What Would Actually Work: A Policy Roadmap for Workforce Recovery in Southern West Virginia

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Southern West Virginia's workforce crisis reflects a systems problem, not primarily a skills problem. The federal programs designed to help displaced workers were not built for people with disrupted lives in rural communities where transportation is scarce, childcare often does not exist, and a criminal record closes doors. The pieces of a working system already exist in this region. Five policy changes would help connect and scale them.

The problem

Coal employment in southern West Virginia has fallen by more than 60 percent since 1983. What rushed in to fill the void was the opioid epidemic, driven by pharmaceutical companies that aggressively marketed painkillers and distributors that flooded the region with quantities bearing no relationship to medical need. Today, McDowell County has the lowest life expectancy of any county in the United States. Fewer than 20 percent of West Virginia adults hold a bachelor's degree, the smallest share of any state. In the southern coal counties, the figure is lower still.

The current workforce system fails to meet people in this region where they are.

The following five changes would begin to fix that.

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1. Break down firewalls

The problem

Like other states, West Virginia organizes its workforce system across separate agencies and geographic regions. Even within the federal workforce system, for example, a person who lives in one county, trains in a second, and finds work in a third crosses three separate federal Workforce and Opportunity Act (WIOA) jurisdictions, each with its own eligibility rules and funding streams. The result is a maze that systematically excludes the people most in need of navigation.

Evidence from the field

At the Mullens Opportunity Center in Wyoming County, director Kristi Halsey spent years assembling the pieces — Transitional Jobs funding, SNAP work requirements, TANF benefits, vocational rehabilitation, housing support — that should have arrived together. "There's no instruction manual," she says.

The ask

> Create a unified enrollment trigger so that filing for unemployment initiates outreach across every relevant agency. Reform occupational licensing laws that bar people with drug records from careers in fields where they are most needed. States that have consolidated WIOA regions have seen measurable improvements in training completion and employment. Pursue such a waiver.

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2. Design programs for rural realities, not urban defaults

The problem

National workforce policy assumes that people can get to a program, that internet service exists to support online alternatives, and that childcare is available during training hours. None of these assumptions reliably holds in the southern coalfields. Rural students who live more than 25 miles from a campus are substantially less likely to enroll in higher education and online programs do not close that gap. When a campus closes, enrollment rates fall and do not recover when remote instruction replaces it.

Evidence from the field

Logan, who pursued an associate degree entirely online from Mullens, described reading textbooks and answering questions in isolation, without the instructors or peers who might have helped him through. A woman in the same IBEW apprenticeship cohort as Mel dropped out within the first year because she could not find childcare or travel to job sites. Childcare in West Virginia costs roughly $800 per month, easily consuming an entry-level wage.

The ask

> Require rural-reality assessments before deploying national workforce program templates: do the core assumptions about transportation, internet access, childcare, and distance to services hold in the communities this program will serve? Invest in mobile program delivery and co-location of services in existing community anchors. Treat broadband access and childcare infrastructure as workforce infrastructure — because they are.

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3. Treat environmental remediation and economic development as one investment

The problem

Southern West Virginia's contaminated water, abandoned mine drainage, and decaying infrastructure are not separate from its workforce crisis; they are part of the same problem. Communities cannot attract employers when the water is undrinkable. Workers cannot thrive in places where the land poisons them. EPA cleanup and DOL workforce programs currently operate as separate funding streams, missing the opportunity to treat remediation as an employment program.

Evidence from the field

In McDowell County, corroded pipes and abandoned mine drainage have left communities with brown, sulfur-smelling water and no functional sewage treatment. In Wyoming County, James Christian's property tested positive for arsenic and other toxins traced to a nearby coal site. Environmental remediation, if funded as a jobs program, could employ hundreds of trained workers at family-sustaining wages while repairing the infrastructure that prevents any other economic development from taking root.

The ask

> Link EPA Superfund and brownfield cleanup dollars to DOL workforce funding. Pilot integrated remediation-as-employment programs in Appalachian coalfield counties. Fund the EDGE Collective model in McDowell County, which combines land access, agricultural training, and community ownership, as a replicable template for place-based integrated investment.

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4. Invest in income during training

The problem

The single most common reason people leave workforce training programs before completion is financial pressure. A full-time training program lasting six months to a year requires people to forgo income for that entire period. For workers without savings, that is a wall.

Evidence from the field

TJ cycled through layoffs and re-hiring for years before finding stability in electrical work. During each training period, he relied on savings. Samantha, coming out of incarceration, did not have any. The Mullens Opportunity Center's Transitional Jobs program, which paid $10 an hour for 32 hours a week, briefly and minimally held her. "Knowing somebody who knows somebody," Kristi says, "can be a real leg up." The stipend made the knowing possible.

The ask

> Raise WIOA's average training expenditure meaningfully above the current $2,000 annual figure. Expand the Transitional Jobs program, with funding levels that reflect actual costs of living in the communities it serves. Make paid training the default for any program serving people without sufficient savings to sustain themselves during a full training program.

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5. Scale through community colleges and fund the navigator layer

The problem

Community colleges hold among the strongest positions for leading a national adult reskilling effort. Their reach, geographic distribution, and existing funding infrastructure dwarf other institutions and programs. Community colleges' structure and curricula, however, took shape around traditional-aged students. Adults with gaps in their employment records, children at home, in active recovery, or facing housing instability have different needs that demand supplemental supports to help maintain enrollments through disruptions.

Evidence from the field

TJ, Bobby, Logan, and others encountered the mismatch in a variety of ways. Logan's fully online associate degree program left him without instructors who knew him, peers with whom to work through problems with, or anyone to call when the material got hard. At Ben Franklin CTE, the institution had adapted to the needs of adult learners, and Bobby enjoyed evening schedules, instruction concentrated in the classroom rather than through copious homework, and teachers who understood the competing pressures of families and work.

The ask

> Direct more federal workforce investment through community colleges. Pair the investment with dedicated funding for nonprofits, navigators, and community-based organizations that can better build trust with people who may distrust institutions and provide supplemental support outside formal programs.

The bottom line

Southern West Virginia is not an anomaly. It is the clearest example in America of what happens when an economic foundation collapses and the systems meant to help people rebuild are not designed for the people who need them most. Among the roughly 350 persistently poor counties in the United States, nearly 90 percent are rural. What works here, and what fails here, is a template for dozens of communities facing versions of the same disruption.

The five changes in this brief entail designing national policy around the people it most needs to reach.