



# Virginia Rural Leadership Institute

PRESENTED BY THE



*Rural Center*

Partnership of the **Senator Frank M. Ruff, Jr.**  
Center for Rural Virginia and the  
Council for Rural Virginia

## 2025

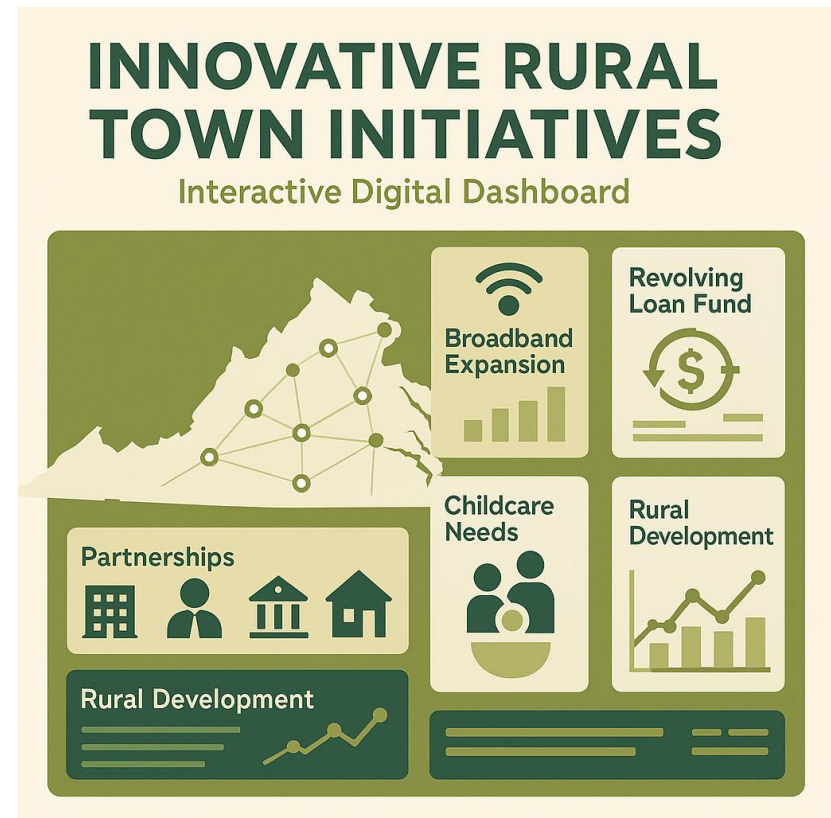
# Community Impact Projects

Dylan Andrews

*Montgomery County*

Economic Development Specialist, Virginia Tech

**Goal: Develop an interactive dashboard showcasing innovative rural town initiatives across Virginia to inspire collaboration, share best practices, and strengthen rural development statewide.**



2025 VRLI Cohort Experience & Community Impact Projects

**Michael Barakey**

*Suffolk*

Fire Chief, City of Suffolk

**Frances Chambers**

*Wakefield*

Wakefield Council Member, Nansemond-Suffolk  
Academy Director of Academic Affairs,  
Commonwealth Fiber Services Co-Owner

**Goal: Improve rural  
healthcare access in  
southeastern Virginia by  
expanding 911 emergency  
services through  
partnerships, shared  
resources, and mutual aid  
collaboration.**



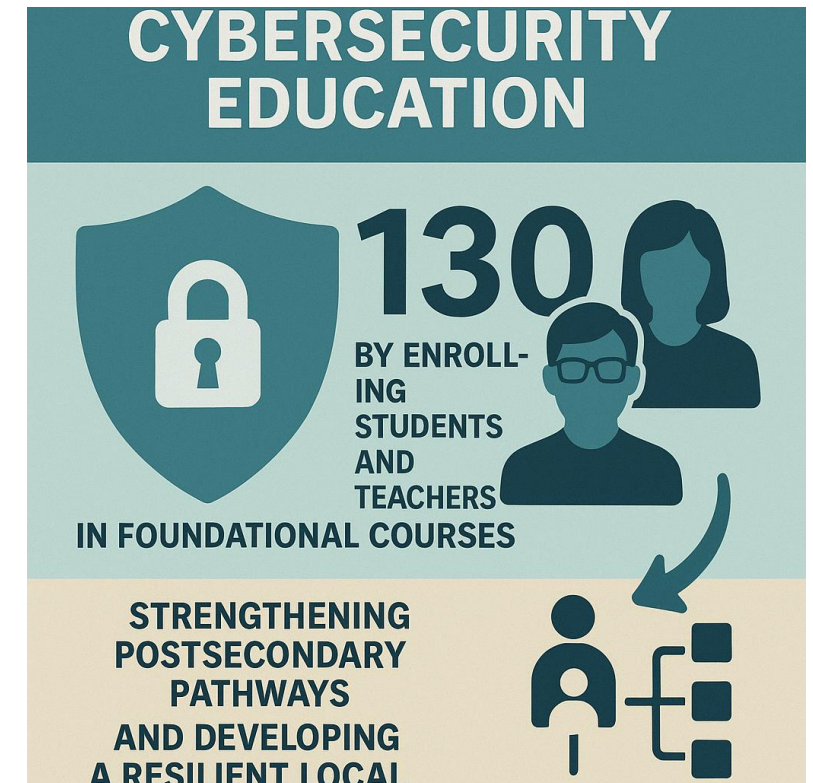
**2025 VRLI Cohort Experience & Community Impact Projects**

**Tom Bennett**

*Radford*

Executive Director IMPACT Lab, Radford University

**Goal: Expand rural cybersecurity education by enrolling 130 students and teachers in foundational courses, strengthening postsecondary pathways and developing a resilient local cybersecurity workforce.**



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Jessica Blythe

*Staunton*

Asst. Dir. Of Economic Development, City of Staunton

**Goal: Create and distribute an Enterprise Zone Amendment Guidebook with frameworks and templates to support Virginia's Local Zone Administrators and DHCD training by December 2026.**



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# Lauren Chitwood

*Hillsville*

Tourism Director/Farmers Mrkt. Mgr., Town of Hillsville

**Goal: Create The Gathering Place Pocket Park in downtown Hillsville to foster community connection, relaxation, and inclusivity through accessible, family-friendly green space and public engagement.**



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**Robin Daniel**

*Brunswick County*

Interim Vice President of Enrollment Management and Student Success,  
Southside Virginia Community College

**Goal: Launch the Panther  
P.A.W.S. initiative by Fall 2026  
to develop civic leadership and  
community engagement skills  
among Southside Virginia  
students through interactive,  
service-oriented workshops.**



**2025 VRLI Cohort Experience & Community Impact Projects**

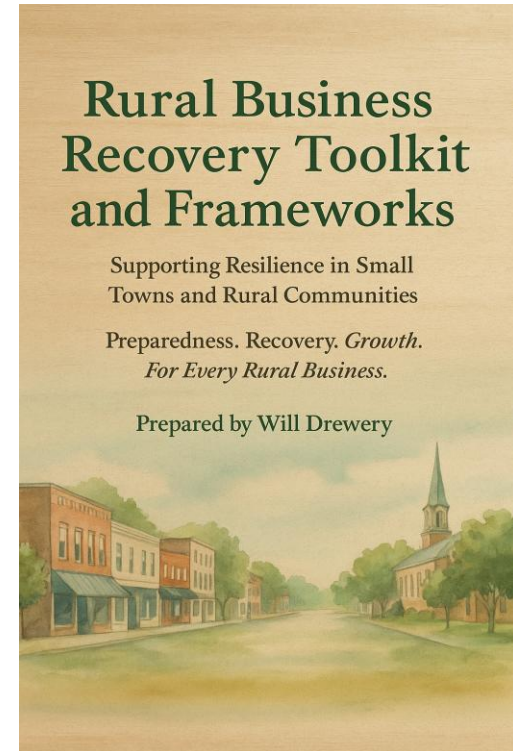


# Will Drewery

*Isle of Wight County*

Battalion Chief/Emergency Management Coordinator, Isle of Wight Fire Rescue

**Goal: Develop and launch a rural economic resilience toolkit by May 2026 to strengthen business continuity, recovery planning, and community preparedness for future disruptions.**



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**Ann Glave**

*Hanover*

Existing Business and Project Mgr., Hanover Co. Econ. Dev.

**Goal: Host a one-day “Fields to Farms” tour in Hanover County by October 2026 to showcase diverse farms, educate visitors, and celebrate local agriculture’s economic importance.**



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# Nichole Hair

*Christiansburg*

Director of Econ. Dev. & Comm. Engagement, Radford Univ.

**Goal: Host the two-day  
AdventureWorks Outdoor Economy  
Summit at Radford University to  
connect leaders, showcase rural  
assets, and highlight outdoor  
recreation's economic impact  
across Virginia.**



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J. Erin Kelley

*Tappahannock*

Owner, The Rappahannock Times

Goal: **Purchase, rehabilitate, and reopen the old Harris Grill property in Essex County and turn it into a local history museum within 2 years.**



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Heidi King

*Harrisonburg*

Workforce Analyst, Appteon Inc.

**Goal: Increase Shenandoah Valley students' access to non-traditional Registered Apprenticeships by 2026 through counselor training, outreach materials, and school partnerships that track and expand apprenticeship placements.**



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**Latoshua LeGrant**

*Martinsville*

Chief Information Office, New College Institute

**Goal: Establish a learning program that promotes responsible, effective, and secure use of Artificial Intelligence across business, industry, education, and daily life.**



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**Rob Mann**

*Lynchburg*

External Affairs Mgr., Appalachian  
Power Company

**Nellie Philpott**

*Roanoke County*

Economic Development Specialist,  
Roanoke County

**Goal: Host two Roanoke County  
Manufacturer's Forums by  
December 2026 to strengthen  
industry collaboration, identify  
shared goals, and establish a  
sustainable manufacturing network  
for future growth.**



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# Eireann Maybach

*Culpeper*  
Student, Virginia Tech

Goal: **By 2030, entice 8 graduating nursing students per year to participate in a Certified Nurse Midwifery program.**



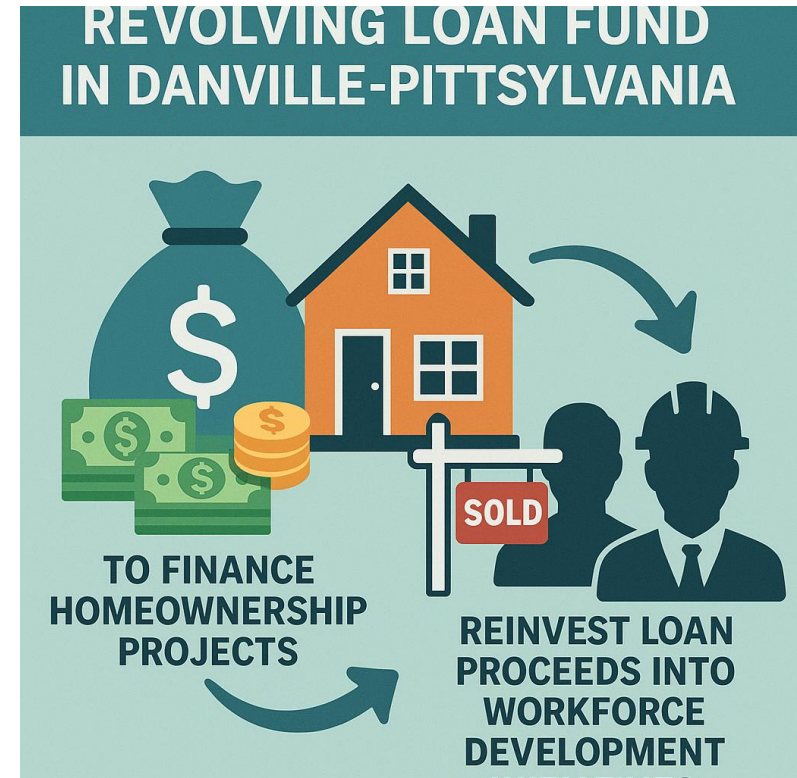
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Chris McNamara

*Richmond*

Virginia Housing, Strategic Housing Officer

**Goal: Establish a Chamber-managed revolving loan fund in Danville-Pittsylvania to finance homeownership projects and reinvest loan proceeds into workforce development initiatives.**



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Rebekah Morgan

*Patrick County*

Community Development Director (*Fmr.*), West Piedmont PDC

Goal: **Develop and implement a comprehensive revitalization plan to reopen, strengthen, and sustain the Bassett Community Center through planning, partnerships, and programming.**



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Jen Otey

*Wytheville*

Outdoor Recreation Development Mgr., Friends of SWVA

**Goal: Develop an online hub connecting Southwest Virginia communities with trail organizations to coordinate maintenance, train volunteers, and strengthen regional outdoor recreation stewardship.**



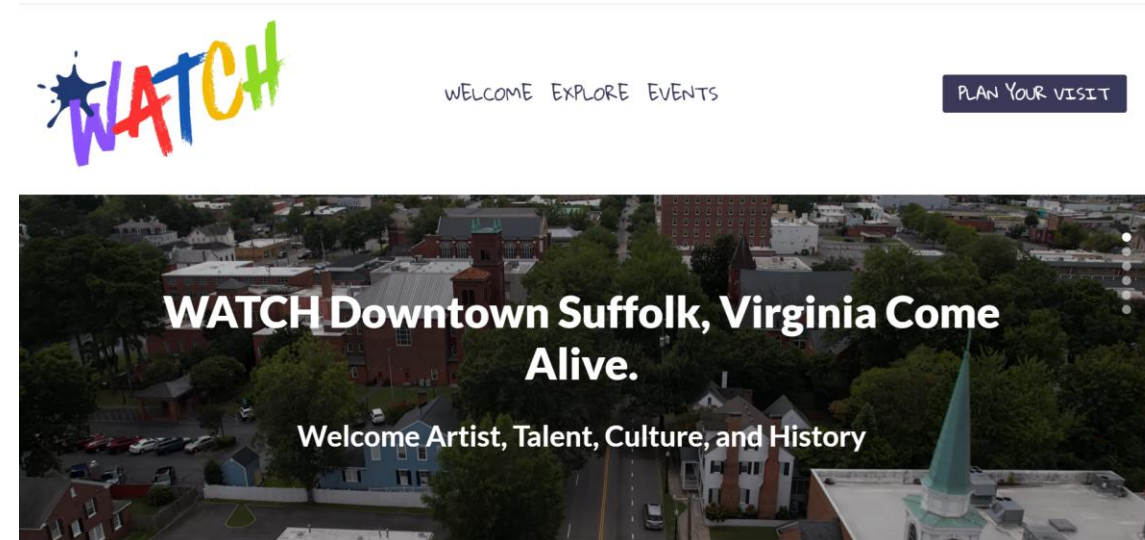
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# Tom Powell

*Suffolk*

President, The Addison Group

**Goal: Establish a comprehensive communication platform for the WATCH Community Initiative by Spring 2026 to increase awareness, engagement, and measurable digital reach.**



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# Tyler Topping

*Emporia*

Owner/Manager, Topping Investment Group

**Goal: Promote investment by cataloging and marketing unlisted small-to-medium vacant commercial properties, increasing community revitalization through higher building occupancy rates.**



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**Bobbie Wagner**

*Allegheny County*

CEO, YMCA of the Allegheny Highlands

**Goal: Conduct a comprehensive childcare needs assessment in the Allegheny Highlands and develop an actionable plan to enhance or relocate childcare services by December 2026.**



**ALLEGHANY HIGHLANDS YMCA**

EARLY LEARNING ACCESS  
↓  
PARENTS CAN WORK / TRAIN  
↓  
HIGHER FAMILY INCOME  
↓  
LOCAL SPENDING INCREASES  
↓  
RURAL ECONOMIC GROWTH



**2025 VRLI Cohort Experience & Community Impact Projects**