

# Dignity Project Listening Research Report

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*By Dr. Jessi Troyan and Amanda Kieffer*



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# Author Biographies

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Jessi Troyan is the Director of Policy & Research for the Cardinal Institute for West Virginia Policy and was raised in Pinch, WV. She graduated from West Virginia University in 2011 with a Bachelor's degree in economics and a minor in Spanish. She received both her Master's & PhD in economics from George Mason University.

She is a guest host of the Forgotten America podcast, and her writing can be found in the *National Review* and the *Charleston Gazette-Mail*.



Amanda Kieffer is the Vice President of Communications & Strategy for the Cardinal Institute for West Virginia Policy where she manages digital marketing, external relations, and strategic communications for the Cardinal team. She is also the Executive Producer of the Forgotten America podcast, which highlights the culture and challenges of rural America by telling the stories of the people who live there.

Amanda grew up in the bluegrass hills of Kentucky and graduated summa cum laude from Liberty University in 2016 with a B.A. in Government: Western Legal Traditions. She is passionate about translating policy work into English for the people of the Mountain State.



# Executive Summary

Over the past seven months, the Cardinal Institute for West Virginia Policy engaged in qualitative research through a listening tour designed to help us learn about our fellow Mountaineers' sentiments regarding the economy, workforce issues, and social safety net programs.

## Methodology

We partnered with Targoz Market Research from Nashville, Tennessee to undertake this project. The listening research consisted of three phases: an online community visioning panel, two live online focus groups, and a statewide poll. The visioning panel included 18 residents of West Virginia aged 18–44 who currently receive some form of public assistance. The participants were interviewed through a moderated online forum for five days where they both answered questions from the moderator and conversed with one another. The two 90-minute focus groups included nine respondents total. There was one focus group for each of the two congressional districts in the state. The poll gathered opinions from 765 registered voters to test results and ideas derived from the visioning panel and focus groups. Among the voters polled, we further segmented the sample to gather opinions of voters who either had firsthand experience or experience through an immediate family member using public assistance programs in the last three years.



Overall, we found that West Virginians are concerned about opportunities to secure sustainable jobs and their ability to create a secure future. This suggests that there is a great appetite across the state for continued policy reforms that facilitate economic growth and encourage individuals to either rejoin or more fully engage in the labor force. While respondents who had used public assistance programs were generally satisfied with their experiences, they and the broader statewide respondent pool were overwhelmingly receptive to policy reforms that would modernize safety net programs and encourage work.

## Introduction

The legacy of poverty looms large in West Virginia—so much so that the first modern food stamps were distributed in McDowell County. The Mountain State routinely sports one of the worst poverty rates in the nation and is ranked 49th in terms of median household income. Likewise, the state suffers from an alarmingly low labor force participation rate of 55%, again 49th in the country, and historically the lowest in the nation. Moreover, West Virginia is widely recognized as the epicenter of the opioid epidemic and suffers the downstream effects of substance abuse, out-of-wedlock births, poor health, and other social problems that burden the state.

These lofty challenges were the background inspiration for the work of the Dignity Project, of which this listening research is a subset. The specific impetus was a desire to better understand the magnitude of benefit cliffs in West Virginia and their impact on labor force participation. The Dignity Project's purpose is to help the Cardinal Institute develop prospective reforms to the disjointed social safety net apparatus and the regulatory morass that impedes social and economic mobility in West Virginia.

Given the research team's lack of personal experience with these programs, we embarked on a journey of listening research to check our priors and our biases against the real-world experiences of people who have used these programs. Further, the questions we asked allowed participants to present their ideas for how to improve the ways these programs can help economically struggling individuals get back on their feet.

# Visioning Panel & Focus Groups

From listening to our fellow West Virginians, we learned that benefit recipients face a variety of challenges when navigating public assistance programs. Such frustrations included the ease of use, inflexible and impersonal eligibility guidelines, benefit cliffs, the disjointed nature of the public assistance bureaucracy, inflation outpacing the support they receive, local costs of living, job retraining, and overall economic opportunity available in the state.

Encouragingly, these challenges came with a set of prospective changes to public assistance programs that would enhance the overall experience for benefit recipients while balancing the fiscal concerns of policymakers. At the outset of this listening research, the research team had one reform idea that we wanted to test, but we walked away from the visioning panel and focus groups with a suite of policy ideas to test in statewide polling.

## Results: What We Heard From Recipients of Public Assistance

While participants were grateful for the help that various assistance programs offered in their time of need, they offered pointed critiques and constructive suggestions for improvements.

The majority of their frustrations related to SNAP and HUD where minor income increases often led to major reductions in assistance, deterring them from earning more. Likewise, participants raised concerns about income eligibility guidelines that were out of alignment with current inflation rates and failed to account for geographic cost-of-living differentials.

With these criticisms, participants noted that they, and others like them, are hardworking and trying to take the necessary steps to be self-sufficient but were struggling in those efforts due to low-wage jobs and a lack of better opportunities.

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*“I truly believe that the first priority should be finding a way to help people trying to better their lives. I think if there was a way to keep partial benefits for 1-3 months after breaking the financial cut-off it would help a lot of people change for the better.”*

*Most new jobs take 30-90 days for the insurance to kick in. Some people can't be without medical care for that long. A new job typically changes when you are paid or could cause you to have a couple weeks where you're not making as much due to training and onboarding, many people in this state live paycheck to paycheck and can't change jobs because of this.*

*I love this great state but we often fail at helping people up, our leadership seems to be happy with just letting people stay where they are, instead of trying to help improve their lives.”*

**Male Recipient, age 24, employed full-time**

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*“Yeah, I am working currently and every little raise I've gotten, whether it be \$0.10 an hour, or you know, \$0.20 an hour I've seen a pretty drastic reduction in my SNAP benefits to the tune of maybe a \$.20 cent raise will, you know, knock off \$50 to \$75 a month in SNAP benefits.*

*So, I do feel like it's a little frustrating and a little hard to kind of get ahead if you will. You know, and touching on the gross versus net pay, they take your gross pay for their calculations, and it makes it hard to contribute to a 401K or to have health benefits because those are deducted from you and then you get your net pay. So, it just kind of makes it hard to get ahead.”*

**Female Recipient, age 34, employed part-time**

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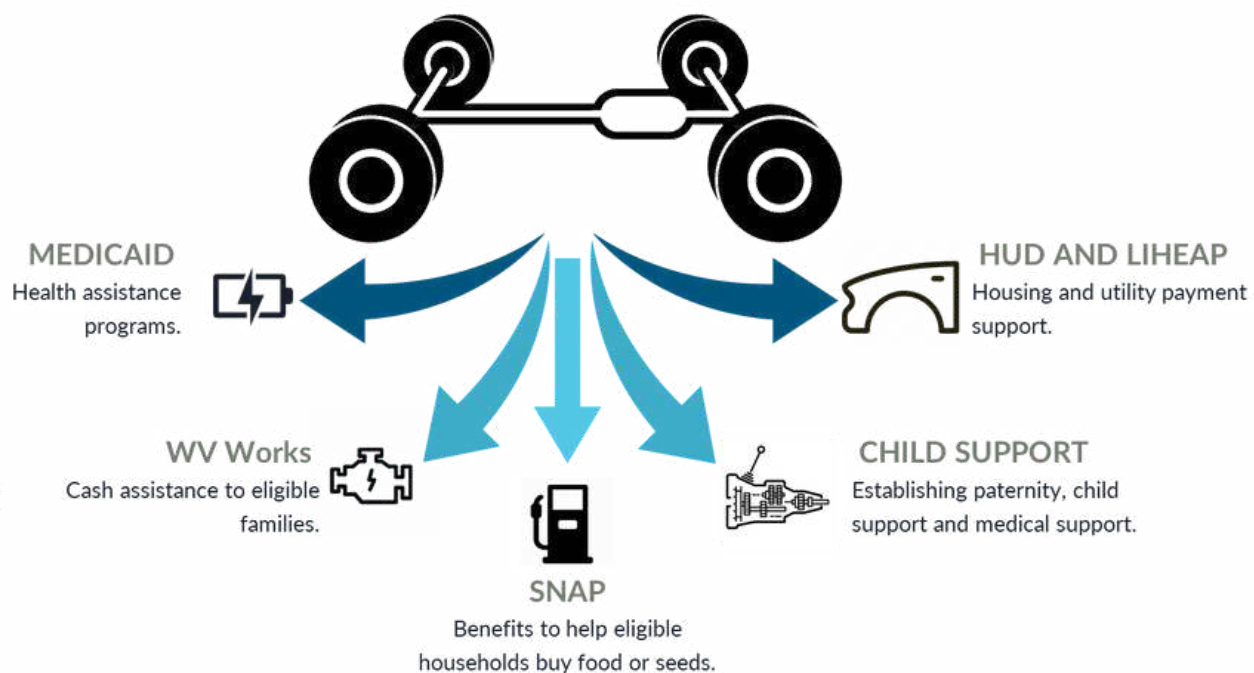


Focus group participants highlighted opportunities for program improvements at every level of the process of seeking assistance.

While the online application process was considered generally beneficial, it was still challenging for recipients to navigate. Once these individuals were in programs, they noted the difficulties with communication and transparency with caseworkers and the lack of coordination among the various programs and non-governmental organizations that could provide additional assistance.

Participants in the groups described a system of ad hoc programs designed for a single purpose without a cohesive plan to put them together to solve root issues.

It's like having all the parts to a car, without a plan for how to attach them to a chassis.



A common theme throughout the discussions was the need for an individualized approach that considers each recipient's unique circumstances when determining benefits.



Another strong theme participants discussed was the impact that receiving public assistance has on their relationships. Eligibility requirements were cited as factoring directly into decisions about marriage and family growth.

One example given of how benefit guidelines can impact family budgets and decisions was child support payments. If a recipient started to receive long-delayed child support payments while working, they could encounter a drastic and sudden reduction in benefits. Participants conceded that this is primarily a factor when child support payments are intermittent or unpredictable. For example, if the father pays sporadically throughout the year, it is difficult if not impossible for the mother to budget and manage the cascading effect on other program eligibility requirements.

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*“My previous partner had three children that I’d raised for almost ten years, and we could not get married because our combined benefits would ruin her HUD, her food stamps, everything.*

*So, we had to stay separated just because otherwise it would ruin all of it, and we wouldn’t be able to afford to pay rent. And we were barely making it as we were with what we had. So, with me working and her working, if we got married and been combined, it would have trashed all of it.”*

**Male Recipient, age 35, employed full-time**

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Other participants cited the difficulties that compound when guidelines for public assistance benefits collide with other municipal or state regulations. This can be especially difficult for individuals who are the primary or sole caregivers of elderly family members or children with special needs.

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*“I had to fix the front door a few years ago, and I remember I didn't have the siding done around it. I'd used some building wrap like a plastic sheet. You know for a temporary fix and you know I was cited. They told me that you have to make a plan to fix it, get a building permit, and start fixing it, or else you know you're going to court, and they can fine you for this stuff, or they can hire people to fix it and then put a lien on your house, things like that.*

*They'll do that even if you don't mow the grass, they'll eventually hire somebody to mow the grass, and if you don't pay the bill, which is going to be probably pretty expensive with all their charges and extra fees, yeah, they'll put a lien on a house and stuff like that.”*

**Male Recipient, age 40, unemployed**

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By addressing both the needs of the recipients and the concerns of the legislators, we can create a system where public assistance is a temporary support that helps individuals transition into sustainable employment rather than continuing benefits long term.

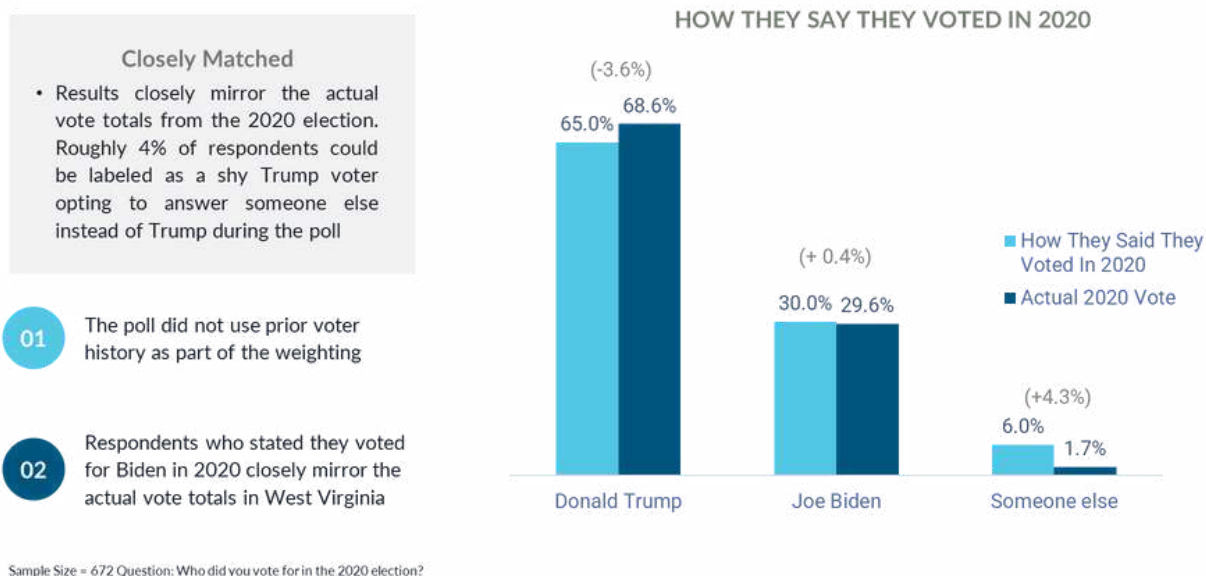
The remainder of this report will outline the results of that statewide polling.

# Statewide Poll

We conducted an online poll of 765 registered voters in West Virginia from October 13 to November 11, 2023. The estimated margin of error is +/- 3.47%. Sampling was stratified by demographics and geography. Likewise, results were weighted by demographics, party, geography, and behavioral measures to properly reflect the profile of the state.

## Registered Voter Profile

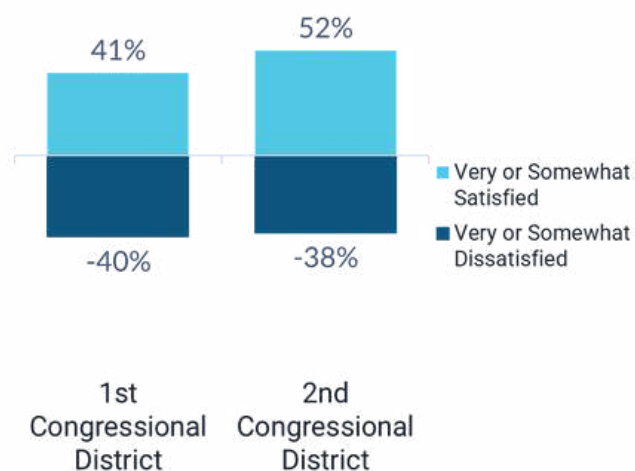
As a preliminary robustness check, we asked a question about how respondents voted in the 2020 presidential election. Those results closely mirror actual vote totals.



## Economic Outlook & Opportunities

In the poll, we asked questions about the economy, barriers to employment, and experiences with social safety net programs. When asked about their satisfaction with the direction of West Virginia, 47% of registered voters reported being ‘very satisfied’ or ‘somewhat satisfied.’

In general, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in: The State of West Virginia



### Statewide

47%

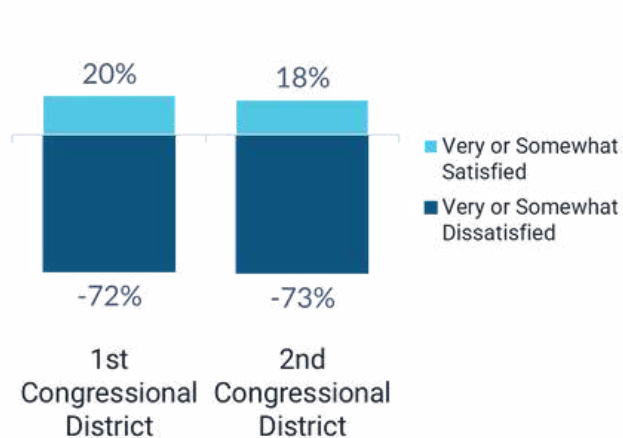
Total Very or Somewhat Satisfied With Direction of The State of West Virginia

39%

Total Very or Somewhat Dissatisfied With Direction of The State of West Virginia

This contrasts with the 19% satisfaction rate when asked the same question about the direction of the country.

In general, are you satisfied or dissatisfied with the way things are going in: The United States



### Statewide

19%

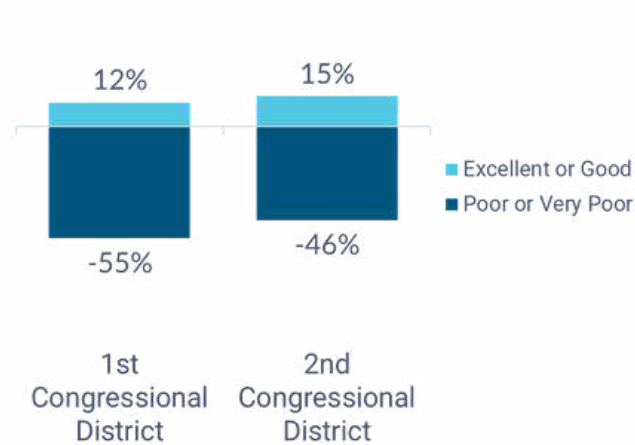
Total Very or Somewhat Satisfied With Direction of The U.S.

73%

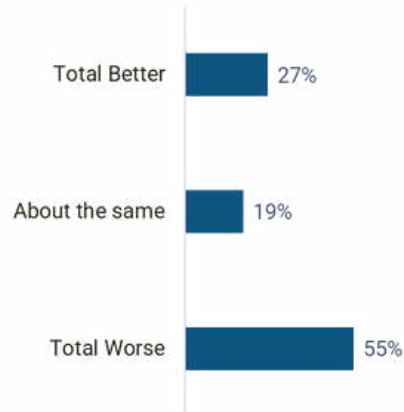
Total Very or Somewhat Dissatisfied With Direction of The U.S.

This tension is further reflected in the responses to questions rating economic opportunities in the state and comparing their family's economic situation to a year ago.

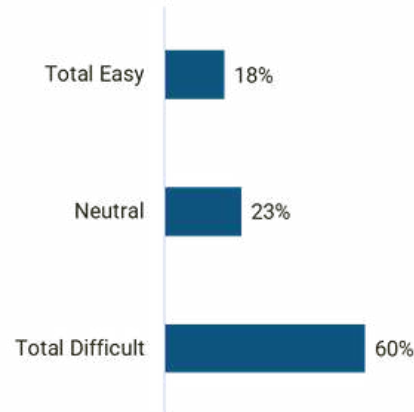
How would you rate the economic opportunities available in your area of West Virginia?



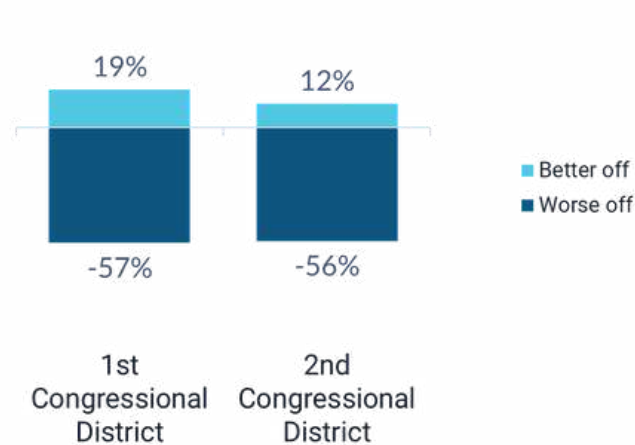
Compared to 10 years ago, how would you rate the economic opportunities in your area of West Virginia ?



How easy or difficult is it for someone in your community to find a job that pays a living wage?



Compared to a year ago, would you say that you and your family are economically...

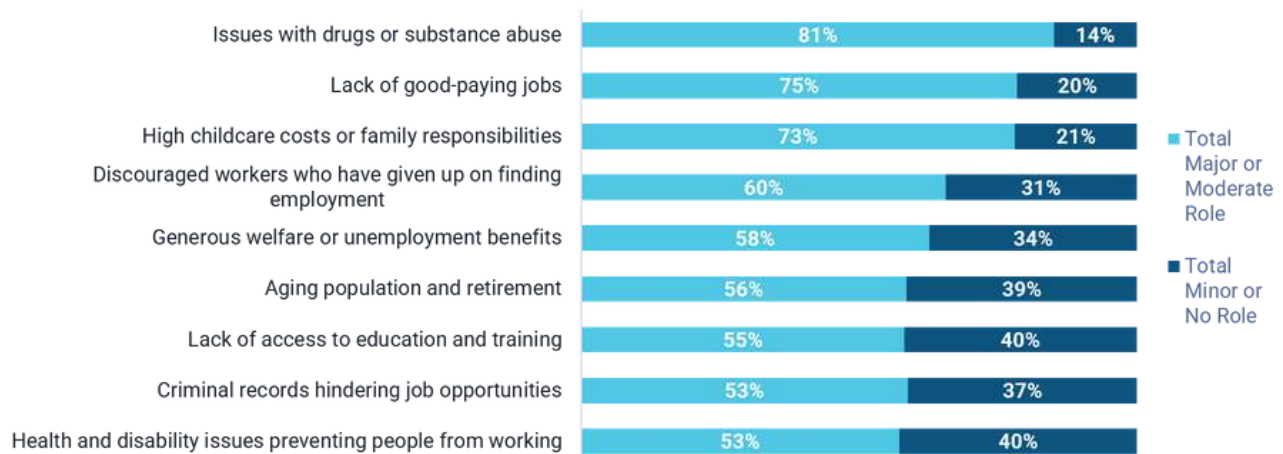


Taken together, these responses suggest that West Virginia voters are encouraged by state and local actions to improve the economic environment but acknowledge the long shadow cast by federal policies.

After establishing a baseline of sentiments about the state and national economy, we asked what factors West Virginians believe are contributing to the state's low labor force participation rate. A significant majority of registered voters agreed that issues with drug and substance abuse play a major or moderate role in the low labor force participation rate. Interestingly, a majority (58%) also believe that generous welfare or unemployment benefits play a major or moderate role in the labor force participation rate.

## The Role Various Factors Play in the Labor Force Participation Rate

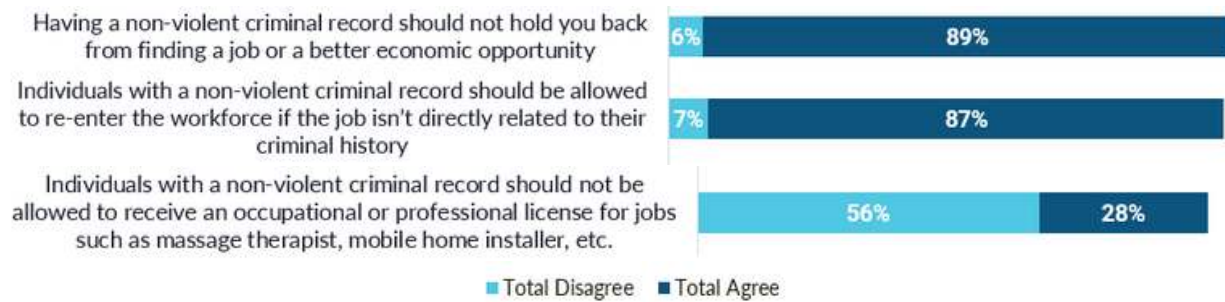
The labor force participation rate refers to the percentage of working-age individuals who are either employed or actively seeking employment. The rate is like a score that tells us how many adults have jobs or are trying to find a job. For each of the following factors, please indicate how significant a role you believe it plays in contributing to the low labor force participation rate in West Virginia.



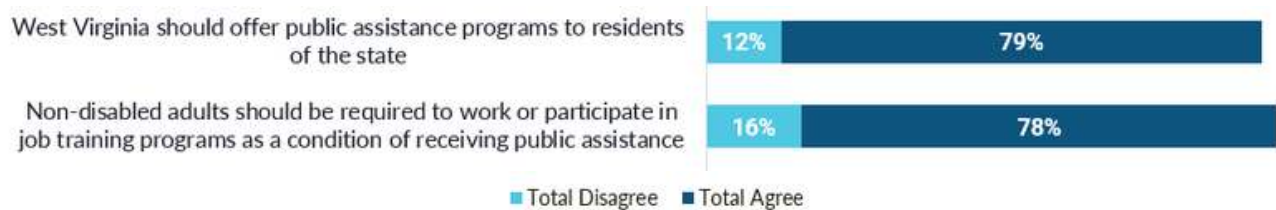
Unfortunately, 43% of Mountaineers don't think that West Virginia's K-12 education system prepares people for a successful life and career. Additionally, 55% said that lack of access to education or training plays a major or moderate role in the low labor force participation rate. This indicates that the education system in West Virginia still has a long way to go to improve quality and gain the trust of residents.



53% of West Virginians stated that criminal records hindering job opportunities is a major or moderate factor in the low labor force participation rate. They also strongly agreed that a non-violent criminal offense should not hold an individual back from finding meaningful employment, including licensed professions.



Examining further, we asked questions about their attitudes toward social safety net programs and individuals who receive public assistance. More than three-quarters of registered West Virginia voters agree that West Virginia should offer public assistance programs to residents of the state. At nearly the same rate, they also agree that non-disabled adults should be required to work or participate in job training programs as a condition of receiving public assistance.

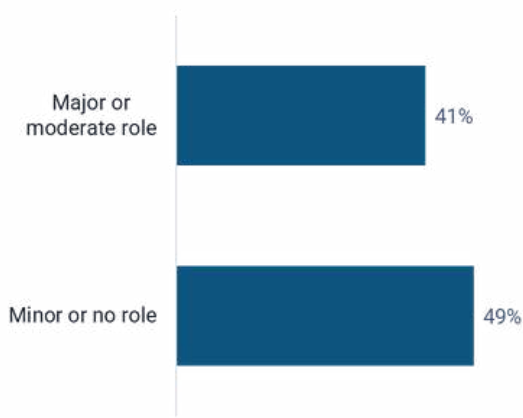


This provides a backdrop against which to compare their answers to additional questions about the social safety net and benefit recipients.

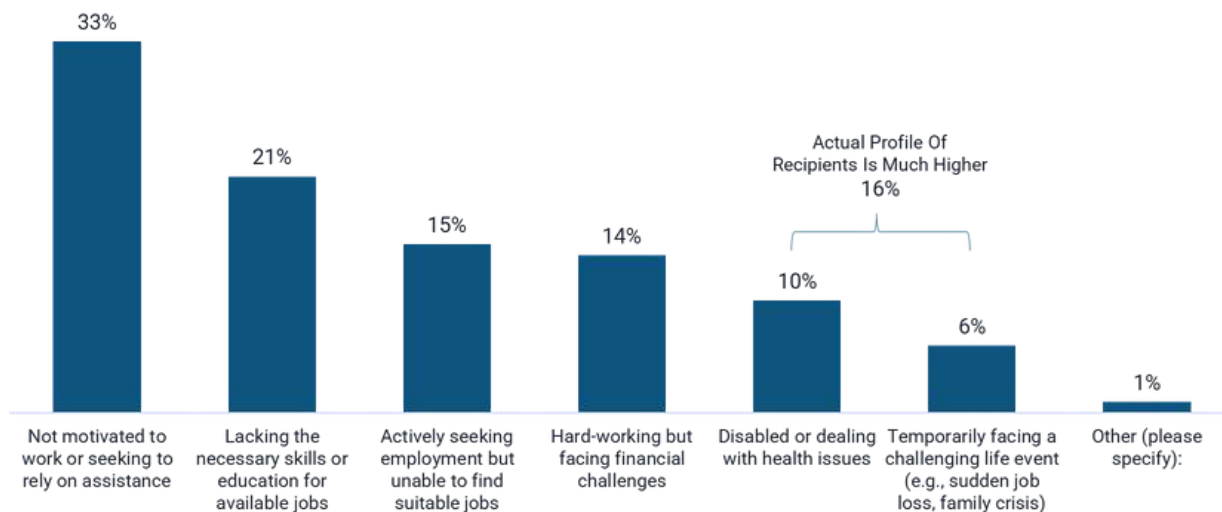


## Views on Recipients

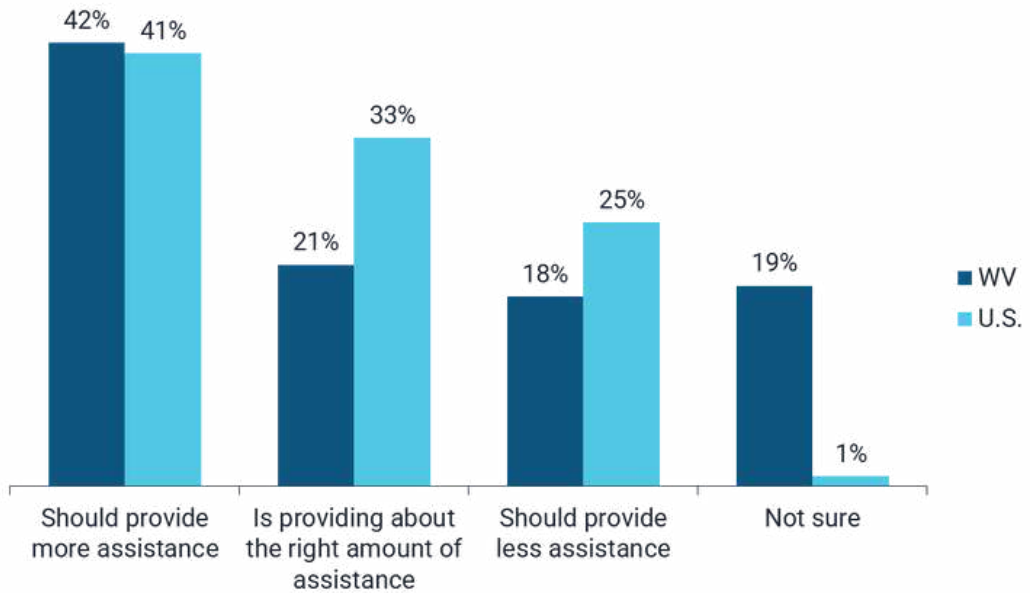
Occupational licensing is a regulatory requirement where individuals must obtain specific permits or licenses from the state government to practice in certain professions or jobs legally. Some examples include positions like massage therapists, barbers, or upholsterers. Considering this, to what extent do you believe occupational licensing requirements contribute to individuals remaining on public assistance?



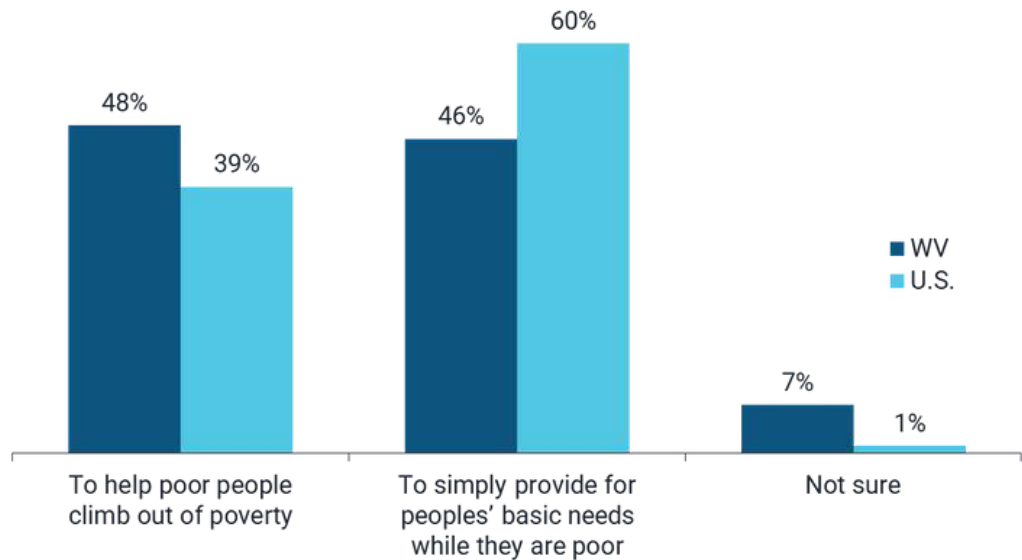
Which of the following descriptions do you believe best characterizes the majority of individuals on public assistance in our state? (Select the one that you believe applies most broadly.)



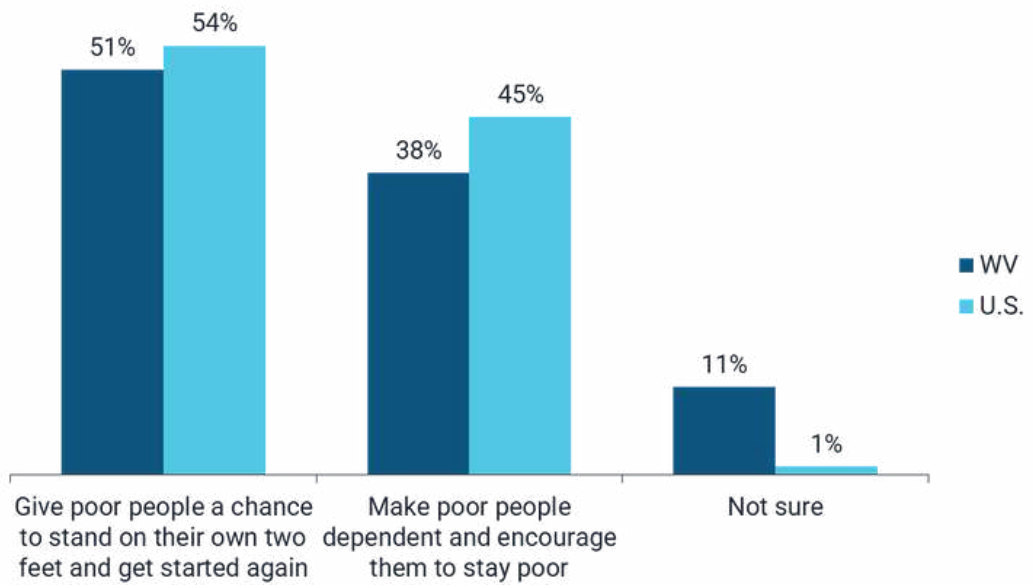
Thinking about the public assistance or welfare programs West Virginia provides to people in need, do you think the government...?



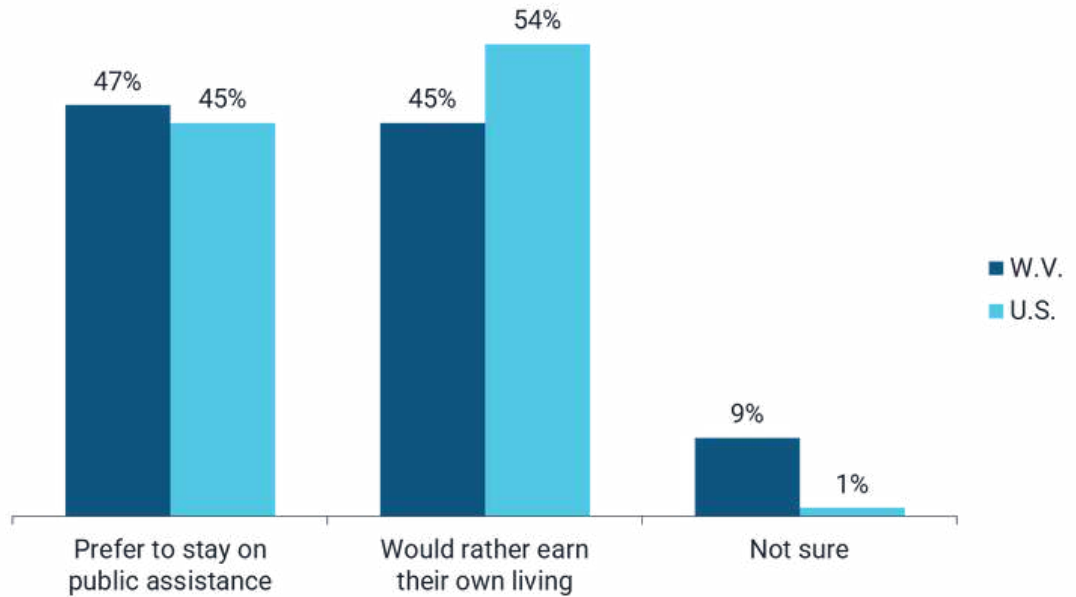
What would you say is the main purpose behind public assistance programs?



In general, do you think public assistance benefits...?



Do you think that most poor people who receive public assistance benefits...?



48% of West Virginian voters say the main purpose of public assistance programs is to help poor people climb out of poverty, but 38% express concern that the outcome of public assistance programs is dependence and entrapment in poverty.

These data points indicate a strong belief among West Virginians in both the importance of self-sufficiency through work and the role of community aid for individuals who fall on hard times. There is also an intense concern that public assistance programs breed dependence rather than giving those in need a hand up the economic ladder.

This contrasted with the experiences of benefit recipients from our visioning panel and focus groups would suggest both a need and a desire to remove barriers to work and reform existing benefit structures to make it easier for individuals who are able and want to pursue economic independence.

While these statistics are concerning, they help hone the focus of policymakers toward efforts that enhance the economic environment in West Virginia. Most of these responses point toward a need for more of the state's residents to be able to connect to quality job opportunities that afford them the ability to provide and care for their families. Maximizing attention toward these ends cultivates a state environment where meaningful and well-paying work is readily available and fundamentally pays off for all citizens.

## Potential Policy Solutions to Benefit Cliffs

In service of addressing the concerns of the 58% of voters that think generous welfare or unemployment benefits are a major or moderate cause of the low labor force participation rate and the 33% that believe that individuals on public assistance in West Virginia are not motivated to work or are seeking to rely on benefit programs, we explained what benefit cliffs are and asked if West Virginians supported efforts to address this problem. 56% of registered voters in West Virginia support addressing benefit cliffs.

Do you support or oppose this idea?

■ Total Oppose ■ Total Support

The 'benefits cliff' refers to a situation where individuals or families on public assistance programs, such as SNAP, Medicaid, or housing assistance, experience an increase in their earned income. However, once their income surpasses a specific threshold (even by a minor amount), they may lose these benefits, resulting in a net loss in overall resources.

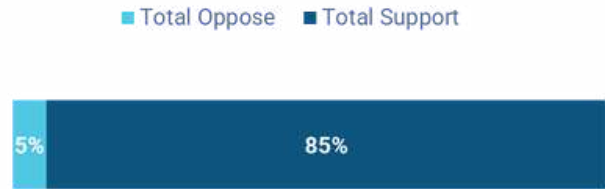
Do you support or oppose efforts to address the "benefits cliff"?



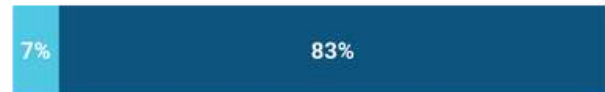
When presented with specific solutions to address benefit cliffs, solutions derived from the vision panel and focus groups with benefit recipients, support skyrocketed.

### Do you support or oppose this idea?

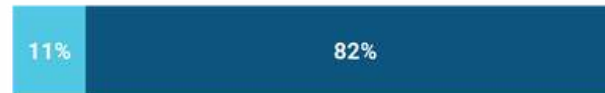
Some have suggested requiring the West Virginia Legislature to conduct a comprehensive review of all public assistance programs in the state every four years. The goal of this review would be to assess the efficacy, efficiency, and relevance of these programs and to make necessary changes based on the findings. Would you support or oppose this proposal?



To simplify and streamline the application process for various social assistance programs, Utah instituted a "One Door" policy, consolidating multiple social assistance programs into a single, user-friendly application process. A person looking for assistance is connected to a single point of contact, whose job is to help that person find the services and support they need to get back on their feet.



How do you feel about the Gradual Benefits Reduction policy proposal, which introduces a scaled approach to reducing welfare benefits as a recipient's income increases? This program would allow recipients to transition smoothly into work without fearing sudden loss of benefits. Do you support or oppose this idea?



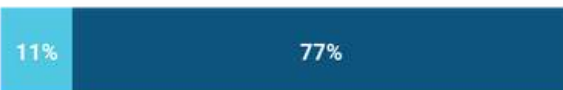
How do you feel about the proposal of a Grace Period policy, which would maintain the level of public assistance benefits for a set period, such as 30 to 90 days, after an individual's income surpasses the eligibility limit? The aim would be to provide a smoother transition rather than an abrupt end of benefits. Do you support or oppose this idea?



Some have suggested implementing annual adjustments to income guidelines for state welfare programs to align with inflation and cost of living changes. Would you support or oppose this proposal?



Some have suggested adjusting the benefits calculation for public assistance by considering individual circumstances and specific reasons a person cannot work, such as health conditions, caregiving responsibilities, or other personal challenges. This could result in some people receiving increased benefits based on their unique situations, while others might see no change. Would you support or oppose an effort to adjust the benefits calculation for public assistance by considering the individual circumstances of recipients?



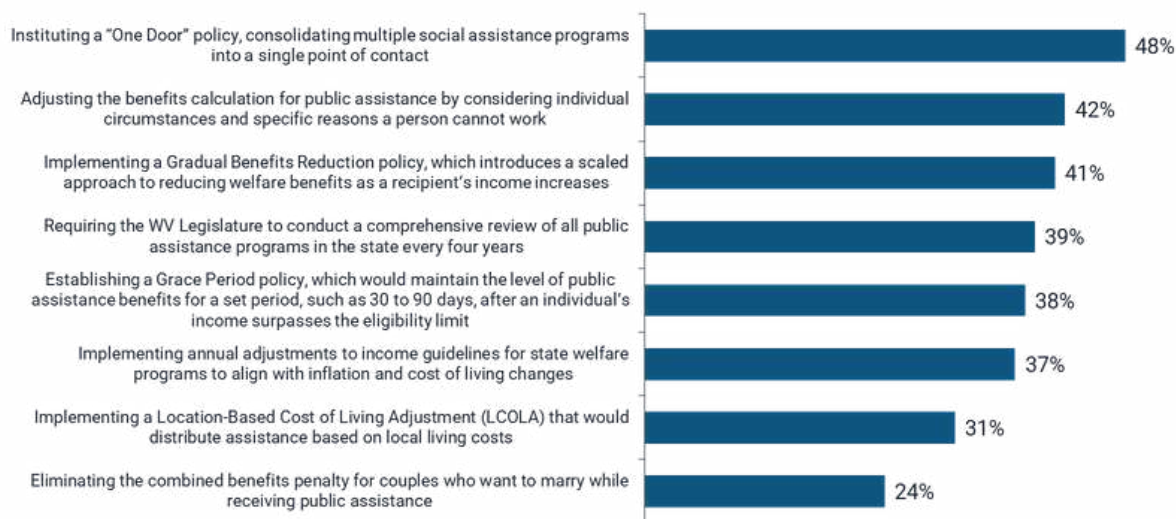
Some have suggested implementing a Location-Based Cost of Living Adjustment (LCOLA) in West Virginia to distribute assistance based on local living costs. Individuals' benefits would be based on the cost of living in their specific county or region instead of the average cost of living for the whole state. Would you support or oppose an effort to implement a Location-Based Cost of Living Adjustment (LCOLA) in West Virginia?



Some say there is a combined benefits penalty for recipients of public assistance where couples are better off not getting married due to the potential loss of benefits, making it difficult for them to afford necessities like rent and jeopardizing their financial stability. Would you support or oppose an effort to eliminate the combined benefits penalty for couples receiving public assistance?



From the following list of proposals to improve the state's public assistance programs, which are most important for the West Virginia legislature to address? (Select Your Top Three)



Respondents were overwhelmingly supportive of all the specific policy suggestions we posed. This suggests that voters recognize that the social safety net is not currently living up to its intentions, and they are open to thoughtfully designed changes in programs that better address the needs of benefit recipients.

## Conclusion

Overall, the findings from this entire body of qualitative listening research demonstrate that West Virginians are keenly aware of the economic progress the state has made and what needs further attention. At the same time, when presented with thoughtful policy ideas to address these needs, West Virginians are highly receptive to removing barriers to work and bridging the gap for individuals who desire to climb out of poverty. Taken together, these results give policymakers general direction on where their efforts would best be placed.



