVE BEEN CREATED  
THROUGH THE IMPACT FELLOWSHIP

# 23

ORGANIZATIONS HAVE  
PARTICIPATED AS HOST EMPLOYERS

# 53

ORGANIZATIONS HAVE BENEFITTED  
FROM VOLUNTEER FELLOWS

# 10,920

HOURS HAVE BEEN VOLUNTEERED  
BY IMPACT FELLOWS

# 1,145

PEOPLE HAVE APPLIED TO  
BE AN IMPACT FELLOW

# 63%

OF FELLOWS STAYED WITH THEIR  
EMPLOYERS AFTER THE CONCLUSION  
OF THE FELLOWSHIP

# 87%

OF FELLOWS RECEIVED OFFERS  
TO STAY WITH THEIR EMPLOYERS  
AFTER THE CONCLUSION OF  
THE FELLOWSHIP

# 80%

OF FELLOWS STAYED IN  
WEST VIRGINIA AFTER THE  
CONCLUSION OF THEIR FELLOWSHIP