

**Raising the Bar at Home:
Investing in West Virginia's Future Lawyers**



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West Virginia is not just short on lawyers. In some rural counties, the bar is becoming extinct. There are places in this state where, aside from a judge or prosecutor, not a single practicing attorney lives in the county. And the statewide trend is moving in the wrong direction: over the last decade, West Virginia's population of resident active attorneys has fallen by nearly 7%.¹

That should alarm everyone, not just lawyers. Justice is only real if people can reach it. And in West Virginia, that promise is starting to look dangerously thin. A court system cannot keep running on goodwill and overextension, asking the same dwindling group of attorneys to carry criminal appointments, abuse and neglect cases, civil matters, and private practice all at once. The strain is no longer theoretical. In Kanawha County, the chief judge warned of a "crisis" in finding enough lawyers for court-appointed work, with the number willing to accept those cases falling from 63 to just 11.² West Virginia Public Defender Services has made clear that this is not an isolated problem in Kanawha County. It is a statewide crisis.³

But this problem doesn't start in the courtroom. It starts much earlier, in classrooms, in communities, and in the quiet assumptions young people make about what kind of future belongs to them.

If West Virginia wants more lawyers ten years from now, it needs to stop treating this solely as an attorney problem. It is a pipeline problem. It is a visibility problem. It is a question of whether students ever see the legal profession as something they could step into, rather than something distant, elite, or meant for someone else. Many attorneys grew up around the profession. They knew a lawyer. They had a parent or family member who practiced. They understood, from an early age, that law was a real path. A great many students in West Virginia do not have that. For some, their only contact with the legal system comes through instability, addiction, incarceration, abuse proceedings, or family crisis. If that is the only version of "the law" a student sees, it should surprise no one that they never dream of becoming part of it.

And West Virginia cannot afford to lose students that way. Only 24.1% of West Virginians age 25 and older hold a bachelor's degree or higher, and adult literacy data shows the state trailing national benchmarks on higher-level literacy skills.⁴ The picture is even more sobering at the ground level: the Appalachian Learning Initiative reports that three in five West Virginians read below an eighth-grade level, and more than 20% read below a third-grade level.⁵

But the crisis does not end there. Even when West Virginia does the hard work of raising, educating, and graduating talented young people, too many of them leave. Generation West

¹ <https://nysba.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/11/2024-aba-nlps.pdf?srltid=AfmBOoqmlYEjZtcgubliBohy78knZklhYRMNGOrhpWbust-dcOcb24g0>

² <https://wchstv.com/news/local/kanawha-county-faces-crisis-as-lack-of-lawyers-threatens-rights-of-defendants>

³ <https://wchstv.com/news/local/west-virginia-public-defender-services-claims-lawyer-shortage-is-a-statewide-problem>

⁴ <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/WV> ; <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/skillsmap/src/PDF/STATE.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.appli.org/west-virginia>

Virginia reports that the state has lost more than 68,000 college graduates over the last decade.⁶ That is not just brain drain. It is the steady depletion of the very talent pool the legal profession depends on to survive. In a state already struggling to keep enough lawyers in its communities, losses on that scale are not just troubling. They are unsustainable.

None of this means West Virginia lacks talent. It means talent is being overlooked, underdeveloped, or pushed elsewhere. It means we cannot sit back and assume the next generation of attorneys will simply appear on their own. It means the profession has to become visible earlier, and in more places, to more kinds of students.

That is why youth outreach matters.

Not because one school visit will solve a statewide attorney shortage. Not because a courthouse tour, a mentorship lunch, or a classroom presentation can undo years of educational and economic headwinds. They cannot. But research is clear that mentoring and career exposure help young people build career interests, connect school to real-world work, and begin to imagine themselves in professions they may never have considered otherwise.

I recently saw that firsthand while volunteering as a coach for the mock trial competition hosted by BridgeValley Community and Technical College. I worked with students from Putnam Career & Technical Center: a group of high school students who, for many reasons, had not grown up seeing the legal profession as something that belonged to them. For some, their only prior exposure to the legal system had been through hardship in their own families. Some had parents who had been incarcerated. For many, “the law” was not associated with opportunity. It was associated with trouble.

At the beginning of the week, that reality showed. When I asked the class (about twenty students in total) how many of them wanted to become attorneys, not one hand went up. Not one. The profession was simply not on their radar.

But over the course of the week, that changed.

Once they began learning what attorneys actually do, how a courtroom operates, and what advocacy looks like in real life, they leaned in. Once the process became interactive, competitive, and fun, they became invested. They prepared. They practiced. They found confidence in themselves. And what stood out most was how much intelligence had been hiding in plain sight. These students were far brighter than many of them seemed to believe. They were thoughtful, sharp, and naturally analytical. They broke down facts, spotted holes in arguments, asked smart questions, and reasoned their way to strong conclusions. The problem was never that they lacked ability. It was that too few people had ever asked them to use it this way. By the end of the

⁶ <https://generationwv.org/generation-west-virginia-announces-the-gwv-fellowship-class-of-2026/>

competition, those same students beat an honors class from a neighboring school. Their teacher later told me they were walking around afterward “like they had won the Super Bowl.”

That alone would have made the experience worthwhile. But the moment that stayed with me most came at the end of the competition, when Judge Witt, who was presiding, asked the students how many of them wanted to become attorneys when they grew up. Just days earlier, I had asked the very same question and got no response. This time, six hands shot up.

Six students in one week.

That moment did not solve West Virginia’s attorney shortage. But it revealed something important: interest can be sparked quickly when the profession is made real and when students are given a chance to see their own potential reflected back to them. These students did not reject the law after carefully considering it and deciding it was not for them. For many of them, it had never felt like an option in the first place. Once it did, their thinking changed. So did the way they saw themselves.

That is the point West Virginia needs to take seriously.

Students cannot pursue a path they cannot see. They cannot aspire to become what no one has ever shown them. And if we are serious about preserving access to justice in this state, then the work of building the next generation of lawyers cannot begin when someone is filling out a law school application. It has to begin when students are still deciding what kinds of futures are even available to them.

So yes, West Virginia needs to retain young professionals. Yes, it needs to address compensation, sustainability, and the realities of rural practice. Yes, it needs broader economic growth and stronger educational outcomes. But it also needs lawyers, judges, schools, and communities to start making this profession visible to kids who would never otherwise picture themselves in it.

Show up in classrooms. Volunteer in career centers. Support civic education. Coach mock trial. Invite students into courthouses. Talk to first-generation students, rural students, and students in technical programs with the same seriousness we reserve for the already-polished and already-connected. Stop assuming the future bar of West Virginia will come from the same narrow pipeline it always has.

Because if West Virginia wants more lawyers tomorrow, it needs to start raising them at home today.