



# Clay County Free Press

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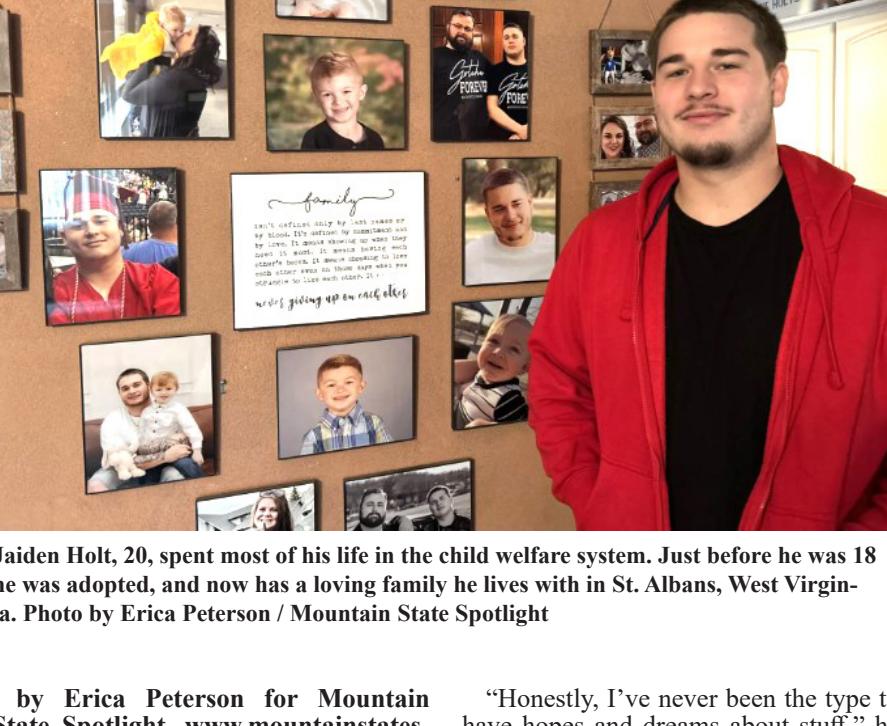
Thursday, January 1, 2026

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## West Virginia got federal money to help foster kids succeed as adults. The state sent millions of dollars back.

*For years, West Virginia has failed to connect many older foster kids with the resources they need to succeed as adults. An understaffed and overworked CPS workforce exacerbates the problem and deepens distrust in the system.*



Jaiden Holt, 20, spent most of his life in the child welfare system. Just before he was 18 he was adopted, and now has a loving family he lives with in St. Albans, West Virginia. Photo by Erica Peterson / Mountain State Spotlight

by Erica Peterson for Mountain State Spotlight, [www.mountainstatespotlight.com](http://www.mountainstatespotlight.com)

*This story was originally published by Mountain State Spotlight. Get stories like this delivered to your email inbox once a week; sign up for the free newsletter at <https://mountainstatespotlight.org/newsletter>.*

When Jaiden Holt was growing up, there wasn't a whole lot in his life that made him feel good.

His biological mother lost custody of him when he was young, and he entered the child welfare system, often living with his aunt and grandmother in St. Albans. Then, when he was seven, his mother regained custody and took off for Florida with Jaiden in tow.

For the next seven years, they lived in tents and U-Haul trailers, occasionally squatting in abandoned buildings. Jaiden rarely went to school. Once, his mother left him, and he ended up living with her drug dealer for two years.

"It wasn't fun, but you just kind of learn to adapt to it," he said.

But Jaiden remembers how his first real barbershop haircut made him feel. It was modeled after a style pop star Justin Bieber was wearing at the time. Despite everything else going on in his life, that haircut made Jaiden feel untouchable.

"He had that big ol' swoosh on his hair, and I wanted that swoosh and I got that swoosh," he said, grinning. He pulled out his phone, displaying a photo of his younger self with his new haircut, brow furrowed, pouting at the camera.

A couple of years after that haircut, Jaiden was a teenager, back in West Virginia and in the foster care system. For a while, everything was temporary as he lived in child shelters, a group home and with a foster family that wasn't a good fit. By the time he was 17, things were looking up: Jaiden had found a home with people who loved him. They adopted him shortly before his 18th birthday, and he graduated from high school later that year.

But in the two years since then, he's been stuck. He wants to be a barber, cutting hair to make other people feel the way that "big ol' swoosh" had once made him feel, but he can't afford barber school. He has two young sons he needs to support, but has had no luck applying for minimum wage jobs. It's hard for Jaiden to see a very rosy future.

"Honestly, I've never been the type to have hopes and dreams about stuff," he said. "Because, even growing up, I never saw a future. I didn't expect to make it past 16, if I'm being honest."

What Jaiden didn't know is that he could have gone to barber school at any time. The federal government gives West Virginia money to help former foster kids like him afford college and trade school or pay for rent, tutoring, budgeting classes and a range of other services.

And he's not alone. For years, West Virginia's child welfare agency has been failing to connect foster kids to these services. In doing so, a Mountain State Spotlight investigation has found, state officials have been squandering a powerful opportunity to help the state's most vulnerable kids move from foster care to adulthood.

Since 2010, the state has returned nearly \$7 million for these programs to the federal government, Mountain State Spotlight's investigation found.

In all, West Virginia has returned more than a fifth of the money it received from the grant program from 2010 to 2023. The state's foster care agency has sent money back under the administrations of three previous governors, both Democratic and Republican.

Agency spokeswoman Angel Hightower acknowledged the unspent funds, but insisted that wouldn't happen under current Gov. Patrick Morrisey's administration.

"Since the new administration took office in 2025, the Department of Human Services has proactively worked to identify underutilized funds earlier in the grant process, so they can be reallocated to other programs aimed at helping foster care children as they enter adulthood, ensuring they are used effectively," she wrote in an email.

Hightower was not able to say whether the state spent all available funds for the latest grant cycle, which ended in September. She said the state's grant report was not yet due, and had not been filed.

For a generation of foster kids, the administration's commitment comes too late.

"It's ridiculous," said attorney Cathy Wallace of the wasted money. She has frequently represented foster kids as their guardian ad litem. "It's one of the most embarrassing things West Virginia can say that they do."

**Are we sending federal funds back?**

On a January day a few weeks into the

**FOSTER KIDS** cont. on page 8



Starting Jan. 1, 2026, West Virginians can no longer use SNAP benefits to purchase sodas like Mountain Dew, shown at Kroger in South Charleston, West Virginia on Dec. 20, 2025. (Photo by Leann Ray/West Virginia Watch)

## West Virginia's SNAP soda ban takes effect Jan. 1

By: Lori Kersey for West Virginia Watch, [www.westvirginiawatch.com](http://www.westvirginiawatch.com)

Beginning New Year's Day, West Virginian residents who rely on the federal Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program can no longer use their benefits to purchase soda.

The state's SNAP ban includes regular soda, diet soda and zero-calorie soda, but does not include water, milk, juice and energy drinks. The state defines soda as "any carbonated, non-alcoholic beverage that contains water, a sweetening agent, flavoring, and carbon dioxide gas to create carbonation."

The Trump administration approved West Virginia's SNAP soda ban waiver along with that of several other states this year.

The SNAP changes are one part of U.S. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr.'s "Make America Healthy Again" agenda. West Virginia was one of the first states in the nation to pass a sweeping ban of artificial dyes in foods sold in grocery stores and restaurants, another part of the MAHA agenda. The state also banned the use of some artificial food dyes in school lunches.

The SNAP soda ban is also part of a health initiative from Gov. Patrick Morrisey called the "Four Pillars of a Healthy West Virginia." Other pillars included prohibiting the sale of certain food dyes in the state, and the "Mountaineer Mile" challenge to walk at least a mile a day. The governor has said the changes are "long overdue."

"I'm happy now that in West Virginia, taxpayers are not going to be subsidizing soda and these sugary drinks — things that have no nutritional value and are directly linked to obesity, diabetes, a lot of other terrible health care outcomes," Morrisey said during a news conference in August.

Retailers who accept SNAP have been required to change their point of sale systems, which can cost up to thousands of dollars, Traci Nelson, president of the West Virginia Oil Marketers and Grocers Association told West Virginia Watch over the summer.

Speaking to reporters last week, West Virginia Department of Human Services Secretary Alex Mayer said the department has been working with the state retailers association and federal Department of Agriculture to prepare for the change.

"We meet with the Retailers Association regularly," Mayer said. "So, what the team has been telling me is that the retailers are on board, and that there's been progress, and that there's been no indication that they're not going to be prepared for that Jan. 1 date."

Representatives for the West Virginia Retailer's Association and the West Virginia Oil Marketers and Grocers Association did not return an email seeking comment last week.

Critics of restricting the use of SNAP benefits argue the bans may negatively impact the businesses of state retailers, particularly for retailers located along the state borders. SNAP recipients in border counties may cross state lines to purchase soda, taking business away from West Virginia retailers.

About one in six West Virginians receive SNAP benefits. The benefits equal less than \$6 per day per person, according to the West Virginia Center on Budget and Policy. In 2024, SNAP brought more than \$500 million in federal food benefits to about 2,200 authorized West Virginia SNAP retailers, the center said.

The state Department of Humans Services told West Virginia Watch it will not enforce the ban on out-of-state soda purchases.

"SNAP applicants, and applicants for all benefit programs administered by the West Virginia Department of Human Services (DoHS), have always been required to sign the Rights & Responsibilities form," Angelica Hightower, a spokeswoman for the Department of Human Services, wrote in an email. "Soda will be designated as a non-eligible item under West Virginia's newly approved waiver, however, the [Rights and Responsibilities] form does not reference or apply to purchases made in other states."

West Virginia's SNAP waiver allows the state to restrict soda for two years, ending Dec. 31, 2027. The state may request three annual extensions after that for a total of up to five years. As part of the evaluation process, the state will collect responses to a survey about the ban next year.

*West Virginia Watch is part of States Newsroom, a nonprofit news network supported by grants and a coalition of donors as a 501c(3) public charity. West Virginia Watch maintains editorial independence. Contact Editor Leann Ray for questions: [info@westvirginiawatch.com](mailto:info@westvirginiawatch.com)*

## Concord University announces Fall 2025 Dean's List

The following students have achieved the Fall 2025 Dean's List at Concord University. The Dean's List recognizes full-time undergraduate students who were registered for a minimum of 12 Concord credit hours and have attained a grade point average of 3.5 or above at the end of the semester.

Area students named to the Dean's List include:

Canvas: Allison O'Dell, Lillian O'Dell, Riley Sharp, Travis Smith Clendenin: Marquise Walker Exchange: Heidi Payne Fenwick: Savannah Mullens Mount Nebo: Alyson Childers Sutton: Dezirae Frazee

# BOOKED



# REGIONAL JAIL MUGSHOTS

## BRAXTON COUNTY



Tony Darrell Blosser  
Booked 12/24/25  
Conspiracy to commit  
misdemeanor, conspiracy  
to commit a felony, petit  
larceny, breaking without  
entering dwelling



Dale Lee Dayton Jr.  
Booked 12/28/25  
Conspiracy to commit a  
felony, DUI, conspiracy,  
wanton endangerment



Andrew Houston Cook  
Booked 12/25/25  
DUI causing personal injury



Brian Evan Dye  
Booked 12/22/25  
Driving revoked for DUI,  
conspiracy to commit misde-  
meanor offense against state,  
petit larceny, no insurance,  
improper registration



Joshua Shane Hays  
Booked 12/23/25  
Solicitation of a minor, use  
obscene matter with intent to  
seduce minor



Kiella Montana Knicely  
Booked 12/23/25  
Petit larceny, conspiracy to  
commit a felony, conspiracy,  
entry of building other than  
dwelling

## BRAXTON COUNTY



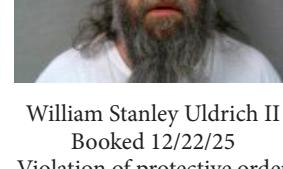
Dana David Lyons  
Booked 12/22/25  
Conspiracy to commit  
misdemeanor offense  
against state, possession of  
controlled substance, petit  
larceny



Joshua Miller  
Booked 12/23/25  
Entry of building other than  
dwelling, driving suspended,  
conspiracy, petit larceny,  
conspiracy to commit misde-  
meanor against state



Luis Fernando Rovelo-  
Salgado  
Booked 12/27/25  
Immigration detainee



William Stanley Uldrich II  
Booked 12/22/25  
Violation of protective order



Jerri Ann Ferreebe  
Booked 12/23/25  
Child neglect with risk of  
death or injury

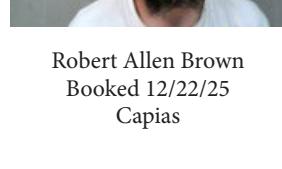


Zachary Carl Glime  
Booked 12/25/25  
Obstructing an officer, tres-  
passing asked to leave

## CLAY COUNTY



Justin Michael Ramsey  
Booked 12/23/25  
Capias



Robert Allen Brown  
Booked 12/22/25  
Capias

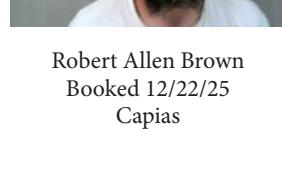


Justin Shaw Thompson  
Booked 12/23/25  
DOP

## NICHOLAS COUNTY



Luis Fernando Rovelo-  
Salgado  
Booked 12/27/25  
Immigration detainee



## Governor Patrick Morrisey Announces Plan to Include State Employee Pay Raises in 2026 Budget Request

Governor Patrick Morrisey announced today that his proposed Fiscal Year 2027 budget will include pay raises for state employees, citing West Virginia's improved financial outlook made possible by his administration's disciplined, balanced-budget approach over the past year.

"I believe in casting a wide net," said Governor Morrisey. "Our state employees are the ones who teach our children, fix our roads and bridges, guard our prisons, police our streets, and administer the programs thousands of West Virginians rely on. They enter public service not for their own benefit, but for the benefit of our people. They deserve to share in the positive results of our fiscal progress."

The pay raises proposed by Governor Morrisey will apply to state employees who are funded through the general revenue budget, which includes the vast majority of state workers. This category covers teachers, State Police, corrections officers, and many other essential public servants.

Governor Morrisey's proposed pay raise will also address critical vacancies in areas such as Corrections, Child Protective Services, and Education.

"Too often, we lose talented teachers, service personnel, and police officers to neighboring states offering higher pay," Governor Morrisey said. "We must reverse that trend by ensuring our public servants can build their careers here in West Virginia. Keeping teachers, law enforcement, and other dedicated professionals is essential to maintaining the vital services our communities rely on."

The plan to provide more competitive wages for state



Governor Patrick Morrisey

employees is the latest step in the administration's broader effort to rebuild West Virginia's economy after securing \$5.5 billion in economic development investments that will bring 5,500 jobs. The Morrisey Administration has secured additional wins, successfully championing universal licensing reciprocity to reduce barriers to work and implementing the one-stop shop permitting system to cut red tape and speed up business development. Additionally, House Bill 2014 has positioned West Virginia as one of the most attractive states in the country for data center investment, while supporting microgrids, strengthening the energy grid, lowering income taxes, and helping counties fund critical infrastructure.

## OBITUARY



William Schoolcraft

William G. "Pee Wee" Schoolcraft, 76, of Duck, entered his heavenly home on Monday, December 22, 2025, at Morgantown Health Care Center.

He was born in Harrison, WV on March 27, 1949, to the late John and Lonie Boggs Schoolcraft.

In addition to his parents, he was preceded in death by his brothers, Burton Schoolcraft, Bucky Schoolcraft and Harley Junior Bailey; sisters, Gladys Huckabee, Mary Ward, Josephine Nelisher, Alma Albaugh, Nancy Loving and Jean Marcum.

Pee Wee was a man of immeasurable character. He was defined by a huge ornery heart and an unwavering sense of humor. He was a man deeply respected and loved by all who knew him. With a hard work ethic, he provided for his family. He and his wife attended Peoples Community Church at Duck. Pee Wee was married 54 years to the love of his life, Roxie. He served as a school bus driver for the Clay County Board of Education where he retired

after 31 years in 2011. He served several years in the United States Army and was stationed in Korea. In 1970, while in the Republic of Korea he mobilized and lead a rescue party operation for those trapped in a collapsed building in Inchon City. He was given a certificate for his bravery.

Left to cherish his memories are his wife, Roxie Schoolcraft; three sons, Gary Schoolcraft, Terry Schoolcraft (Misty) and Jerry Schoolcraft (Christy); grandchildren, Kenzy Amick, Tyler Summers, Danielle Hill, Hunter Nicholas, Nikki Schoolcraft, Mitchell Schoolcraft, Blake Parsons, Jeremy Goodwin, Destinee Morton, Ronee Nottingham, Jarrod Schoolcraft, and Zachery Henke. He is also survived by 13 great grand-children; his brother, Freddie Schoolcraft (Janie); sisters, Mahalia Cantrell (Randy), Linda Lambey (Richard) and Emily Duncan; and several nieces and nephews.

Pee Wee's funeral was held at 2 P.M. Saturday, December 27, 2025, at Peoples Community Church, 1702 Flat Fork Road, Duck with Pastor Kenneth Tanner officiating.

Burial followed in the Chapman Cemetery, Duck.

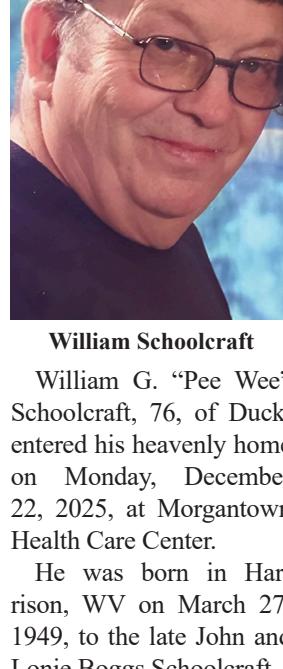
His visitation was held two hours prior to the service at the church.

Arrangements by Roach Funeral Home, Gassaway, WV.

Words of comfort and fond memories may be extended to the family at [www.roachfuneralhome.com](http://www.roachfuneralhome.com).

## Super Crossword

### Answers



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# The Joy We Make

## By Joe Mazzella

I had never been a big fan of January. By the time it rolled around the holidays were over. The Christmas decorations had been taken down. All the leftovers and extra cookies had been eaten. And all we had left was a month of short days, long nights, heavy snows, and cold bitter enough to bite into your bones. It was no longer Christmas. It was just winter.

My view of it changed, however, a few years ago. We'd had an especially heavy snow followed by a bitingly cold morning. Still I needed to shovel out our paths and clean off my cars so we could get out once the snow plows had run. As I was outside, making my way to my car, one shovelful at a time, I noticed some of my neighbors doing the same thing. We waved and chatted while we worked and even shared a smile when the sun finally broke through the clouds.

One of my neighbors tried to start her truck only to find out her battery was dead. The rest of us jumped in to help. Soon a spot was shoveled out next to her truck and my tiny car was maneuvered in so we could give her a jump start. Her engine soon roared back to life and she happily thanked us all. We all stood a bit talking while our breath smoked from our mouths. Then suddenly I heard the sound of kids laughing and making the most of the snowy day by sledding down the hill behind us. We all laughed as well when we watched them. I smiled and thought to myself, "Maybe even winter has its own unique joys. And maybe the biggest joys in life are the ones we make with each other."

In the darkness of winter always be ready to shine your light. Always be ready to share your love. Always be ready to spread your joy. Henry Van Dyke wrote: "Is not love the light of the soul?" May your soul always shine bright then. May all your days be full of joy. And may you always remember that this life is God's gift to you, but how you live it is your gift to God.

# Home Country

## Slim Randles

Dewey's a community project. He's our resident accident-prone guy who managed to get his dad's pickup stuck in the county's only mud hole during a six-year drought, release 300 steers from the feedlot onto the interstate, and create about a ton of tossed salad with hot oil dressing on the on ramp. Quite a few of us have scratched our heads over helping Dewey find something he could do without causing widespread destruction.

Last year, at Doc's suggestion, Dewey fixed up his dad's pickup and became what Doc later called an "entre-manure," by taking manure from feedlots and the dairy and delivering it as fertilizer to people's gardens. The problem is, no one needs fertilizer in their gardens in winter.

Bert, who keeps up on these things, suggested that Dewey look into vermiculture. He explained that this was NOT a new dish at the Italian restaurant, but rather the raising of worms and the creation of compost.

"It's a win-win deal, Dewey," Bert said. "You put the worms in the manure. They multiply and replenish the earth, then they leave behind rich compost. You can get more money for composted manure next spring than the raw stuff, and you'll have worms to sell to fishermen."

Dewey went out the door so fast he forgot to pay for his coffee, so we got it.

A few weeks later, Dewey was as happy as a chairman of the board of something wonderful.

He discovered that worms don't eat and reproduce as readily when they're cold, so to speed up the project, he built some worm crates, filled them with worms and manure, and spread them around. As I said, he's a community project. He has two worm bins in Steve's spare room, three in Doc's garage, two in his mother's garage, and two in the basement first-grade classroom at Pastor Jeff's Sunday school, because Sunday school just happens not to have any first graders this year.

Haven't seen Bert around lately. Been looking for him, too.

Brought to you by "Dogsled, A True Tale of the North," by Slim Randles. Amazon.com

# Can You Eat Too Many Cookies at Christmas

## By Dr. James Snyder

Christmas was over, and the house began to quiet down in a good way. Don't get me wrong, I love the noise when all the family is together. It is a good feeling to be with your family during this wonderful holiday season. I love the energy!

I enjoy the presents and watching the family opening theirs, but I especially love the holiday feasts prepared by The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage.

There was only one time when she really messed up. That was when she had broccoli at the holiday feast. Nothing is more disgusting to me than seeing broccoli on the table. She only did it once, for which I am most grateful.

Someone might ask what my favorite item on the table was. I would reply by saying, the item that is in my mouth at the time.

This Christmas season, The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage baked a truckload of cookies and shared them with friends and neighbors, who greatly appreciated them.

The only problem with The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage baking cookies is that I'm in the same house, and the smell infiltrates every room.

I can be in my office, busy on a project, when suddenly the most fascinating aroma fills the room: cookies baking in the kitchen.

There is a very strict rule in our house about cookies: I can have only one, and only if The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage gives it to me. Otherwise, it is a forbidden fruit.

Every so often, she will slip me a second cookie, and I'm so appreciative of that small gesture.

The great thing about our family coming together for Christmas dinner is that there are so many of us. With the little ones always very noisy, I try to stir up that noise as much as possible—after all, isn't that a grandfather's job?

Amid all the holiday noise, I sneak a cookie. If The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage doesn't catch me, it's okay—or so I think.

I must confess that eating these cookies is not my fault. After all, if the Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage did not make so many delicious cookies, I wouldn't be tempted. In short, my eating cookies is not my fault but hers.

I've tried several times to explain this to her, but she still doesn't buy it. Her idea is that I can only have a cookie if she hands it to me.

During the holiday festivities, with all the noise, I can sneak cookies whenever I want. The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage is so focused on the family, especially the great-grandchildren, that I can get away with it. So, if I get away with it, it's all right. Right?

As our family festivities began, I noticed the stash of cookies the Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage had baked. The grandchildren love her cookies.

As the festivities begin, I asked The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage if I could give some cookies to the grandchildren. After all, I explained, she was too busy to do this.

I must say I caught her by surprise, and because she was busy with something else, she just said, "Okay, but remember, no cookies for you."

With a big smile on my face, I picked up a plate of cookies and took them around to the grandchildren. There was so much activity that I began eating a cookie now and then. I made sure the plate was in front of one of the grandchildren before I picked up a cookie. I think I covered my tracks pretty well.

The first grandchild I took the cookie plate to looked at me and said, "Papaw, do you want one of my cookies?" Now, how can you refuse your grandchild? I thought it was my grandparental duty to respond to my grandchild by saying, "Oh, my dear, thank you so much I appreciate that." And the cookie disappeared from the plate into my adoring mouth.

I was very cautious because when I went to one of my grandchildren, I often made sure to check where The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage was and whether she was looking and in my direction. When she wasn't, it was a signal for me to get another cookie.

My only question during this festive time was: How many cookies are too many?

After the family activities were over, I relaxed with some coffee and The Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage came in and sat down. She looked at me and asked, "So, how many cookies did you eat today?"

To answer that question would get me in deep trouble. Instead, I replied, "Wasn't our great-granddaughter so cute?" That was enough to distract her and get her talking about our great-granddaughter. I ducked an arrow with that.

While the Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage went on and on about our great-granddaughter, I remembered a Bible verse I read in my devotions.

"Give thanks unto the Lord, call upon his name, make known his deeds among the people. Sing unto him, sing psalms unto him, talk ye of all his wondrous works. Glory ye in his holy name: let the heart of them rejoice that seek the Lord" (1 Chronicles 16:8-10).

No amount of trouble can rob me of rejoicing in the Lord. Everything I have is a gift from the Lord, and I'm going to appreciate it the rest of my life.

Dr. James L. Snyder lives in Ocala, FL with the Gracious Mistress of the Parsonage. Telephone 1-352-216-3025, e-mail [jamesnyder51@gmail.com](mailto:jamesnyder51@gmail.com), website [www.jamesnyderministries.com](http://www.jamesnyderministries.com).

# West Virginia Association of Counties assists food banks amid holiday demand

As food banks across West Virginia work to meet increased demand during the holiday season, the West Virginia Association of Counties (WVACo) is providing financial support to help ensure families, children, and seniors do not go without during a time when resources are often stretched thin.

WVACo President Greg Vandall has announced WVACo will provide direct financial support to West Virginia's two largest food banks during the holiday season.

The decision comes amid recent federal government disruptions that strained food banks and charitable organizations nationwide, leaving many families facing shortfalls in food and basic necessities.

"In this time of year, no one should go hungry," Vandall said. "Our Executive Committee felt strongly that WVACo should step forward and help meet these shortfalls here at home, in West Virginia. We're proud to support the organizations doing the heavy lifting on the ground."

WVACo will donate \$5,000 each to Mountaineer Food Bank in Gassaway and Facing Hunger Food Bank in Huntington, strengthening their ability to serve vulnerable populations across the state.

The need is real across West Virginia – and it is growing.

According to data from Feeding America and the USDA, more than 16 million children nationwide are food insecure, meaning more than one in four American children does not consistently know where their next meal is coming from. Nearly 38 percent of those served by Feeding America are under the age of 18, and almost four out of five households receiving assistance include a child.

West Virginia's aging population presents another ur-

gent challenge.

Fifty-two of the state's 55 counties have a higher-than-average senior population, placing increased pressure on local food assistance networks. When medical costs are considered, an estimated 78,800 seniors in West Virginia and neighboring Kentucky are living in poverty, making food access a daily concern rather than a seasonal one.

WVACo Past President and Lewis County Commissioner Agnes Queen urged courthouse officials and county employees across the state to take the message home.

"Every county has local needs and local food pantries," Queen said. "We encourage our fellow officials and staff to consider donating locally as well. Small actions, multiplied across the state, can make a real difference."

About The West Virginia Association of Counties:

The West Virginia Association of Counties (WVACo) is the unified voice and resource hub for the elected officials serving all 55 West Virginia counties. Representing assessors, circuit clerks, county clerks, county commissioners, prosecuting attorneys, sheriffs, and other constitutional officers, WVACo champions professionalism, preservation, and protection of county government to improve services and quality of life for all West Virginians.

From advocacy at the State Capitol to educational programs and inter-county collaboration, the association works tirelessly to strengthen local government and support those on the front lines of community service throughout the Mountain State.

For more information about WVACo and its initiatives, or to learn how to support local food banks in your community, visit <http://www.wvaco.org>.

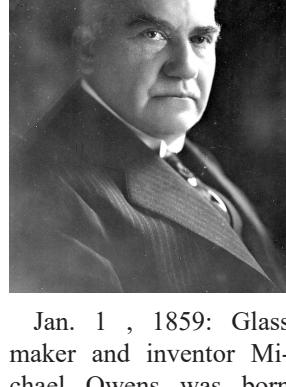
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# THIS WEEK IN West Virginia History

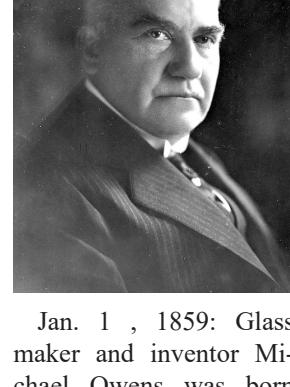
Dec. 31, 1939: Larry Combs, one of the world's leading orchestral clarinetists, was born in South Charleston. He started studying woodwinds at age 10 and was principal clarinetist for the Charleston (now West Virginia) Symphony Orchestra at age 16. He later served in the same role for symphonies in Montreal and Chicago and was inducted into the West Virginia Music Hall of Fame in 2009.



Jan. 1, 1859: Glass maker and inventor Michael Owens was born in Point Pleasant. He is considered the foremost developer of mechanical glass production.

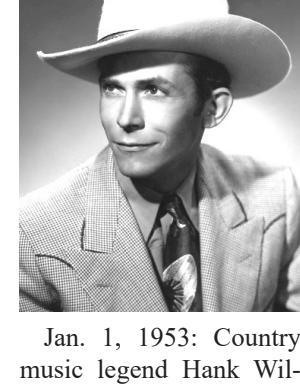
Jan. 1, 1888: In one of

from prison after serving 32 years for trying to kill President Ford. Moore grew up in Charleston and later moved to California, where she joined left-wing groups and became an FBI informant. She spent part of her incarceration at the Federal Prison Camp in Alderson.



Dec. 31, 2007: Sara Jane Moore was released

the most violent episodes of the Hatfield-McCoy Feud, Jim Vance, uncle to "Devil Anse" Hatfield, led an arson attack on the McCoy family cabin. Two of Randall McCoy's children were killed, and his wife was beaten.



Jan. 1, 1953: Country music legend Hank Williams was found dead in his car in Oak Hill, Fayette County. He had been scheduled to perform in Charleston the previous night, but the concert was canceled due to bad weather.

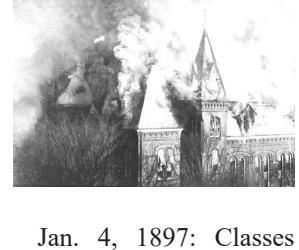
Jan. 2, 2006: An explosion at the Sago Mine in Upshur County killed 12 men. Federal investigators pointed to a lightning strike as the most likely ignition source for the blast.



Jan. 3, 1856: Musician Lewis Johnson "Uncle Jack" McElwain of Webster County was born. He was the most respected fiddler in central West Virginia during his lifetime. He took part in many fiddle contests, and no one can recall him ever being beaten.

Jan. 3, 1921: The state capitol building in Charleston was destroyed by fire. The so-called

Victorian capitol, the second one in Charleston, had opened in 1887. After the fire, a temporary wood-frame building was erected in just 42 days and became known as the "pasteboard capitol." It burned in 1927.



Jan. 4, 1897: Classes began at Montgomery Preparatory School, a state institution established to prepare students for West Virginia University. The school evolved into the West Virginia University Institute of Technology.

Jan. 5, 1810: The Virginia General Assembly recognized 20 acres of land owned by farmer and trader Thomas Buffington

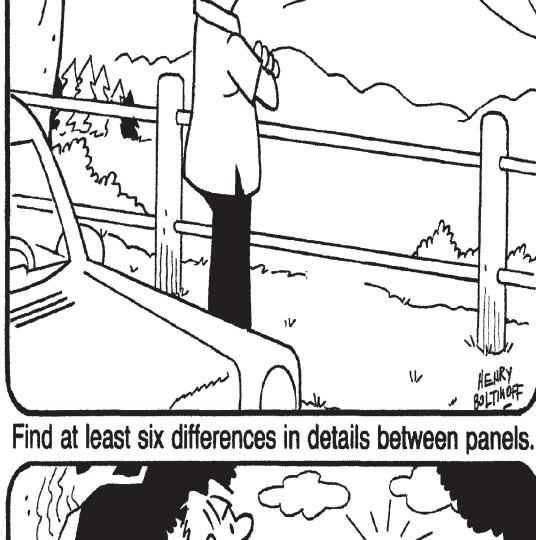
at the confluence of the Guyandotte and Ohio rivers as the new village of Guyandotte.

Jan. 6, 1828: Ward Hill Lamon was born in Jefferson County. Lamon was friend, law partner and unofficial bodyguard to President Abraham Lincoln. President Lincoln was assassinated when Lamon was away in Richmond on business.

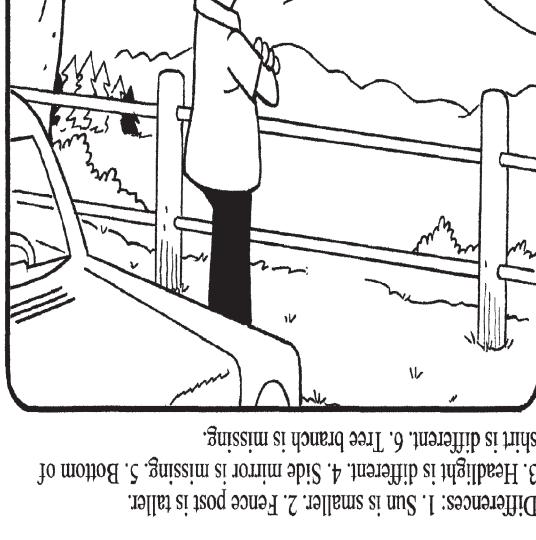
Jan. 6, 1931: An underground gas explosion killed eight men at the Glen Rogers coal mine in Wyoming County—eight years after another explosion had killed 27 at the same mine.

Jan. 6, 1937: Football coach Lou Holtz was born in Follansbee, Brooke County. At Notre Dame, he won his only national championship after defeating West Virginia University in the 1989 Fiesta Bowl.

## HOCUS-FOCUS BY HENRY BOLTINOFF



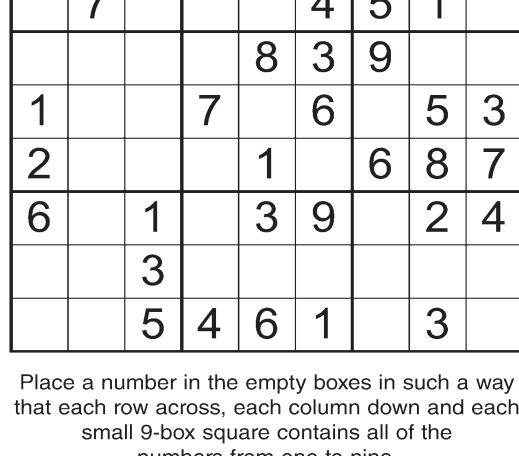
Find at least six differences in details between panels.



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Differences: 1. Sun is smaller. 2. Fence post is taller. 3. Headlight is different. 4. Side mirror is missing. 5. Bottom of shirt is different. 6. Tree branch is missing.

## Weekly SUDOKU



Place a number in the empty boxes in such a way that each row across, each column down and each small 9-box square contains all of the numbers from one to nine.

**DIFFICULTY THIS WEEK: ♦**

♦ Moderate    ♦♦ Challenging  
♦♦♦ HOO BOY!

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Super Crossword																		CORNER TO CORNER			
ACROSS																		DOWN			
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18	40	Video's	80	It's charged
5	Neophyte	52	Add up to	94	Send forth	1 Streisand,	2	Streisand,	41	Streisand,	42	Last name of	43	Knotted like	81	Knotted like	82	Huxtable	83	Goat groups	
9	Negate	53	March 15,	95	pinschers,	to friends	2	Slightly	96	pinschers,	2	the Bee Gees	44	Eight-armed	45	Mrs. Trump	46	Actress Eve	47	Limber	
15	"Kapow!"	55	e.g.	97	Emperor	3	Vigorous	98	Completed	99	Male sibling	4	creatures	48	Gump	49	Shrimp	50	Bird homes	51	Black, in
19	"— Ben Adhem"	58	before	100	Caligula	5	quality	101	Asian fusion	102	by birth	52	looking dance	53	taxing org.	54	Company	55	Cheapen	56	verse
20	Whole bunch	62	In the	103	restaurant	57	Enjoy a slope	104	French body	105	chain	58	of water	59	taxi	60	McEntire of	61	Honcho	62	country
21	Opposed (to)	64	direction of	106	taxiing	61	Beach hut	63	Like an ode	107	Asian fusion	63	country	64	proposal	65	Mambo king	66	Puente	67	proposal
22	Nevada city on I-80	65	unsafe	108	restaurant	65	"Selma"	68	Marjanovic of	109	restaurant	68	proposal	69	bake-off	70	Rio	71	Ricochets	72	needs
23	Mild-flavored lettuce	66	Convent VIP	110	the Rockets	70	director	71	the Rockets	111	alternative	71	enough ..."	72	heroes	73	Actor Arnaz	74	Janitorial	75	letters
24	Dawn's direction	68	Small bouquets	112	Memory loss	72	Duvernay	73	Citigroup	112	surfing on	72	enough ..."	74	tool	75	Court filings	76	Limber	77	symbols
25	Common corsage flower	69	Monkey in "Aladdin"	113	Like eyores	73	Lincoln loc.	75	alternative	113	one's stomach	73	enough ..."	76	Deli heroes	77	Pianists'	78	Black	79	symbol
27	2019 buddy-cop action-comedy film	70	Die-hard devotees	114	Citigroup	74	Boohoo	76	item for	114	stomach	74	enough ..."	75	actors	76	exercises	77	in	78	symbol
29	Leaning Tower city	74	What this puzzle's solver does	115	alternative	75	Boohoo	77	surfing on	115	stomach	75	enough ..."	76	actors	77	Road semi	78	in	79	symbol
31	Co-avenger with Electra	78	when filling in the upper-left to lower-right diagonal?	116	Memory loss	76	Boohoo	78	one's stomach	116	stomach	76	enough ..."	77	staff	78	semifinals	79	in	80	symbol
32	Wooden shoe	79	to lower-right diagonal?	117	Like eyores	79	Boohoo	80	stomach	117	stomach	79	enough ..."	80	symbol	81	Admiral	82	in	83	symbol
34	Bestow	84	Die-hard devotees	118	Citigroup	81	Boohoo	81	stomach	118	stomach	81	enough ..."	82	Admiral	83	Admiral	84	in	85	symbol
38	Feedbag grain	85	Devotees	119	Alternative	82	Boohoo	82	stomach	119	stomach	82	enough ..."	83	Admiral	84	Admiral	85	in	86	symbol
39	Jaguar, e.g.	88	Monkey in "Aladdin"	120	Alternative	83	Boohoo	83	stomach	120	stomach	83	enough ..."	84	Admiral	85	Admiral	86	in	87	symbol
41	"It's not — deal"	89	Die-hard devotees	121	Alternative	84	Boohoo	84	stomach	121	stomach	84	enough ..."	85	Admiral	86	Admiral	87	in	88	symbol
43	Guy who helps people get out of jail	90	Monkey in "Aladdin"	122	Alternative	85	Boohoo	85	stomach	122	stomach	85	enough ..."	86	Admiral	87	Admiral	88	in	89	symbol
48	Attila the —	92	Die-hard devotees	123	Alternative	86	Boohoo	86	stomach	123	stomach	86	enough ..."	87	Admiral	88	Admiral	89	in	90	symbol
49	"pass," in cards	93	Monkey in "Aladdin"	124	Alternative	87	Boohoo	87	stomach	124	stomach	87	enough ..."	88	Admiral	89	Admiral	90	in	91	symbol
				125	Alternative	88	Boohoo	88	stomach	125	stomach	88	enough ..."	89	Admiral	90	Admiral	91	in	92	symbol
				126	Alternative	89	Boohoo	89	stomach	126	stomach	89	enough ..."	90	Admiral	91	Admiral	92	in	93	symbol
				127	Alternative	90	Boohoo	90	stomach	127	stomach	90	enough ..."	91	Admiral	92	Admiral	93	in	94	symbol
				128	Alternative	91	Boohoo	91	stomach	128	stomach	91	enough ..."	92	Admiral	93	Admiral	94	in	95	symbol
				129	Alternative	92	Boohoo	92	stomach	129	stomach	92	enough ..."	93	Admiral	94	Admiral	95	in	96	symbol
				130	Alternative	93	Boohoo	93	stomach	130	stomach	93	enough ..."	94	Admiral	95	Admiral	96	in	97	symbol
				131	Alternative	94	Boohoo	94	stomach	131	stomach	94	enough ..."	95	Admiral	96	Admiral	97	in	98	symbol
				132	Alternative	95	Boohoo	95	stomach	132	stomach	95	enough ..."	96	Admiral	97	Admiral	98	in	99	symbol
				133	Alternative	96															



# THE WIDEN NEWS

The people who think alike

should vote alike.

## "DUNDON" RED ASH COAL

Where all think alike, no one

thinks very much.



November 1958

### Winners Announced in "Miss Carnival Contest"



JANICE TRIPLETT

Janice Triplett was the winner of the Miss Carnival Contest. She won a bracelet which had "Widen High School" written on it. She also received a box of chocolates.

The winners for King and Queen contest, in the grade school were Frankie Donohue and Molly Dorsey.

Molly's prizes were a friendship necklace and paint-by-number set, and Frankie's prizes were a pocket knife and a Wyatt Eary Paint-by-number set.

The Hula Hoop contest was won by eight-year old Sandra Miller, a third grade student. She was presented with a "54 game" chest.

Judges for the Hula Hoop contest were, Carolyn Gibson, Virginia Reese, and William Reese.



FRANKIE DONOHUE

MOLLY DORSEY

### TWENTY-THREE MAKE WHS HONOR ROLL

#### First Semester, First Period

1958-59

#### Tenth Grade: Mr. Matheny

##### "A"

None

##### "B"

Virginia Nettles ..... 3.05

Terry Shaffer ..... 3.00

Robert Baughman ..... 3.00

Charles Barrett ..... 3.00

##### "C"

Dawne Backus ..... 3.65

Lillie Nash ..... 3.55

##### "D"

Karen Donohue ..... 3.38

Lora Wilson ..... 3.00

##### "E"

Ruby Lee Rapp ..... 3.94

David Hamrick ..... 3.88

Judy La Corte ..... 3.56

##### "F"

Rosa Gibson ..... 3.38

#### Eleventh Grade: Mr. Leeson

##### "A"

None

##### "B"

None

##### "C"

None

##### "D"

None

##### "E"

None

##### "F"

None

##### "G"

None

##### "H"

None

##### "I"

None

##### "J"

None

##### "K"

None

##### "L"

None

##### "M"

None

##### "N"

None

##### "O"

None

##### "P"

None

##### "Q"

None

##### "R"

None

##### "S"

None

##### "T"

None

##### "U"

None

##### "V"

None

##### "W"

None

##### "X"

None

##### "Y"

None

##### "Z"

None

##### "A"

None

##### "B"

None

##### "C"

None

##### "D"

None

##### "E"

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##### "F"

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##### "G"

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##### "H"

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##### "I"

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##### "O"

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##### "P"

None

##### "Q"

None

##### "R"

None

##### "S"

None

##### "T"

None

##### "U"

None

##### "V"

None

##### "W"

None

##### "X"





# CHURCH DIRECTORY



## A

**ALTA CHURCH OF GOD**  
Sunday Night Services  
6:00 PM  
Wednesday 7:00 PM Everyone  
is welcome! **Pastor: Paul E.**  
**Young**

## B

**BELL CREEK**  
**COMMUNITY BAPTIST**  
**CHURCH**  
NO Scheduled Services  
At This Time

**BELL CREEK**  
**PENTECOSTAL CHURCH**  
Dixie  
Tuesday Night 6:00 PM  
Thursday Night 6:00 PM  
Sunday Morning 10:00 AM  
**PM Pastor: Lee Holiday**  
(304) 632-1135

**BETHEL BAPTIST**  
**CHURCH** of Adonijah.  
Preaching from K.J.V. Bible  
Sunday School 10:00 AM  
Sunday Morning 11:00 AM  
Sunday Evening 7:00 PM  
Thursday Evening 7:00 PM

**BETHEL COMMUNITY**  
**CHURCH**, Porter Creek Road,  
Bomont, WV  
Sunday School 10:00 AM  
Sunday Night Service  
7:30 PM  
Thursday Night Service  
7:30 PM  
Everyone welcome!  
**Pastor: Junior Davis**

**BICKMORE BAPTIST**  
**CHURCH** located at Bick-  
more on Fola Road  
Sunday School 9:45 AM  
Morning Worship 11:00 AM  
Sunday Evening 6:00 PM  
Wednesday evening services  
7:00 PM  
**Pastor: Ralph D. Lane**

**BIG OTTER BAPTIST**  
**CHURCH OF IVYDALE**  
Sunday School 10:00 AM  
Preaching 11:00 AM  
Wednesday prayer service and  
Bible Study 6:30 PM **Pastor:**  
**Danny Richardson**

**BIG UNION BAPTIST**  
**CHURCH**  
Sunday School 10:00 AM  
Worship Service 11:00 AM  
Sunday Evening Service 1st,  
3rd and 4th

Sundays Preaching 6:00 PM  
Wednesday Night Prayer &  
Bible Study 7:00 PM  
2nd Sunday Communion  
Service 6:00 PM  
**Pastor: Pete Shaffer**

**BLUE KNOB CHURCH**  
Sunday School 10:00 AM  
Preaching 11:00 AM Everyone  
is Welcome!

**BUFFALO VALLEY**  
**BAPTIST CHURCH** Sunday  
School 10:00 AM Worship  
Service 11:00 AM Sunday  
Evening Service  
6:00 PM  
Radio Broadcast, Sunday  
Morning 9:00 AM. WCWV  
Summersville  
Everyone Welcome **Pastor:**  
**Doug Newell IV**

**BURKE MEMORIAL**  
**METHODIST CHURCH** in  
Procious. Across Camp Creek  
Bridge on the left. Preaching  
Every Sunday  
9:00 AM  
Sunday School 10:00 AM Bible  
Study every Wednesday 7:00  
PM **Pastor: Jerry Chandler**

## C

**CHRISTIAN CHURCH OF**  
**LIZEMORE**  
Prayer Service and Bible Study,  
Tuesday 7:00 PM Regular  
Service Sunday Nights at 7:00  
PM

Sunday School 10:00 AM  
**Pastor: Thurman Sizemore**

**CHURCH OF GOD**  
**BENTREE**  
Sangamore Rd., Bentree, WV  
Sunday School 10:00 AM  
Sunday Evening Service  
7:00 PM

Wednesday Service 7:00 PM  
Come and worship the Lord  
with us.  
Everyone Welcome!  
**Pastor: Michael L. Holcomb, Sr.**

**CLAY COMMUNITY**  
**CHURCH**  
Sunday School 10:00 AM  
Sunday Night Service  
7:00 PM  
Wednesday Night Service 7:00  
PM. Everyone welcome.

## CLAY UNITED

**METHODIST CHURCH**  
Sunday School 10:00 AM  
Worship 11:00 AM.  
Everyone is Welcome!  
**Pastor: Wilma Dobbins**

## CLENDENIN UNITED

## PENTECOSTAL CHURCH

10:00 AM – Sunday School

11:00 AM – Preaching

6:00 PM

Wednesday 7:30 PM

**Pastor: Fred Walker**

## CLIO COMMUNITY

## CHURCH

Sunday School 10:00 AM

Sunday Night Preaching 7:00  
PM

**Pastor: George Stickland**

## COLD SPRINGS GOSPEL

## TABERNACLE

Upper Falling Rock, Clay County

Sunday Morning Worship

10:00 AM

Sunday School 11:30 AM

Sunday Evening Service

7:30 PM

Tuesday Evenings 7:30 PM

Teachings from the King

James Bible

Everyone welcome!

**Pastor: Darris Barker**

## CORNERSTONE

## INDEPENDENT BAPTIST

CHURCH, Rt. 3, Newton

Sunday School 10:00 AM

Sunday Worship 11:00 AM

Sunday Night Service 7:00  
PM

Wednesday Prayer Service/

Discovery Clubs 7:00 PM

**Pastor: Roy Huffman**

## E

## ELK RIVER BAPTIST

## CHURCH

Sunday School 10:00 AM

Preaching 11:00 AM

Wednesday Service 7:00 PM

Saturday Night 7:00 PM

**Pastor: Bruce Cook**

## F

## FAIRVIEW BAPTIST

## TEMPLE

Sunday School 10:00 AM

Sunday Worship 11:00 AM

Sunday Evening 6:00 PM

Wednesday 7:00 PM

**Pastor: Bret Wiley**

## FAITH MISSIONARY

## BAPTIST CHURCH

Dutch Ridge Laurel Road

Sunday Service 6:00 PM

Tuesday Service 6:00 PM

Everyone Welcome!

**Pastor: Brother B. J. Evans**

Associate Pastor: **Lee Roy**

**Anderson**

## FAITH MISSIONARY

## BAPTIST CHURCH

Sunday Service 6:00 PM

Everyone Welcome!

**Pastor: Freddie Elliott**

## FOLA MISSIONARY

## BAPTIST CHURCH

Sunday School 10:00 AM

Preaching 11:00 AM

Sunday Night Service 7:00 PM

Wednesday Adults Bible Study

& Kids for Christ 7:00 PM

**Pastor: David Davis**

## G

## GAULEY BRIDGE

## BAPTIST CHURCH

Sunday School 9:45 AM

Sunday Morning Worship

11:00 AM

Junior BYF/Senior BYF

6:00 PM

Sunday Evening Worship

7:00 PM

Wednesday Bible Study

7:00 PM

Wednesday Kids/Children/

Youth 7:00 PM

## GOSPEL LIGHT

## COMMUNITY CHURCH

Located on Rt. 119 at the mouth

of Gabe. Everyone welcome.

Sunday School 10:00 AM

Sunday night 6:00 PM

Wednesday night 6:00 PM

**Pastor: Rev. David Smith**

## GROVES CREEK

## COMMUNITY CHURCH

Sunday Service 10:00 AM

Wednesday Service 7:00 PM

Friday Service 7:00 PM

**Pastor: Dean Rogers**

## H

## HALLBURG BAPTIST

## CHURCH

Sunday Sunday 10:30 AM

Sunday Night Preaching 6:00  
PM

**Pastor: Michael Jackson**

## HARTLAND COMMUNITY

## BAPTIST CHURCH

Wednesday Night Service

7:00 PM

Sunday School 10:00 AM

Sunday Worship 11:00 AM

Sunday Night Service

6:00 PM

**Pastor: Jeremy Holcomb**

## HORNERS FORK

## MISSIONARY BAPTIST

## CHURCH

Sunday School 10:00 AM

Morning Worship 11:00 AM

Sunday Evening Worship

6:00 PM

Wednesday Evening 7:00 PM

Wednesday Evening Youth

7:00 PM

**Pastor: Joe Dawson**

## HOUSE OF PRAYER

Hansford Fork Rd, Maysel,

WV (off Rt. 36)

Pentecostal/Full Gospel

Sunday Morning 10:00 AM

Sunday Evening 6:00 PM

Wednesday evening 7:00 PM

**Pastor: Robert Thomas**

## IDA BAPTIST CHURCH

Bentree

Sunday School 10:00 AM

## FOSTER KIDS

2023 legislative session, state senators gathered to review the budget for the Department of Health and Human Resources.

Interim DHHR Secretary Dr. Jeff Coben reminded lawmakers he'd only been in the position for seven weeks. His tenure with the department would last another five months, before he returned to his duties at West Virginia University's School of Public Health.

As Coben ran through a slide presentation of the budget highlights, a slide caught the eye of Sen. Ben Queen, R-Harrison. It laid out billions of dollars the agency had received in extra COVID-era federal funding. And for several of the grants, money hadn't been spent.

"Are we sending federal funds back that we're not using?" Queen asked Coben.

"We do some, yes," Coben replied.

A month later, West Virginia sent back nearly \$5 million for two grants through the John H. Chafee Foster Care Independence Program, earmarked to help foster kids.

**"It's ridiculous. It's one of the most embarrassing things West Virginia can say that they do."** - *Cathy Wallace, Attorney*

The idea behind the program, named after the late U.S. senator from Rhode Island who sponsored the legislation that created it, is to give states money to help prepare kids for adult life after foster care. One pot of money can be spent in a variety of ways to help kids learn the necessary skills to live independently. The other helps pay for post-secondary college or vocational training. The federal government covers 80% of the cost, while the state has to kick in the rest.

But frequently, West Virginia hasn't spent the money. It wasn't just that extra COVID money: The state failed to spend all of the money from Chafee grants more than half of the time between 2010 and 2023.

This isn't just a problem in West Virginia. Earlier this year, a report by the U.S. Government Accountability Office found that 29 states returned extra pandemic funds for independent living. Twenty-five returned at least part of the extra grant for education and training. And even among the regular annual grants, the agency found that states sent back millions of dollars every year from 2018-2022.

For Jennifer Pokempner of the Youth Law Center, this unspent money doesn't indicate a lack of need; rather, that states aren't doing a good job telling kids what's available.

"It seems very clear that there's a real high need for services," she said. "And I think states would benefit from really being a lot clearer about the programs, doing more outreach."

Nowhere is that more true than in West Virginia, which for years has led the nation in the highest percentage of kids in foster care. The system has been chronically overwhelmed with shortages of social workers and foster homes, leaving kids languishing in institutions and living in hotel rooms.

Chafee is meant for kids like Jaiden Holt who need extra help to close the gaps created by years spent in the foster care system. When this money is spent wisely, it can help former foster kids build a steadier foundation for their adult lives.

Take Maria Bass. When she turned 18 after years of living in shelters, juvenile detention centers and treatment facilities, she faced long odds. But she had a trusting relationship with her state social worker, and when the worker explained Maria would be able to access additional benefits if she voluntarily extended her time in the state's custody, she agreed.

"She wants what's best for me," she said of her caseworker.

By doing so, Maria has been able to pay for her college courses toward earning a medical assistant degree at West Virginia Junior College. She has a one-bedroom apartment overlooking the Kanawha River in Charleston — money from this program covers the entire rent. And this assistance has given her the breathing room to prepare for and dream about the better life she wants to give her unborn son. He's due in February, and his crib, bouncer and playmat already fill Maria's apartment in anticipation.

"My son is not going to have the experience I had as a kid," she said fiercely. "I'm going to do way better."

But an analysis of the data West Virginia submits to the federal government shows that more often than not, kids like Maria don't get any services through the program. Between 2018 and 2023, only 13% of the kids who aged out of West Virginia's foster care system got any of these federally-funded services — far below the U.S. average of 81%. Of the West Virginia kids who did get support through this program, they got fewer individual services than U.S. kids on average.

WV kids get fewer of these federally-funded services

In a statement, a spokesperson for West Virginia's child welfare agency blamed the low participation rates on a broader lack of social services in some parts of the state. But two of the major benefits this federal money can provide are rent and education subsidies that theoretically should be available throughout the state.

Since 2023, DoHS officials say they have expanded independent living options for former foster kids.

"Increasing awareness and developing partnerships remain a priority to ensure youth understand which services are available to them," Angel Hightower wrote.

...and WV got these federally-funded services to only a small percentage of youth who aged out of foster care.

When West Virginia doesn't connect kids with these services, the state misses opportunities and the money goes unspent. And lawyers, current and former CPS workers and former foster kids say often, it all comes down to the caseworkers: whether they have enough time to spend helping older teens plan for their adult lives, and whether they've developed a close enough relationship to ensure the teenage foster kid takes their advice.

### It all hinges on the caseworker

For Wyatt Pitcock, an absent Child Protective Services worker almost caused him to miss his chance to tap into the opportunities that West Virginia promises to former foster kids.

"The CPS workers honestly didn't tell me much about what would happen after I aged out," Wyatt, now 19, said. He spent several years in foster care in Braxton County. "I wanted to go to college, but I didn't think there was any way I'd be able to afford it."

Even though Wyatt was on track to graduate high school with decent grades, his CPS worker had never mentioned MODIFY: the program run by West Virginia University to help connect qualified former foster kids with money from Chafee. Referring foster kids to that program is explicitly part of the social workers' duties when managing the cases of older teenagers.

The only reason Wyatt found out about the program was through a chance encounter: his foster sister applied for help with college, and a representative came to their apartment to talk to her and their foster mom.

"Can Wyatt get this stuff too?" Wyatt remembers his foster mom asking. The answer was yes, and the worker helped him fill out the forms.

Now, Wyatt is a sophomore at WVU. He's majoring in social work and hopes someday he can help kids like

him.

"My CPS worker was very absent whenever I was in the system," he said. "I want to get into the system and try to make it a little better. I know I'm only one person, but I'm hoping that one person can make a difference."

But over the past few years, even the most diligent and well-meaning social workers have found it difficult to spend adequate time with all of the foster children assigned to them.

Many workers have said their average caseload was in the 30s, and some have reported having as many as 50 cases at a time. And because of the way the state calculates cases, each case often has multiple children. That high caseload has been attributed to high vacancy rates among CPS workers combined with large numbers of children in the system.

In the past two years, the state has added more positions and reported progress in filling vacancies: as of October, 7.5% of the allotted CPS positions were vacant, down from more than 27% in 2023.

But as recently as 2024, agency officials noted that simply filling the vacancies wouldn't be enough to achieve the target caseload of 10 cases per worker. If the remaining vacancies were filled today, West Virginia would still need dozens more workers to reach that goal. A state spokesperson didn't answer a question about what the current average caseload is for social workers.

Earlier this year, Mountain State Spotlight revealed that state officials fall far short of giving foster kids the mental health care they need, and that the state is increasingly putting the burden of children's needs onto grandparents without providing adequate help for those families. We also reported that, despite years of talk about the problem, the state still struggles to hire and retain child welfare workers.

Last month, a federal audit found severe deficiencies in the way CPS workers investigate child abuse, problems the state agency attributed to the longstanding crisis of overly-burdened workers with high caseloads.

After kids enter West Virginia's custody, these same out-of-control caseloads often mean CPS workers have no time to spend on seemingly less urgent tasks, like creating a plan with all kids older than 14 to help them work toward independence.

"Transition planning is a vital part of the youth's case plan," West Virginia's Foster Care Policy reads. "The plan must be specific for the youth and contain information that will assist the youth in their successful transition to adulthood."

**"My CPS worker was very absent whenever I was in the system. I want to get into the system and try to make it a little better. I know I'm only one person, but I'm hoping that one person can make a difference."** - *Wyatt Pitcock, former foster child*

Part of that is working with the foster kid to identify the skills they need to learn, and crucially, whether any of these services can be paid for using Chafee funds from the federal government.

"I think the whole thing is rushed," said a current CPS worker in Southern West Virginia who didn't want to be named in fear of retribution from agency officials. "I think because the caseloads are so huge and there are other cases that may be a little more serious, I don't think the time that's taken is appropriate."

Some of the current and former workers interviewed for this story said they had never done transition plans with 14-year-olds. And even workers who were familiar with transition plans said they were unaware of some of the federally-funded services available for these youth.

Until recently, Amie Andersen was a CPS worker in McDowell County. She said more than half of the kids she worked with were teenagers.

She thought back to one of her most memorable cases: "I've never met a more intelligent teenage boy," she said. He entered foster care as a teenager, and they put him in a temporary shelter. As Andersen tried to find him a more permanent placement, he told her his plan for adulthood was to live out of his car.

"Had I known there were more resources there for him that I could have plugged into for him early on, I think he wouldn't have had to struggle so hard," she said.

Amanda Barnett was able to benefit from Chafee funds at a young age: when she was 16, after a variety of failed placements, the state moved her into her own apartment in Putnam County.

"This child isn't working in group homes, she's not working in foster care, she's not working here, she's not working there, she can't go home to her family, what else do we have left?" Amanda said of what she believed were her social worker's thoughts at the time.

This wasn't a semi-independent option, like many run by nonprofits around the state to help older foster kids ease into their independence. It was her own apartment, where she lived by herself. She didn't have a driver's license or a car. And with no other support, problems emerged. Amanda said she had a tendency to spend too much of her stipend at the local Dollar General, which was one of the only places she could walk to. Eventually, her CPS worker found alcohol in her apartment.

"They didn't like the way that I was handling things," she said. "But I mean, I'm a 16-year-old. You give a 16-year-old their own apartment, there's going to be a lot of problems — especially a 16-year-old that's been in the state's custody for the last five years."

The whole experience left her with the sense that she didn't have any control over her life, and no one cared. Now 23, she looks back on that time and marvels at how unprepared she was.

"They taught me nothing," she said of her CPS workers. "I figured that out all by myself, in the sense of what to do, how to live, how to exist."

### There are strings attached

Many former foster kids talk about the lack of control they felt while in the system. So, maybe it shouldn't be surprising that for many, their first act as an adult is to take that control back.

When kids in foster care turn 18, they have an option to voluntarily extend their state custody. While foster kids are eligible for Chafee services starting at age 14, some of the most significant benefits, including subsidized rent and money for college, are for older kids. By choosing to stay involved in the system, a young adult can unlock those benefits.

But advocates in every corner of West Virginia said it's rare they can convince a kid to sign up.

For 28 years, L. Scott Briscoe has represented thousands of kids in Boone County in court as their guardian ad litem. And as each kid gets closer to their 18th birthday, he's tried to get them to consider opting in to more support.

He said of those thousands of kids, only two have agreed.

"I've made the pitch in every possible way to every 17-year-old that I know. I try to dangle that carrot of money in front of them," Briscoe said. "I have tried in so many ways to explain the opportunities for education, housing, vocational training, money in their pockets. But time after time after time, every single kid says to me, 'I don't want it. There are strings attached.'"

These agreements are sometimes referred to as "extended foster care" or even "signing yourself back into the system." But in reality, it's not the same as foster

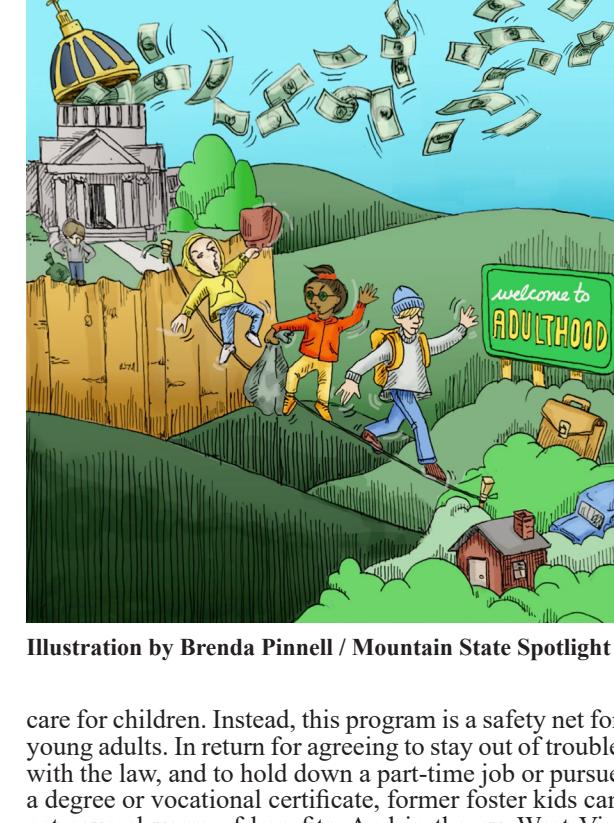


Illustration by Brenda Pinnell / Mountain State Spotlight

care for children. Instead, this program is a safety net for young adults. In return for agreeing to stay out of trouble with the law, and to hold down a part-time job or pursue a degree or vocational certificate, former foster kids can get several years of benefits. And in theory, West Virginia gets several more years of checking in with these kids and trying to set them on a path for future success.

"The problem is, it takes a huge paradigm shift on the part of the child to recognize what they're being offered. Because their experience has been in the system where everything has been taken away from them," said Layne Diehl, an attorney in Martinsburg. "I think they just truly do not believe what you're telling them. They just don't buy it. They think you're lying to them."

Advocates around the state and country say that with clearer explanations of the benefits — as well as the ways the extended foster care program differs from traditional foster care — more kids might be willing to remain involved with the system as young adults and take advantage of the federal funding.

This support could have really helped Orion Flynn, who lives in Huntington. He aged out of the system in 2023 after more than a decade bouncing among treatment centers, group homes, temporary shelters and short-term foster families.

Looking back on his experience two years later, he has a laundry list of the skills he wished he had been able to learn before he aged out of care: cooking, laundry, doing taxes, applying for jobs.

"Various life skills that are small, but whenever you stack them all together, it just makes life a little harder not knowing them," he said.

He said he was interested in learning more about what his options were for independent living support once he turned 18. But when he asked his CPS worker about it, he said she explained that he would probably have to start out in more of a group home setting, before moving into his own apartment.

But Orion had been to group homes before.

"You were treated like a number on a sheet a lot of times. I didn't want to experience that again," he said. "Seeing how that was presented as my only option for getting any help after foster care, I kind of stopped pursuing it."

### Filling in the gaps

When these youth aren't properly supported, the effects can be seen in towns and cities across West Virginia.

In Charleston, Traci Strickland runs the Kanawha Valley Collective, a nonprofit that helps people experiencing or at risk of homelessness.

"This year we have seen more people directly aging out of foster care," Strickland said. "Within the past month, I've had three calls directly related to people who have just aged out of foster care."

It doesn't have to be like this. But experts say convincing more former foster kids to accept help and support after age 18 will likely involve a reimaging of the program, as well as its requirements.

Other states have tried various approaches. In Illinois, for example, youth generally remain in the state's custody until they're 21. In Washington State, lawmakers increased participation rates for kids over 18 when they removed a requirement, which still exists in West Virginia, for youth to work or be in school to keep getting help.

Outside of the child welfare system, nonprofits have seen success in reaching former foster kids who want nothing else to do with the state. Many programs have placed an emphasis on mentorship, helping foster kids and former foster kids develop trusting relationships with adults, who can then offer advice and support.

At the FPC Hope Center in Charleston, director Kyra Nichols said their services aren't so different from what the state provides with federal funding. But most of the kids she works with chose not to extend their custody.

"I think they're more willing to seek services through programs like Hope Center because they're voluntary," she said. "They know they have a say, they can access as many or as little services as they choose."

Whether kids get support through federal funding while they're in West Virginia's child welfare system or through places like Hope Center afterwards, advocates agree there's a sweet spot. It's easier to help a kid before they've experienced homelessness, struggled with substance abuse or been incarcerated, rather than after.

"I'm old enough now where I'm seeing a lot of my old clients are now parents and are back in the system too," attorney Cathy Wallace said. "This is one of the tools that we have that can help break that cycle: giving them an education and giving them opportunities when they didn't have it before and giving them a support system to allow them to do that. And if we're not going to be able to provide that, then I think it hurts our ultimate mission of breaking the cycle and raising children who could be productive citizens."

In St. Albans, Jaiden Holt has a new mission: to try to figure out how to unlock the funding for barber school that he should be entitled to as a former foster kid.

"I still want to go, it's just about figuring that stuff out," he said.

He's heard from a worker who can help him apply for the program, and his mom is going to help him navigate the process. And he's allowing himself to dream — just a little — about what the future might hold. Like that someday he'll own his own business with a barbershop in the front and a lounge in the back.

"Then you gotta call it 'Chop It Up,'" he joked. "Get it? Cause, like in the back you're chopping it up."

He hopes it's not too late.

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