



HAPPY VALLEY
**SPORTS &
ENTERTAINMENT**
ALLIANCE

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Happy Valley visitation reaches 5 million
State Games of America coming to Happy Valley in 2026

STATE COLLEGE, PA, July 9, 2024 – The Happy Valley Adventure Bureau (HVAB) and the Happy Valley Sports & Entertainment Alliance (HVSEA) made two significant tourism announcements at the HVAB’s annual State of Tourism Breakfast on July 9 at the Wyndham Garden State College.

More than 140 people attended the annual event, which reinforced tourism’s role as an important economic driver in the county. During the program, the HVAB released the results of the 2023 Centre County Visitor Volume study conducted by Longwoods International; and reflected on last year’s tourism milestones. In addition, the HVAB and HVSEA both presented priorities for the upcoming fiscal year, with the HVSEA announcing Happy Valley’s hosting of a major sporting event.

“Last year, the Adventure Bureau set a goal of 5 million visitors and one billion dollars in visitor spending by the end of 2024,” said Jennifer Brooks-Stahl, General Manager of the Wyndham Garden State College and Chair of the HVAB Board of Directors. “I am pleased to report that we have already achieved that goal.”

According to the 2023 Longwoods International study, Centre County reached a record 5-million person-trips last year, which is a 3.1 percent increase over 2022. This total includes 3.2 million daytrips, and 1.8 million overnight trips.

Brooks-Stahl said that with average visitor spending at approximately \$200, it is “safe to say” the county has also reached the \$1 billion spending goal as well.

Brooks-Stahl said the county is well positioned to reach the next milestone of six million visitors by 2026.

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Through June of this year, Happy Valley has already had 2.8 unique visitors who have frequented the area five times on average.

“We see this impact in many areas,” she said. “This includes the county’s lodging performance, which reflects this upward trend in visitation.”

According to Smith Travel Research data, all significant hotel metrics were ahead of 2022 levels.

As a result, Happy Valley climbed to 13th in Pennsylvania county lodging performance. For perspective, the county was 17th in 2020. Through May 2024, the county is now at No. 11, putting the top 10 well within reach.

The HVAB also sent 21,000 referrals to county lodging properties through Book Direct.

Lodging performance is an important metric because the lodging tax paid by visitors is the HVAB’s primary source of funding, and is what enables the organization to carry out a robust, strategic and comprehensive destination-marketing mission. The lodging tax also funds the annual Tourism Grant program conducted in partnership with Centre County Commissioners, which this year awarded a record \$960,200 to 77 tourism projects.

The HVAB cited as 2023 highlights the launch of a modern, user-friendly destination website, happyvalley.com, which is tracking to reach 1 million sessions by year’s end; investments in new research platforms that are helping the organization and event organizers better understand where visitors are coming from, and their activity while in the destination; and solidifying HVSEA operations, including hiring Executive Director Eric Engelbarts, finalizing the Board and establishing eventual stand-alone 501(c)3 status.

HVAB President and CEO Fritz Smith outlined strategies that the organization will focus on in the upcoming fiscal year.

“The state of Happy Valley tourism is strong,” Smith said. “Taking it to the next level is going to require countywide and organization-wide commitment to the Happy Valley brand, foremost, and continued community and university collaboration.

“We are competing with counties that have significantly higher populations than we have, with greater resources and bigger infrastructures than we have,” he continued. “We need complementary development. We need to think about what is possible through brand buy-in, collaboration, and a shared vision.”

Smith said additional areas of focus include DEI initiatives to foster a welcoming destination; testing international markets such as India and China; assessing and aligning HVAB staff with organizational priorities; and implementing initiatives that encourage even greater member and community engagement and organizational collaboration.

“Tourism must be a positive, beneficial experience for our residents and our visitors,” he said. “We must be stewards of our communities and tourism assets as we welcome more people to experience what makes Happy Valley so special.”

Happy Valley to host 2026 State Games of America

Joined by officials from the National Congress of State Games and the Keystone State Games, HVSEA Executive Director Eric Engelbarts announced that Happy Valley would host the prominent athletic competition July 28-Aug. 2, 2026. The multi-sport Olympic-style sports festival for medal winners of National Congress of State Games-member events will bring more than 8,000 athletes and their supporters to compete in more than 30 sports.

New to Happy Valley, the event and its impact on the economy and ability to elevate destination awareness is well known to Engelbarts. As former Executive Director of the Michigan Sports Alliance, Engelbarts created and grew the State Games of Michigan, which produced an annual estimated economic impact of \$3.25 million.

“Similar to IRONMAN®, hosting the State Games of America is a wonderful opportunity for Happy Valley, both economically and from a visibility standpoint. The marketing and branding value of hosting an event of this stature is an amazing ancillary benefit,” he said. “Like IRONMAN®, it is an event that will take support from the community, which has been incredible.”

National Congress of State Games Vice President Chip Hofler said Happy Valley’s selection as the host for the 2026 State Games of America is a testament to its dedication to sports and community.

“This event will not only showcase the talents of athletes from Pennsylvania and beyond, but also highlight the area’s rich cultural and recreational offerings,” he said.

Keystone State Games Executive Director Jim Costello said his organization is thrilled to partner with the Happy Valley Sports & Entertainment Alliance for the 2026 State Games of America.

“The region’s exceptional facilities, vibrant community, and strong support for athletics make it an ideal host for this prestigious event. We look forward to bringing together athletes from across the nation to compete in Happy Valley,” he added.

Engelbarts said priorities for the 2024-25 fiscal year also include growing the local entertainment sector, which is an HVSEA area of focus along with sports. The HVAB and HVSEA will soon release the results of an Arts & Culture Economic Impact Study by Econsult Solutions. The study results will serve as a benchmark for growth.

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