

STATE PROFILE:

WEST VIRGINIA



This National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) state profile examines the interaction between fathers and programs funded by the West Virginia Department of Human Services (DoHS) to support families, particularly the program services available through the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. As detailed in the Appendix (*Technical Assistance Activities in West Virginia*), information for this profile was gathered between September 2023 and July 2024. Representatives of the West Virginia DoHS invited the NRFC to assess father-engagement practices and help the state find more ways to engage and support dads in programs such as WV WORKS, Family Support Centers, and other community-based programs. These efforts are a testament to an ongoing commitment from the NRFC and the West Virginia DoHS to ensure the health and well-being of West Virginia's fathers and families.

Life in West Virginia

West Virginia VIDEO ONE



youtube.com/@fatherhoodgov

Across West Virginia, families live in mostly rural communities that blanket hills and mountains cascading from the Appalachian Mountain range. The human service providers we spoke with in this state describe these communities as tight knit and family oriented. People help each other with their kids and seek support and resources predominantly via word of mouth. Community members value autonomy. The state's two panhandle regions are near major cities that add pockets of geographic, demographic, and economic diversity.

Almost Heaven, West Virginia
Blue Ridge Mountains,
Shenandoah River
Life is old there,
older than the trees
Younger than the mountains,
growin' like a breeze

Country roads, take me home
To the place I belong
West Virginia, Mountain Mama
Take me home, country roads

John Denver, Country Roads

"West Virginia is diverse. The east and the west side is how it's divided up. The east side is where the Greenbrier Hotel is, which everybody knows as 'America's resort.' There are more resources, more funding, more everything on the eastern end. The western end is a whole different area. There are not as many resources. There are fewer jobs, fewer opportunities, and there's a lot of substance use disorder in that area." – Director of the Greenbrier County Family Support Center

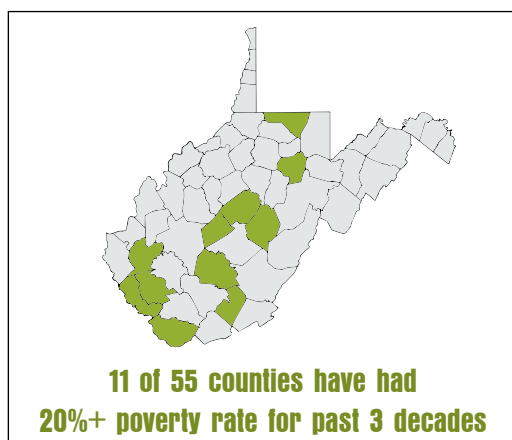
Fathers and families face challenges

West Virginia VIDEO TWO



youtube.com/@fatherhoodgov

As Table 1 shows, West Virginia ranks first in the number of children in foster care per 100,000 population and, compared to the national average, West Virginians face higher rates of poverty and substance use disorders. Reports from local health and human service providers estimate that these rates are even higher than official statistics report, emphasizing how community context and data collection approaches matter within their service areas. These types of challenges affect how safe, healthy, and nurtured children and their parents feel. The challenges often lead to periods of parental absence and limit the quality of family relationships. They also impact school readiness and economic stability. These challenges have been persistent and have lasted through many generations. According to policy analysts, 11 of 55 counties in West Virginia have had a poverty rate of 20 percent or higher continually for the past three decades (Benson et al., 2023).



WHAT SUPPORTS ARE AVAILABLE TO FATHERS AND THEIR FAMILIES?

Many of the mothers and fathers in West Virginia are low-income. Nearly half of the children in the state are born to parents who are unmarried and about a third are living in single parent households, which further compounds the challenges faced by low-income parents. In 29 percent of these single parent households, the children are living with their mother, while 4 percent of the households are headed by a single father. Many of the noncustodial fathers are faced with child support obligations and often have only informal visitation orders, meaning they can sometimes struggle to ensure regular time with their children. Unfortunately, low-income fathers often face the same challenges as mothers but, as in most U.S. states, the state's human service providers are predominantly serving mothers and children. While low-income mothers are able to access some support services, there are very few safety net supports to help fathers deal with their economic, health, and coparenting struggles. This situation is compounded in West Virginia due to higher rates of parents involved with the child support system.

WHERE ARE THE FATHERS?

Accurate assessments of father involvement within a family unit are challenging to obtain with the existing data. As with many public benefits programs across the United States, the intake survey designed by DoHS and used by human service providers currently only asks questions about the head of household and the number of children younger than 18 living in the household. Unless a father is the actual applicant for the benefit program or he is younger than 18, the intake form cannot be used to gather information about a nonresidential father and the kind of involvement he has with the children in the household of record.

TABLE 1: Comparison of Demographic Data

	West Virginia (from Local Survey) ¹	West Virginia (from National Data Sources) ²	United States (from National Data Sources) ²
Population	16,185 surveyed	1,770,071	334,914,895
Urbanicity	No data	54.5% live in rural location	21.2% live in rural location
Race/ ethnicity	93.7% white	92.8% white	75.3% white
Educational attainment	87.6% with at least a high school diploma	88.4% with at least a high school diploma	89.1% with at least a high school diploma
Unemployment rate	19.0%	4.2% (ranked 38th)	Range 2.0%–5.3% Average 4.1%
Median income	\$18,000	\$55,217	\$75,149
% living in poverty	24.0%	16.7%	11.1%
% living with fair or poor health status	24.2%	---	11.2%
Number of overdose deaths per 100,000	---	90.9	36.2
% of children born to unmarried parents	---	45.1%	40%
Number of children on child support caseload	---	77,541	12,054,010
# of children involved in foster care per 100,000	---	1,789 (ranked #1 in country)	572
% who received public assistance [through programs such as: Women, Infants and Children (WIC)]Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), TANF	40.3%	31%	31%
Overall satisfied with life	41.7%	---	95.2%

¹ Local Survey: MATCH, 2021.

² National Data Sources: U.S. Census Bureau, 2024A; U.S. Census Bureau, 2024B; Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2024; Office of Child Support Services, 2024; National Center for Health Statistics, 2023; Centers for Disease Control, 2023; Fleck, 2023; and U.S. Census Bureau, 2020.

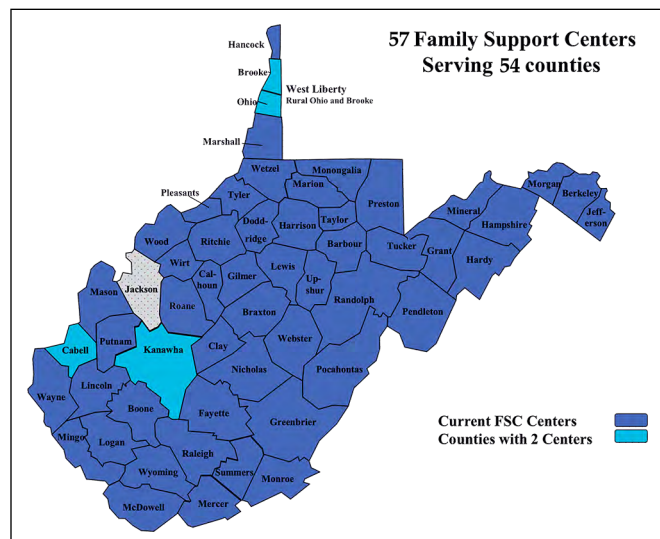
The work of the Department of Human Services

West Virginia VIDEO THREE



youtube.com/@fatherhoodgov

The DoHS administers West Virginia's safety net programs through the Bureau for Social Services, the Bureau for Child Support Enforcement, the Bureau for Family Assistance, the Bureau for Behavioral Health, and other offices. As of September 2024, there were 4,715 cases receiving basic assistance from West Virginia WORKS. Most were child only cases illustrating the large prevalence of children living in households with relatives or other guardians who are not the biological parent. Federal and state TANF funds are used to help meet the specific needs of each community, including child care, child welfare, and employment supports. In addition, there are 57 Family Support Centers across 54 of the 55 counties in West Virginia where families can find co-located supports and referrals to other programs, activities and services in the community. (West Virginia Bureau for Family Assistance, 2024)



Historically, these services have focused on immediate crisis management for women and children. However, today, leaders are now placing more emphasis on prevention efforts and increased support for families to provide help before they reach crisis mode. An analogy that the Director of the Division of Family Support uses to convey this message is to encourage human service providers to provide upstream support in order to catch people before they fall into the river. This vision opens up a natural opportunity to examine how to engage all family members, including fathers.

Despite the increased focus on father engagement at the leadership level, it will take time to change local program practices and community perceptions. Although DoHS now brands many service offerings "for families," few fathers engage in these offerings. Human service providers cite several reasons for low father engagement, including:



Transportation challenges.



Timing/scheduling of these services (e.g., many are hosted during work hours).



Lack of community awareness about services for fathers



Fathers' feeling unwelcome when they try to access services.

When and How are Programs Engaging with Dads?

- ➔ We welcome dads... we have done some specific training on being more welcoming to dads... we have changed our pictures on the wall and changed our language.
 - Director of Morgan County Starting Points Family Support Center
- ➔ I do not encounter fathers often. I usually work with single mothers (where the father is absent) or on rare occasions single parent fathers who are raising their kids. Parents [we work with] are usually recipients of West Virginia WORKS.
 - Attorney from Legal Aid of West Virginia
- ➔ Fathers tend to come in with another parent or to retrieve items for the family from the food pantry. While we offer father-only events like fishing with dad, we do not tend to get a big turnout.
 - Family Support Center staff member

Human service providers have distinct roles and communities are often separated by community context and the mountainous topology of the state. [Family Support Centers](#) act as community hubs or centralized referral sources. Although annual conferences and a state database do facilitate opportunities to share information and experience connections with other providers, providers could benefit from more information sharing and technical assistance to refine their services and find ways to engage more fathers.

Interestingly, unlike most of the United States, West Virginia recently passed legislation to grant fathers equal parental rights at birth if they are not married to the child's mother. It is too early to observe the impact of this type of change on human services in the state. However, giving fathers these rights will create opportunities for discussion and will stimulate new ideas for engaging fathers.



Morgan County Family Support Center - Starting Points

The expectations for all involved

West Virginia VIDEO FOUR



youtube.com/@fatherhoodgov

*Educate moms to give dad a chance,
and empower each dad
to know HE CAN DO IT.*

The NRFC, along with the West Virginia Department of Human Services, local leaders, and community members will continue to strive for positive change and improvement. Understanding the challenges and the work yet to be done is critical so that collectively we can build stronger families in West Virginia. Empowering fathers and supporting the essential role they play is critical for ensuring a brighter future for children and their families. As we plan next steps to more fully engage fathers in supportive services, here are some of the ideas and suggestions that we received from service providers:

What are some things that you wish fathers knew?

- ✓ That they don't have to be right, perfect, strong, or vulnerable all the time.
- ✓ There is help out there.
- ✓ People want to be there for them.
- ✓ Programs within the state and within their own communities want to see them succeed.
- ✓ How critical their role is in family dynamics, especially with their children.
- ✓ You do not have to have a lot of money to do things with your children, create memories, and make your children feel important. For example, you can make a homemade bubble solution to blow bubbles together, go out for a walk, read a book, tell a story.
- ✓ How much involvement is needed from them.
- ✓ Children love knowing they are loved and cared for by their dad.
- ✓ How important it is to be consistent, to be there.
- ✓ How important they are in raising kids.

How can programs engage more dads and support their unique needs?

- ✓ Make more effort to find out what makes fathers tick and target them for services.
- ✓ Get dads involved with all stages of their kids' lives and support moms in doing this.
- ✓ Develop program services and activities to meet fathers' needs based on their responses to survey questions such as "What are your strengths and challenges? What services should a program for fathers provide?"
- ✓ Grow our community partners.
- ✓ Interact more with other community organizations, many of us are trying to do similar things.
- ✓ Invite dads to join in activities that they can do with their kids, with a little bit of education but mostly fun.
- ✓ Begin by inviting fathers to join in activities as a family unit before encouraging them to attend father-specific services.

References

- **Benson, C., Bishaw, A., & Glassman, B. (2023).** *Persistent Poverty in Counties and Census Tracts*. American Community Survey Reports, U.S. Census Bureau. <https://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2023/acs/acs-51%20persistent%20poverty.pdf>
- **Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2024).** Unemployment Rates for States. <https://www.bls.gov/web/laus/laumstrk.htm>
- **Centers for Disease Control. (2023).** QuickStats: Age-Adjusted Drug Overdose Death Rates, by State — National Vital Statistics System, United States, 2021. *Morbidity and Mortality Weekly Report* 72, 293. DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.15585/mmwr.mm7211a7>
- **Fleck, A. (2023).** *Fewer Young People are in Foster Care in the U.S.* Statista. [https://www.statista.com/chart/31232/number-in-foster-care-in-the-united-states/#:~:text=The%20states%20with%20the%20highest,Montana%20\(1%2C188%20per%20100%2C000\).&text=This%20chart%20shows%20the%20number,care%20in%20the%20United%20States](https://www.statista.com/chart/31232/number-in-foster-care-in-the-united-states/#:~:text=The%20states%20with%20the%20highest,Montana%20(1%2C188%20per%20100%2C000).&text=This%20chart%20shows%20the%20number,care%20in%20the%20United%20States)
- **Mountain State Health Assessment of Trends in Community Health (MATCH). (2021).** *MATCH Findings Report*. wvmatchsurvey.org.
- **National Center for Health Statistics, National Health Interview Survey. United States, 2020–2021.** Table Stat. *National Health Statistics Reports, Number 192*, November 2, 2023 (cdc.gov)
- **Office of Child Support Services. (2024).** Preliminary Report for FY 2023. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/ocse/fy_2023_preliminary_report.pdf
- **U.S. Census Bureau (2020).** U.S. Census Bureau Decennial Census Statistics. United States. <https://www.census.gov/programs-surveys/decennial-census.html>
- **U.S. Census Bureau. (2024 A).** U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States. [U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts: United States](https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/US).
- **U.S. Census Bureau. (2024 B).** POV-08. Program Participation Status of Household—Poverty Status of People. <https://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/cps-pov/pov-08.html>
- **West Virginia Bureau for Family Assistance. (2024)** *Legislative Oversight Commission on Health and Human Resources Accountability Reports (September 2024)*. <https://dhhr.wv.gov/bfa/reportsdata/Documents/2024%20LOCHHRA%20Reports/September%202024%20LOCHHRA%20Report%20.pdf>

Acknowledgements

This report was prepared by MDRC and Fathers Incorporated for the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse, under contract no. HHSP23320110020Y.

The National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse is a U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Family Assistance funded national resource for fathers, practitioners, programs/federal grantees, states, and the public at-large who are serving or interested in supporting strong fathers and families.

If you have questions about this report or other fatherhood-related topics, please contact the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse.

 info@fatherhood.gov |  877-4DAD-411 (877-432-3411) |  www.fatherhood.gov

Suggested citation: Israel, D., Wilson, E., & Vann, N. (2024). State Profile: West Virginia. National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse.

Appendix: Technical Assistance Activities in West Virginia

This document is an appendix to the National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse (NRFC) State Profile: West Virginia. It describes the methods used – storytelling, facilitated group discussions, and facilitated one-on-one discussions – to examine the interaction between fathers and programs funded by the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program in West Virginia.

Background

In 2023 and 2024, the NRFC, on behalf of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, conducted two visits to West Virginia to build fatherhood awareness with TANF and Child Welfare service providers. The NRFC also conducted a technical assistance needs assessment during this period.

In 2023, the NRFC team hosted training sessions with human service staff from the Bureau for Social Services, Department of Human Services.

In 2024, the NRFC team participated in the West Virginia Department of Human Services, Bureau for Family Assistance, Difference Maker Conference. The conference was held June 3–5, 2024, in Charleston, West Virginia. Attendees included human service providers from Family Support Centers, West Virginia WORKS (cash assistance program), benefits administrators, home visitors, child abuse prevention staff, community service, supervisors, Legal Aid, and community and technical colleges.

Technical Assistance Activities

STORYTELLING

The purpose of this technical assistance method was to model the importance of storytelling for human service professionals while also building awareness of father perspectives.

1. THE IMPORTANCE OF FATHERHOOD ENGAGEMENT, *presented by the Director of the NRFC, Kenneth Braswell*

Braswell's session focused on establishing empathy as a core responsibility to serving families. He shared his own personal experiences as both a son and father, emphasizing the importance of storytelling to humanize issues and validate experiences. Mostly all programs in West Virginia use the term "family," but traditionally cater more to the mother and children. Braswell challenged this social narrative in his presentation and asked the attendees to think about their personal baggage and how their lived experience influences their interaction with fathers.

2. HELPING FATHERS AFFECTED BY SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS, *presented by NRFC Manager Patrick Patterson and Fatherhood Practitioner Joseph Stiltner*

Storytelling was at the core of Patterson and Stiltner's session. They each shared their personal experiences and then discussed the unique challenges faced by fathers with substance use disorders, including societal stigmas, family dynamics, and personal barriers to recovery.



Kenneth Braswell



Joseph Stiltner



Patrick Patterson

FACILITATED GROUP DISCUSSIONS

The purpose of this technical assistance method was to create a space for reflection and use peer support and storytelling to build awareness of father perspectives.

1. FATHERHOOD 101, *presented by NRFC team members Kenneth Braswell and Patrick Patterson*

Braswell and Patterson guided staff through examples of experiences fathers have in their daily life, with other family members, and when interacting with human service providers. They discussed techniques to engage with fathers effectively in order to delve into discussion about the heart of fatherhood, exploring the complexities of the role and how best to foster and support fathers.

2. HELPING FATHERS AFFECTED BY SUBSTANCE USE DISORDERS, *presented by NRFC team members Patrick Patterson and Nigel Vann with Fatherhood Practitioner Joseph Stiltner*

In two separate sessions the presenters (first Patterson and Stiltner, then Vann and Stiltner) asked attendees a series of questions to encourage group discussion about substance use disorders. The questions included:

- *Do you have personal experiences with substance use disorders? If so, how does that impact your work?*
- *Does the addiction of a family member impact other family members – and if so, how?*

In the second of these two sessions, Vann also asked attendees to reflect on what they had been hearing throughout the conference and then:

- *Share what you have been doing to engage dads so far.*
- *Share new ideas you have as a result of our time together.*
- *Describe how you might implement these ideas and what challenges you might face.*

These and other questions created space for attendees to share their personal stories and insights about the context of their local community, specifically the impact substance

use has on the families they serve and their engagement in human services. This interactive presentation was designed to help attendees consider how approaching the issues from a framework of evidence-based practices and tools could help support fathers affected by substance abuse disorders.

3. WORKING WITH FATHERS: PROMISING PRACTICES FOR FEMALE LEADERS AND STAFF, *presented by Fatherhood Expert/Trainer Patricia Littlejohn*

Littlejohn's session shared practical strategies and promising practices for female leaders and staff to employ as they interact with and work with fathers. This session recognized the unique position of female staff working with fathers and aimed to equip them with skills to foster positive relationships and provide effective services. Littlejohn used a series of questions to encourage group discussion on the topic. The questions included the following:

- *What kind of father did you have?*
- *How does that experience impact your work?*
- *Are there ways men parent differently?*
- *For those fathers in the room, what advice would you give your colleagues?*





FACILITATED ONE-ON-ONE DISCUSSIONS

Technical Assistance Video Content



youtube.com/@fatherhoodgov

The purpose of this technical assistance method was to create a space for reflection and use peer support and storytelling to build awareness of father perspectives. In addition, the conversations were recorded to create technical assistance video content to use in the future with state and national audiences, including at the 2024 National Fatherhood Summit. Participants volunteered to participate, and discussion topics were tailored to each participant.

INDIVIDUALIZED DISCUSSIONS ABOUT HUMAN SERVICES AND FATHERHOOD

*with NRFC team members, Kenneth Braswell
and Patrick Patterson*

In a conference room, Braswell and Patterson rotated interviewing individual human service workers, as well as presenters. Respondents described the qualities of West Virginia, the challenges associated with serving fathers and their families in this state, the type of services in place to meet those challenges, and future hopes and expectations.