

## The Virginia Rural Center Announces Virginia Rural Leadership Institute's Inaugural Graduating Class

*Ceremony celebrated graduates from across the Commonwealth and highlighted how community impact projects will support rural communities.*

**December 8, 2022 (Richmond, VA)** The Virginia Rural Center (VRC) is pleased to announce the Virginia Rural Leadership Institute's (VRLI) inaugural graduating class. Created by VRC, VRLI is the Commonwealth's first leadership program focused on developing and retaining leaders in rural communities. The inaugural cohort, representing rural localities throughout Virginia, began in May of 2022 with 29 members. After completing the seven-month program, cohort members participated in a graduation ceremony in Staunton, Virginia on November 19, 2022.

*“Over the past seven months, VRLI Cohort members traveled throughout rural Virginia, learning, and collaborating with the goal of bringing back ideas to their respective rural communities that will help make positive impacts throughout our Commonwealth,”* said Kristie Helmick Proctor, Executive Director, The Virginia Rural Center.

VRLI included four 3-day sessions in five uniquely different rural regions across the Commonwealth including: Southern Virginia, Middle Peninsula/Northern Neck, New River Valley, Shenandoah Valley, and Southwest Virginia. During each session, VRLI cohort members heard from Virginia's top experts on economic and community development and specific opportunities and challenges for rural Virginia. Additionally, VRLI cohort members were paired with a leader in Virginia for mentorship to assist with developing a community-impact project to give back to their communities through a project putting leadership skills into practice.

Senator Frank Ruff, Chairman and founding member of the Center for Rural Virginia (CFRV), said *“We are proud of the Virginia Rural Leadership Institute's efforts and the success that has already come from the Community Impact Projects that these leaders are working on. We are optimistic that these projects will bring prosperity across the Commonwealth for many years to come.”*

VRLI culminated with a graduation ceremony celebrating the accomplishments of the VRLI cohort and featured presentations from each cohort member highlighting their Community Impact Project. Keynote remarks were provided by the Honorable Matthew Lohr, Virginia Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry and VRC Board Member. Additional speakers included Senator Frank Ruff, CFRV Chairman and CFRV Founding Member; Bryan David, Council for Rural Virginia Chairman, and Jay Poole, VRLI Advisory Committee Chair. Distinguished guests attending graduation included: Senator Emmett Hanger, former CFRV Chairman; the Honorable Bettina Ring, Virginia's former Secretary of Agriculture and Forestry; The Honorable Steve Landes, Augusta County Clerk of Circuit Court and Center for Rural Virginia Founding Member; and former Delegate Richard “Dickie” Bell.

*“The Inaugural Cohort of VRLI has leaders from the non-profit, public, and private sectors. These leaders span 21 different rural communities and have 24 different Community Impact Projects across the Commonwealth. With the diverse backgrounds, ages, employers, and skill sets that each Cohort member has, we will be able to address a multitude of issues that rural communities face.”* said Bryan David, Chair of the Council for Rural Virginia.

VRC would like to extend sincere gratitude to the partners who have worked tirelessly as visionaries for VRLI and financial supporters of VRLI. Current sponsors for VRLI include: Appalachian Power Foundation, Appalachian Regional Commission, Danville Community College Foundation, Dominion Energy Foundation, Institute for Advanced Learning and Research, RiverLink Group, Microsoft, Mid Atlantic Broadband Corporation, Virginia Community Capital, Virginia Tobacco Revitalization Commission, and Virginia Housing. VRC plans to continue to build the list of partners as excitement and interest grows for VRLI in future years.

## **Graduates of the 2022 VRLI Cohort**

### **Listed in Alphabetical Order by Last Name**

#### ***Richelle Alexander***

*Lexington, VA*

Rockbridge Area Housing Corporation, Assistant Property Manager

#### ***Luke Allison***

*Pulaski County, VA*

Aggregate Capital LLC, Project Manager

#### ***Garrett Blaize***

*Wise County, VA*

Appalachian Community Fund, Grants Manager and Regional Organizer

#### ***Neva Bryan***

*St. Paul, VA*

University of Virginia's College at Wise (UVA-Wise), Senior Director of Academic Enhancement & Coordinator of National Awards and Fellowships

#### ***Rebekah Castle***

*Augusta County, VA*

Augusta County, Director of Economic Development and Marketing

#### ***James Clements***

*Prince George County, VA*

University of Richmond, Full-Time MBA Student

***Stacey English***

*Hopewell, VA*

Dinwiddie County, Economic Development & Marketing Manager

***Jenna French***

*Shenandoah County, VA*

Shenandoah County, Director of Tourism & Economic Development

***Jessi Fritz, MBA***

*Abingdon, VA*

Virginia Economic Development Partnership, Regional Business Manager (Talent Solutions)

***Lydia Gilmer***

*Pulaski County, VA*

Pulaski County, VA, Small Business Solutions Manager (Economic Development)

***Shannon Hair, Ed.D***

*Danville, VA*

Danville Community College, VP of Institutional Advancement & Development/Executive Director of DCC Educational Foundation, Inc.

***Debbie Irwin***

*Staunton, VA*

Shenandoah Community Capital Fund, Executive Director

***Michelle Johnson***

*Charles City County, VA*

Charles City County, County Administrator

***Lisa Jordan, Ph.D***

*South Hill, VA*

Virginia Department of Military Affairs, Historic Preservation Specialist and Collections Manager

***Zachary King***

*Harrisonburg, VA*

Virginia Poultry Growers Cooperative LLC, Sales Associate & Business Analyst

***Lachanda Lee***

*Dinwiddie County, VA*

Dinwiddie County, Director of Human Resources

***Maggie Beal Longest, M.S.***

*Ashland, VA*

Downtown Ashland Association, Executive Director

***John Matthews***

*Wytheville, VA*

Joint Industrial Development Authority of Wythe County, Deputy Director

***Joseph Mengedoth, M.S.***

*Henrico County, VA*

Federal Reserve Bank of Richmond, Regional Economist

***Allison Moore***

*Pittsylvania County, VA*

Institute for Advanced Learning and Research, Manager of Public Relations & Communications

***Hope Mothershead***

*Richmond County, VA*

Richmond County, VA, Director of Planning and Zoning

***Julia Pilipenko***

*Augusta County, VA*

Dominion Energy, External Affairs Representative

***French Price***

*Woodstock, VA*

Virginia Cooperative Extension, Value Chain Coordinator

***Billie Roberts***

*Bluefield, VA*

Virginia Community Capital, Community Innovation Advisor

***Joy Rumley***

*Abingdon, VA*

New River Valley Regional Commission, Senior Planner

***Logan Ryan***

*Mechanicsville, VA*

Covintus, Inc., Director of Community Engagement

***Lauren Stuhldreher***

*North Chesterfield*

VA - U.S. Dept. of Commerce, Economic Development Administration, Economic Development Representative for Virginia

***Wendy Welch. Ph.D***

*Wythe County, VA*

Graduate Medical Education Consortium of SWVA, Executive Director

***James Werth, Ph.D***

*Bristol, VA*

Tri-Area Community Health, CEO

**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](http://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).