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TOP STORY

## Charleston joins Ascend WV program, helping remote workers leave 'hustle and bustle'

By Sierra Marling smarling@hdmediallc.com

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Alys Smith and Brad D. Smith speak during a news conference announcing the expansion of Ascend West Virginia program in Charleston, Friday, Sept. 5, 2025.

LAURA BILSON | Gazette-Mail

At Charleston's Capitol Market this week, state and local leaders gathered to announce the

Capital City's newest role: host community for [Ascend West Virginia](#), a nationally recognized program designed to attract remote workers and their families to the Mountain State.

Charleston now joins Morgantown, Shepherdstown, Lewisburg, the Eastern Panhandle and Elkins as part of the program's growing network — an expansion supporters say will tackle population loss while showcasing West Virginia as a place to live, work and put down roots.

Launched through a partnership between West Virginia University, the state, and philanthropists Brad D. and Alys Smith, Ascend WV offers new residents \$12,000 in relocation assistance, access to co-working spaces, and a two-year package of outdoor adventures meant to highlight the state's rivers, trails and mountains.

Smith, president of Marshall University and a Wayne County native, said the idea grew out of conversations in 2019 about how to reverse West Virginia's shrinking population. His team studied similar initiatives across the country, including [Tulsa Remote](#) in Oklahoma, before shaping one specifically for the Mountain State.

"[There] was a shift in geographic preference. Rural was becoming the new urban," Smith said. "Everyone wanted to live where they could live, work, play, raise a family, live in Hallmark-like communities. We're going to take all their lessons, but God gave us

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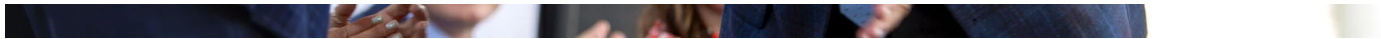
something that they didn't have — whitewater rapids, beautiful peaks, sunrises and sunsets over the mountain, and his kindest angels right here in West Virginia.”

Since its launch, the program has drawn more than 65,000 applicants from 108 countries. More than 500 remote workers — or “ascenders” — have relocated, bringing with them nearly 1,000 new residents, including family members. Thirty-six percent have purchased homes, and Ascend families have already welcomed 13 babies born in West Virginia, with another on the way. In just two years, Ascend WV has generated an estimated \$500 million economic impact.

Chelsea Ruby, the state's secretary of tourism, recalled that within hours of launching the program website attracted 10,000 visitors, and more than 2,000 people applied within the first 36 hours.

Local leaders say Charleston's addition to the program will amplify the city's ongoing economic development efforts.





Marshall University President Brad D. Smith shakes hands with West Virginia University President Michael T. Benson during a press conference announcing the expansion of Ascend West Virginia program in Charleston, Friday, Sept. 5, 2025.

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“Bringing Ascend WV to the Charleston Area is an incredible opportunity to strengthen our economy and support local businesses across our communities,” Charleston Mayor Amy Shuler Goodwin said. “As more professionals and their families choose to make our Mountain State home, they will bring new talent, ideas, and energy that benefit the entire region.”

For Shane Powers, those benefits are already real. A native of Rock Cave in Upshur County, Powers had left West Virginia for job opportunities in Arlington, Virginia. But in 2021, he and his wife decided to return, settling in Bridgeport with their three children. He now works as chief operating officer for a tech company called [Trilogy](#), based in Bridgeport, which is focused on workforce development in the state.







A crowd listens during a news conference announcing the expansion of Ascend West Virginia program in Charleston, Friday, Sept. 5, 2025.

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“The biggest change [with Ascend] was that we could buy twice the house for half the cost,” Powers said. “I was happy to be back. In Arlington, it was hustle and bustle. The savings helped me spend more time with my family.”

For Powers and hundreds of others, the promise of Ascend WV is not just economic impact — it’s a chance to come home, or discover it, in West Virginia.

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