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For Release: April 29, 2026
Media Contact: Scott Widmeyer
scott.widmeyer@finnpartners.com
(917) 763-3938

NEW FOUNDATION LAUNCHED TO SUPPORT WV ENTREPRENEURS

Country Roads Angel Foundation Will Focus on Education, Mentoring and Connecting to Capital

MORGANTOWN, WV (April 29, 2026) – Building on six years of momentum supporting high-growth startups across the Mountain State, Country Roads Angel Network (CRAN) today announced the launch of the Country Roads Angel Foundation (CRAF), a new nonprofit initiative designed to expand access to capital, mentorship, and entrepreneurial resources throughout West Virginia.

The announcement was made this morning at CRAN's annual meeting in Morgantown, in conjunction with the Bridging Innovation conference.

Speaking at the launch event for CRAF was West Virginia Secretary of State Kris Warner who highlighted the state's growing commitment to entrepreneurship, including the creation of a new West Virginia Office of Entrepreneurship within his office.

Warner emphasized the importance of aligning public and private efforts to support entrepreneurship across the state. "Today's announcement is a powerful example of what can happen when the public and private sectors work together to support innovation. The newly formed Country Roads Angel Foundation will play a critical role in expanding opportunity for entrepreneurs throughout West Virginia and helping strengthen our economy from the ground up.

"With the establishment of the WV Office of Entrepreneurship, the Secretary of State's office is doubling down on our commitment to small business growth and innovation," Warner said. "Partnerships like the Country Roads Angel Foundation are exactly what is needed in providing the resources, networks, and investments needed for entrepreneurs to succeed in West Virginia."

"The Country Roads Angel Foundation represents the next chapter in our mission to grow West Virginia's startup economy," said Scott Widmeyer, President of the Country Roads Angel Foundation.

"Over the past six years, CRAN has demonstrated that there is real opportunity here—great founders, innovative ideas, and investors willing to step up. The Foundation allows us to go further by supporting entrepreneurs earlier, strengthening the pipeline, and ensuring more West Virginia companies are positioned for success," said Widmeyer.

He continued, "This is about building a sustainable ecosystem. By investing in education, mentorship, and access, we can help more entrepreneurs turn their ideas into viable businesses—and ultimately keep that talent and growth here in West Virginia."



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Since its founding, CRAN has played a pivotal role in advancing early-stage investment, connecting promising startups with angel investors and helping to foster a more vibrant innovation ecosystem. To date, CRAN members have invested about \$2 million into emerging companies, supporting job creation and economic diversification across the state. And, those dollars have been used to leverage tens of millions of dollars in additional funds.

CRAF will build on that success by focusing on education, outreach, and ecosystem development—helping to prepare more entrepreneurs for investment while expanding the pipeline of investable companies.

Kevin Combs, founder and executive chair of CRAN, emphasized the importance of the Foundation as a natural evolution of CRAN's work.

"From the beginning, our goal with CRAN was to prove that West Virginia could support high-growth, investable businesses," Combs said. "We've made tremendous progress over the past six years. The Foundation is the next step—expanding our ability to nurture entrepreneurs earlier and build a stronger, more connected pipeline for innovation across the state."

Also speaking at today's launch announcement in Morgantown was Joshua Hall, dean of the John Chambers College of Business & Economics at WVU.

According to Hall, "I am continually inspired by the talent and passion of our students. They realize the meaningful impact they can have on others through business. When guided and empowered, their determination and creativity have the potential to drive lasting progress across West Virginia."

Entrepreneurs who have benefited directly from CRAN's support say the new Foundation will help even more founders succeed.

"CRAN played a critical role in helping 'O Pioneer' reach a national audience by supporting distribution across PBS, streaming platforms, and screenings at festivals and in theaters and universities nationwide. That stage in filmmaking is often the hardest, and CRAN's support made all the difference. Beyond funding, they invested in us as people by offering mentorship, guidance, and meaningful connections that continued well beyond the initial investment. The Foundation can build on that approach by supporting entrepreneurs in ways that recognize their ingenuity, perspective, and potential. I believe that is where real and lasting change begins," said Clara Lehmann of "O Pioneer" who also will be joining the board of CRAF.



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James Carnes, co-founder of Iconic Air and incoming CRAF board member, added, "Access to early-stage capital and experienced mentors can make all the difference for a startup. CRAN delivered that for us, and the Country Roads Angel Foundation will extend that impact by preparing more founders to succeed and attract investment."

Through collaboration with universities, industry partners, government, county school districts, investors, banking, and community leaders, CRAF will work to build and expand the infrastructure and ecosystem necessary to sustain innovation in West Virginia for the long term. The Foundation will work with partners to host educational programming, support founder development, and expand awareness of angel investing opportunities. With this in mind, CRAF will complement the investment arm of CRAN.

About Country Roads Angel Network (CRAN)

West Virginia's first accredited angel investment network, CRAN is a leading early-stage investment group focused on supporting high-growth companies in West Virginia. Since its founding, CRAN has connected entrepreneurs with capital and strategic guidance to help build and scale successful businesses.

About Country Roads Angel Foundation (CRAF)

Country Roads Angel Foundation is a nonprofit organization set up as a 501(c)(3) organization dedicated to strengthening West Virginia's entrepreneurial ecosystem through education, mentorship, and expanded access to early-stage investment opportunities.

Country Roads Angel Foundation Board of Directors



James Carnes

James Carnes is a Weirton, WV native and co-founder of Iconic Air, a Silicon Valley-backed enterprise software platform serving the energy sector, where he led its successful acquisition by Asuene, a leading international sustainability company based in Tokyo. He is a graduate of West Virginia University with a B.S. in Industrial Engineering, a Forbes 30 Under 30 honoree, and the creator of Beacon, a founder-led community focused on helping West Virginia early-stage founders get customers and raise capital. James now resides in Bridgeport, West Virginia with his family.



Steven Clevenger

Steven Clevenger is a VP of Commercial Banking at Truist Financial Corporation, responsible for driving growth, profitability, and portfolio quality. Since April 2023, he has expanded client relationships and market share across lending, deposits, and payment solutions through a differentiated, advisory-focused client experience. With over 16 years of banking experience, Steven has served as a Business Banker, Mortgage Officer, and Market Leader. He is actively involved in West Virginia, serving on advisory and investment committees, and holds a B.S. in Industrial Engineering from West Virginia University. Outside work, Steven enjoys spending time with his family in Morgantown.



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Kevin Combs

Kevin Combs thinks globally but acts locally in his leadership role with the Country Roads Angel Network (CRAN) as co-founder and chair. A native of Ansted, WV, Kevin has not forgotten his roots. His decades of business and investing experience shapes the structure of new business start-ups in the Mountain State and helps close the gap by identifying much-needed capital for home state entrepreneurs. He is an accomplished founder and entrepreneur with a successful track record of building operating companies that produce outsized value, while maintaining core values of integrity, passionate pursuit of purpose and consistent sustainability. Kevin is a graduate of West Virginia University.



Brandon Dennison

Brandon Dennison, a native of Cabell County, is vice president for economic and workforce development at Marshall University. Dennison is a driving force in the resurgence of economic activity in southern West Virginia. At Marshall, his team includes Marshall's Advanced Manufacturing Center, the Southern WV Brownfields Center, the Center for Environmental, Geotechnical, and Applied Sciences, Marshall's Sustainability Department, and the Alliance for the Economic Development of Southern West Virginia. He is a winner of the J.M.K. Social Innovation Prize, a DRK Entrepreneur, and an Ashoka Fellow, all awards for social entrepreneurs. Dennison continues to serve as Coalfield Development's executive president.



Michael Graney

Michael Graney has a long-standing career in West Virginia focused on jobs creation, economic development, and supporting entrepreneurs. Until recently, he was Deputy Secretary of Commerce in the WV Department of Commerce, and prior to that was executive director of the WV Development Office for more than six years. Graney studied at the University of Virginia where he received a Bachelor's and Masters degree in business administration.



Marc Halbritter

Marc Halbritter is a native West Virginian with degrees from West Virginia University and West Virginia Wesleyan College. He was an executive in the natural gas industry for most of his 35+ year career. He has served on numerous community, charitable, educational, trade association and other boards, including Country Roads Angel Network where he is currently Vice Chair. A lawyer and accountant by training, he has built businesses for himself and for his employers.



Mike Howard

Mike Howard is Business Development Manager for Beyond Marketing, based in Wheeling. He has 35+ years of sales, marketing, event and management experience and recently Mike served as the COO of the Wheeling Chamber of Commerce. Mike understands the entrepreneur as he is currently a John Maxwell Leadership Certified Instructor and author of two books, one in sales and the other a faith-based devotional. Focusing on servant leadership to help influence company culture and the consultative selling model, makes Mike a great partner for businesses and organizations that are looking to grow in revenue generation/donor development plus culture building.





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Clara Lehmann

Clara Lehmann is a filmmaker and co-founder of Coat of Arms, an award-winning creative studio working with Fortune 100 and 500 brands to tell human-centered stories through film and animation. Her work has earned Webby, Emmy, and Cannes Lion honors and has screened at festivals including SXSW, Tribeca, and Cannes. She wrote and directed the feature documentaries “Born in a Ballroom” and “O Pioneer,” the latter earning multiple festival and academic awards. She serves as Chair of the WV Community Development Hub, sits on the board of the Helvetia Restoration and Development Organization, and is a 2023 Country Roads Angel Network investment recipient.



Michele O'Connor

Michele O'Connor brings more than three decades of experience in the finance and banking sector. She currently serves as the Director of INNOVA Commercialization, an initiative spearheaded by the High Technology Foundation, based in Fairmont, WV. Dedicated to fostering entrepreneurial success and new ventures, INNOVA Commercialization stands at the forefront of business support services and seed and early-stage investment capital programs. Michele's commitment to empowering entrepreneurs extends beyond her professional endeavors. She actively contributes to various organizations, serving as a board member and past chair of TechConnect West Virginia.



Harriet Pearson

Harriet Pearson settled in West Virginia following a 30+ year career spanning law, business, and government. Based in Shepherdstown, she restored and operates the historic Shepherdstown Opera House and publishes the Observer Weekly, a digital newspaper covering Jefferson County and the Eastern Panhandle. A former partner and innovation leader at Hogan Lovells and senior IBM executive with global roles in Legal, HR, and Public Affairs, she has advised major organizations on technology risk governance and transformation. She now leads a boutique consultancy and serves on nonprofit and business boards focused on technology policy, community development, and agriculture. She is a graduate of Princeton University and the UCLA School of Law.



David Ramsburg

After graduating from WVU, David left West Virginia to pursue his technology career after receiving no local interviews. Drawing on extensive experience in small tech companies and startups, he returned home in 2005. Since then, he has worked to reverse the odds for West Virginia technology graduates and encourage future generations to live and thrive in the state. He has helped establish multiple entrepreneurship and innovation centers, including two at the University of Charleston, as well as the WVU LaunchLab. Today, he leads the LG NOVA Morgantown office and focuses on building a sustainable pipeline of high-tech jobs across West Virginia.



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Amber Ravenscroft

Amber Ravenscroft is a leading expert in entrepreneurship-led economic development and nonprofit leadership. As Founder of the Bridging Innovation Institute, she directs the West Virginia Entrepreneurship Ecosystem, specializing in building collaborative environments that align statewide resources. With over a decade of experience and a Master's in Education Entrepreneurship from UPenn, she uniquely helps bridge the gap between education and economy. A passionate advocate for democratizing economic opportunity, Ravenscroft co-chairs National Entrepreneurship Week, focusing on trust-based systems and ecosystem development to drive sustainable, local prosperity across the country.



Maryanne Reed

Maryanne Reed is an award-winning faculty member and administrator who recently retired from West Virginia University. During her 32-year tenure at WVU, she served as a professor, dean and most recently, as Provost and Chief Academic Officer. As Dean of the College of Media for 15 years, Reed led the college to achieve record enrollment and entrepreneurial revenue generation – and national recognition for innovation in journalism and media education. She was named the 2016 Scripps Howard/ACEJMC Administrator of the year and has received numerous awards for both her academic and professional achievements.



Frank Vitale

Frank Vitale is President and CEO of Forge Business Solutions, a certified Veteran-Owned Small Business focusing on strategic planning, project management, and business development. He has more than two decades of experience in banking, entrepreneurship, and government service. Prior to starting Forge, Vitale served in senior roles at Centra Bank (United Bankshares) and Clear Mountain Bank. Vitale earned a master's degree in business administration (MBA) and a bachelor's degree from West Virginia University. Frank serves on the board of Leadership West Virginia and the West Virginia Public Education Collaborative. He is the past chairman of the board for the Morgantown Area Chamber of Commerce and the United Way of Monongalia and Preston counties.



Scott Widmeyer

Scott Widmeyer, a native of Martinsburg, has a distinguished career in communications. He was the founder of Widmeyer Communications (now Finn Partners), the largest agency in the U.S. focused on education. His early career began in Charleston, WV as a reporter for the Charleston Daily Mail and later served for four years as Press Secretary to then Governor Jay Rockefeller. Scott graduated from WVU, and in 2023 was awarded an Honorary Doctorate degree from WVU. Scott co-chairs the Stubblefield Institute for Civil Political Communications and is on the boards of CRAN, the Leadership Academy, and the Visiting Committee for WVU's College of Creative Arts and Media. He currently is president and co-founder of The Overlook News, a digital news outlet in upstate New York.



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