



Virginia Rural Leadership Institute

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Rural Center

Partnership of the Center for Rural Virginia and the Council for Rural Virginia

The Virginia Rural Center Announces 2023 Virginia Rural Leadership Institute Graduates

28 members graduate from the Commonwealth's only leadership program that focuses on developing rural Virginia's existing and emerging leaders

November 13, 2023 (Staunton, VA) The Virginia Rural Center is pleased to announce 28 graduates from the second cohort of the Virginia Rural Leadership Institute (VRLI). VRLI is a leadership program that develops and supports highly skilled, highly motivated leaders who are committed to revitalizing their communities across rural Virginia.

Throughout the 2023 program, VRLI cohort members attended in-person sessions that featured presentations from Virginia's top experts on economic and community development, healthcare and education, and agriculture. In-person sessions were held in five different rural regions across the Commonwealth, including: Southside Virginia, the Middle Peninsula, the Northern Neck, the Shenandoah Valley, and Southwest Virginia. An important component of VRLI is for cohort members to immerse themselves in unique rural localities to hear from leaders how they have addressed challenges and worked to transform their communities.

"I am proud that in its second year, the Virginia Rural Leadership Institute is able to deliver a return on investment for participants and their communities," said **Senator Frank Ruff, founding member of the Center for Rural Virginia (CFRV) and current Chairman of CFRV**. "The program helps leaders from rural Virginia learn actionable leadership skills both from subject-matter experts and each other while visiting parts Virginia that often go unseen."

In addition to the in-person sessions, as a part of the program, each Cohort member is required to complete a Community Impact Project upon graduation from the program. Community Impact Projects are developed and implemented with the guidance of VRLI mentors, Virginia Rural Center staff, and the VRLI Advisory Committee. For the VRLI second cohort, Community Impact Projects focused on public safety, food security, youth engagement, technology, funding, senior supports, workforce development, entrepreneurship, the arts, agritourism, and cultivating the next generation of leaders.

VRLI's graduation event, held in Staunton on November 4th, included dignitaries from across the Commonwealth. Graduation program speakers included Center for Rural Virginia Board Member, Secretary Matthew Lohr; former chair of the Center for Rural Virginia, Senator

Emmett Hanger; former Delegate and Founding Member of the Center for Rural Virginia, Steve Landes, and current Chair of the Council for Rural Virginia and VRLI Advisory Committee Member, Bryan David.

“Over the past seven months, VRLI Cohort members traveled throughout rural Virginia, learning, collaborating, and improving their skills to address the issues they face and help bring prosperity to their communities. In addition to this unique professional development opportunity, VRLI Cohort members will complete Community Impact Projects that will truly transform rural Virginia over the course of the next year.” said **Kristie Proctor, Executive Director of the Virginia Rural Center.**

The Virginia Rural Center’s success with the Virginia Rural Leadership Institute is because of the partners who have worked tirelessly with the Center to bring together the best and brightest for the VRLI Curriculum, supporting and providing funding for the program, recruiting rural leaders in every region of Virginia, and playing a pivotal role in the curriculum of VRLI. Current sponsors are Appalachian Power Foundation, Danville Community College Foundation, Dominion Energy Foundation, The RiverLink Group LLC, Microsoft, Mid Atlantic Broadband Corporation, Virginia Tobacco Revitalization Commission, Virginia Housing, and the Virginia Poultry Growers Cooperative. The Center is continuing to build its list of partners as excitement and interest grow for VRLI in future years.

“The 2023 Cohort of VRLI has leaders from the non-profit, public, and private sectors. These leaders span 24 different counties and cities and have 25 different Community Impact Projects across the Commonwealth,” said **Bryan David, Chair of the Council for Rural Virginia.** “With the diverse backgrounds, ages, employers, and skill sets that each Cohort member has, we will be able to successfully address a multitude of issues that rural communities face.”

The application window for the 2024 VRLI Cohort will open soon! Contact varuralleadership@cfrv.org for more information!

Graduates of the 2023 VRLI Cohort **Listed in Alphabetical Order by Last Name**

John Patrick Clair

Marion

Town of Marion, Chief of Police

Donna J. Dagner

Victoria

Community Resources Services, Executive Director

Jackie Davis

Farnham

Bay Consortium Workforce Development Board, Executive Director

Jessica K. Drake

Williamsburg

Filanthropic Consultancy, Founder & Principal

Jarrold Elwell

Doswell

Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, Community Development Regional Manager

Todd Fortune

Farmville

Commonwealth Regional Council, Deputy Director

Olivia Garrett

Henry County

New College Institute, Director of Institutional Advancement

Josh Gillespie

Louisa County

County of Louisa, Director of Community Development

Courtney L. Harper

South Hill

Building Blocks to Success, LLC, CEO and Occupational Therapist

Darren Hayes

Freeman

Spotts Fain Consulting, Government Relations Assistant

Tabitha Hodge

Christiansburg (Floyd County)

Assistant Director of Community and Economic Development

William Johnson, III

Emporia

City of Emporia, City Manager

Stephanie Lillard

Luray

Director of Community Economic Development, People, Inc.

Jamie Lynn Anderson Lindley

South Boston

Comfort Systems USA MidAtlantic, Outreach, Recruiting, & Training Manager

Vanesa Livingstone

Warsaw

Richmond County Department of Social Services Director

Craig McCroskey

Bassett

United Way of Henry County & Martinsville, Director of Financial Stability Programs

Angela McPhaul
Waverly
Town of Waverly Mayor

Nick Minor
King George County
King George County Director of Economic Development

Alex Rendon
Henrico County
Dominion Energy, External Affairs Representative

AJ Robinson
Tazewell County
Tazewell County Director of Communications and Tourism

Jennifer Schmack
Fluvanna County
Fluvanna County Director of Economic Development

Beth Simms
Patrick County
Patrick County, County Administrator

Kim Smith
Russell County
Heart of Appalachia, Interim Executive Director

Joe Sumner
Martinsville
New College Institute, Executive Director

Rhett Weiss
Farmville
DEALTEK, Ltd, Chairman & CEO

Alex White
Luray
Town of Luray Councilman

Kendra Wood
Aylett
Rappahannock Community College, Dean of Strategic Enrollment Management

Dr. Terrence M. Wood
Greensville County
Greensville County Director of Human Resources

About the Virginia Rural Center:

The Virginia Rural Center is a collaborative partnership of the Center for Rural Virginia and the Council for Rural Virginia. These two organizations established a collective services agreement

to work jointly toward the mission of economic prosperity for rural communities throughout Virginia. Together, the Center for Rural Virginia and the Council for Rural Virginia work with federal, state, and local policymakers and regulators as well private sector stakeholders to improve economic opportunities and preserve the quality of life throughout rural Virginia. Learn more about the Virginia Rural Center or the Virginia Rural Leadership Institute online at www.cfrv.org or on Facebook at [@VirginiaRuralCenter](https://www.facebook.com/VirginiaRuralCenter), Twitter at [@VARuralCenter](https://twitter.com/VARuralCenter), and Instagram at [@varuralcenter](https://www.instagram.com/varuralcenter) or using the hashtag [#VRLI](https://twitter.com/VRLI) & [#GrowRuralVA](https://twitter.com/GrowRuralVA).