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Impact WV fellowships aim to attract and retain talent in the state

By Douglas Imbrogno Assistant Features Editor Jan 12, 2018



Natalie Roper, director of Generation West Virginia, says fellows and companies in the expanding Impact WV fellowship program are “amazing people who want to be a part of the future of West Virginia.”

Courtesy photo

If you live in West Virginia, you’ve read the stories and op-eds about young people in the state, of which there have been many.

Twenty-somethings, millennials, the best and the brightest – they’re fleeing West Virginia. Or, if they are not natives, they would likely never come to such a work wasteland, which more than a few media-types have dubbed “a dying state.”

Generation West Virginia and Sara Cottingham, a 29-year-old native Texan, have some contrarian notes to strike on that theme.

Cottingham’s view of what West Virginia means to her is, in fact, a polar opposite to that familiar narrative.

“I found immediately, once I landed in West Virginia, that it is possible as a young person to put down roots, to make a community, to find fulfilling work. And – if you have an idea – you can make it happen here,” she said. “I find that being in a small state, anything is possible.”

Cottingham landed a significant position in her field at Downstream Strategies in Morgantown through a Generation West Virginia Impact WV Fellowship.

Last year, almost 200 applicants from within the state and around the world applied for the fellowships, which runs from September to September in fields including environmental consulting, software development, graphic design, banking, marketing, project management and more.

In 2017, seven fellows began work in September with five companies across the Mountain State: Core10, WesBanco, Vaught Inc., Downstream Strategies and EntreEd.

The program is now accepting applicants for a second round of fellowships, with a wider array of companies offering the one-year fellowships. The fellows earn \$31,000, plus benefits, along with a four-day workweek with a fifth day of community service every Friday.

The aim of the fellowship is to keep the state’s best talent in West Virginia and to attract people who may never have thought of putting down career roots in the state, said Natalie Roper, executive director of Generation West Virginia.

“So many employers are looking for people that already have three to five years of experience,” Roper said. “Fellowships are one way for recent graduates to gain experience and get their foot in the door at these companies.

"But it's also a tool people are using to transition in their careers or – especially in this state – to transition into a location. To try a new place out and get connected to a new state or to a new career."

Cottingham, who has a master's degree in community and regional planning from the University of Texas at Austin, first came to West Virginia in 2012 as an AmeriCorps VISTA volunteer with the Coal River Group.

She has worked in seven different states for various state and federal agencies and nonprofits, including stints in and out of the Mountain State.

"I am that unique person who is not from here, but has moved to West Virginia three times now. I guess I defy the odds," she said.

She heard about the fellowship on Facebook, and – with expertise and experience in river and watershed management – leapt at the chance to work with Downstream Strategies.

"I was actually working in New England for the last year when I learned about the fellowship. I had been looking for an excuse to come back to West Virginia because I really love it here. I knew that I eventually wanted to come back," she said.

West Virginia is small enough that you can network and see the impact your work is having on a community or region, she said.

"There are so few degrees of separation to anyone you need to reach in the state," Cottingham said. "It's very different coming from a place like Austin, Texas, where there are people with Ph.D.s waiting tables."

As a VISTA in West Virginia, just out of graduate school in Texas, she identified what so immediately appealed to her about the state – and why she sought to renew that connection through the fellowship program.

"It was super satisfying to come to a place that valued me as a young person," she said. "I wasn't just one of a million others. My community visibly appreciated me, and I knew I made that place better by virtue of me being there.

"That's something that is really special and you don't have everywhere as a young professional. I know that I make a difference in my community and in my state by virtue of my being here."

Downstream Strategies, with offices in Morgantown and Alderson, is a consulting company specializing in environmental science and policy, but also local economic development projects, said founder and president Evan Hansen.

The company's 13-member staff works in teams, and the company immediately put Cottingham to work on various projects, Hansen said.

"She's working as a staff scientist. She fit right in because she has a degree in planning with an emphasis on watershed planning," Hansen said.

"One thing we really enjoy doing is working with local governments in West Virginia to find opportunities for diversifying economies or creating jobs in a way that combines natural resource stewardship with economic development, instead of seeing these as things in opposition to each other," Hansen said. "Tourism is one of the huge opportunities in West Virginia to do that."

Cottingham has taken the lead on tourism business opportunity assessments for small towns across West Virginia, including Matewan, Richwood, Hinton and Whitesville, Hansen said.

Cottingham has also helped on a project with the Morgantown Utility Board to protect the city's drinking water, he said.

"Sarah is a very capable person," Hansen said. "We were able to give her assignments to hit the ground running."

He said he hopes things work out so that after the fellowship ends, Cottingham remains.

"I hope we can keep Sarah here at Downstream," Hansen said.

The company has never taken part in a fellowship program before, Hansen said.

"We were very interested in providing opportunities for people to stay in West Virginia or to return to West Virginia," he said. "This seemed like a way to help start a new program that would do just that. It would create a buzz about the state and showcase what's right about West Virginia to people outside the state – and hopefully be the start of a much bigger program in the future."

The fellowship program, aided in its start-up by a \$100,000 Benedum Foundation grant, is expanding in 2018, Roper said. The number of fellowship spots is increasing from seven to 15, with 11 companies offering fellowships this year.

"Our mission as an organization is to attract, retain and advance young talent in the Mountain State," Roper said. "In order for young people to be able to stay here, they have to have quality jobs. So we worked to develop this program."

She noted that while the fellowship program will be attractive to young people starting out or wishing to make a career change, there is no age limit to apply.

"We think it's especially good for early- to mid-career professionals," she said. "But there's no age limit. Everyone is eligible to apply."

The program is modeled after a successful fellowship program called Challenge Detroit, Roper said. She noted that meeting the fellowship applicants has been inspiring to her.

"They're all amazing people who want to be a part of the future of West Virginia," she said. "It's incredibly inspiring every day to get to work with these folks."

She also praised the companies taking part in the program, which pay the salaries and benefits of the fellows, creating new positions that had not existed before, Roper said.

"It's such an honor to work with companies who understand how important it is to invest in the next generation of West Virginians and who are doing the hard, important work of creating innovative, quality jobs that allow more young people to stay," Roper said.

"I think that's what is important about this," she said. "The program is really creating jobs. These fellows are employees of these host companies. So they're investing in creating that new job. It's not charity."

To apply for the 2018 Impact WV fellowships, visit weimpactwv.org. Applications are in a two-phase process, and phase-one applications open Jan. 31 and close March 18.

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