

MARYLAND AGRICULTURAL EDUCATION AND RURAL  
DEVELOPMENT ASSISTANCE FUND  
FISCAL YEAR 2025 Awards ANNUAL REPORT

Rural Maryland Council

October 2025



## Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund Fiscal Year 2025 Awards Annual Report

**MAERDAF OVERVIEW:** MAERDAF was established in 2000 with the purpose of increasing the overall capacity of rural-serving nonprofit organizations and community colleges to meet a multitude of rural development challenges and to help them establish new public/private partnerships for leveraging non-state sources of funding. This grant has the following focus areas: **Agriculture & Forestry Education, Community & Economic Development, Rural Broadband, Energy, Youth Engagement and Leadership Development.**

The Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund (MAERDAF) provides capacity-building support to rural-serving nonprofit organizations and community colleges. In Fiscal Year 2025, the maximum award was capped at \$45,000. While no match is required, matching funds are strongly encouraged due to the competitiveness of the program. MAERDAF is funded through the State of Maryland's Annual Operating Budget, with \$118,485 (PCA 39101) allocated in line-item appropriations and additional funding provided through the Rural Maryland Prosperity Investment Fund (RMPIF). At the start of FY2025, the Rural Maryland Council received level funding of just over \$9 million; however, a mid-year budget reduction of \$2.25 million to competitive grant programs created significant challenges and made funding decisions particularly difficult. Starting award funds for MAERDAF totaled \$869,358, with the Grant Review Board approving an allocation of \$106,972 from MAERDAF to RMPIF, leaving \$762,386 in total MAERDAF award funds.

In FY2024, this program received 111 applications totaling \$3,374,140 in requests. Of these requests, 26 grants totaling \$762,386 were awarded.

**GRANT DECISIONS:** The Rural Maryland Council serves as the administrative agency in receiving the applications and disbursing the funds. Grant award determinations are made by the independent MAERDAF Grant Review Board set by law and consisting of the Secretaries (or their designee) of the Departments of Agriculture, Commerce, Health, Housing and Community Development and Natural Resources as well as the Chair (or the designee) of the Rural Maryland Council. Decisions by the MAERDAF Grant Review Board are final and binding. Fiscal Year 2024 Grant Review Board Members were **Mindie Burgoyne**, Senior Regional Business Development Representative, Commerce; **Karen Fedor**, Senior Agricultural Marketing Specialist, Maryland Department of Agriculture, **Dan Rider**, Forest Stewardship & Utilization Program Manager, Maryland Department of Natural Resource Forest Service, **Sara Seitz**, Director, State Office of Rural Health, Maryland Department of Health, **Dona Sorce**, Project Manager, Division of Neighborhood Revitalization, Maryland Department of Housing and Community Development, **Joyce Bowlsbey**, RMC Board Chair Designee. **Charlotte Davis** is the MAERDAF Coordinator and Rural Maryland Council Executive Director.

MAERDAF FY2025 Awards At-A-Glance by Focus Area

MAERDAF Focus Area	Grants Awarded	Amount Awarded	Amount Moved
Agriculture & Forestry	6	\$169,400	
Community Development	11	\$381,600	
Economic Development	4	\$106,191	
Energy	0	\$0.00	
Youth Development & Leadership	5	\$105,195	
<b>Total:</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>\$762,386</b>	<b>\$106,972 moved to RMPF</b>

MAERDAF FY2025 Awards At-A-Glance by Focus by Region

Region	Grants Awarded	Amount Awarded	Details
Western	8	\$199,400	
Southern	1	\$35,000	
North East	3	\$118,995	
Eastern Shore	13	\$405,491	
Baltimore City	1	\$3,500	-United Covenant Union (serving Eastern Shore)
<b>Total:</b>	<b>26</b>	<b>\$762,386</b>	

Summary of Projects

MAERDAF-Agriculture and Forestry Focus Area

**Appalachian Farm and Food Alliance**

**Amount Awarded: \$24,900**

**Project Name: Improving the Efficiency of Local Food Systems**

**Project Summary:** The Appalachian Farm and Food Alliance, in partnership with the Garrett Growers Cooperative and Summit Custom Designs, is developing a web-based food hub management software to strengthen the regional food system. The platform will automate the ordering process, allow farmers to easily update product availability, and enable customers to access fresh produce within 24 hours of harvest. By streamlining operations, the program increases efficiency and ensures farmers retain a greater share of final sale dollars. This initiative supports the Alliance’s mission to build a resilient, sustainable, and equitable food system across the region. *The MAERDAF grant award, together with matching funds, were used to contract a Summit Custom Designs to build the software and integrate functions such as farmer availability, billing, record keeping, and accounting.*

During the early phase of development with Summit Custom Designs, Garrett Growers faced challenges in securing sufficient funding to sustain ongoing development and expansion. To accommodate these delays, the project has been granted a six-month extension for continued development and activation of the site. The final report is due January 31, 2026.

**Evergreen Heritage Center Foundation****Amount Awarded: \$22,500****Project Name: AmeriCorps Support for Climate Resilience**

**Project Summary:** The Evergreen Heritage Center (EHC) Foundation, established in 2008 and now serving 18,000 participants annually, leverages its historic farm to deliver award-winning, hands-on programs that raise student science literacy by 25 to 50 percent. Through this project, two full-time and one part-time AmeriCorps members, guided by EHC leaders, created and piloted a Climate Resilience program that included five education modules rated “very good” or “excellent” by teachers and tested with 5,000 students, increasing climate literacy by 25 percent. Overall, 6,583 students participated in programming, with 38 percent showing measurable literacy gains, while public workshops engaged 72 attendees, one-third of whom improved their knowledge and all committed to new environmental practices. Although the AmeriCorps program ended in May, most activities were completed, ensuring lasting impact. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported stipends for the AmeriCorps members as well as the purchase of a multiparameter water quality meter and an ambient air particulate sampler.*

**Forever Maryland****Amount Awarded: \$13,000****Project Name: Land Use & Conservation Education AmeriCorps/ShoreCorps Member**

**Project Summary:** Forever Maryland promotes land conservation through education, advocacy, and outreach to protect working landscapes and healthy ecosystems. This project funded a full-time ShoreCorps AmeriCorps member through Salisbury University to build capacity by planning an education series, hosting a conservation bus and boat tour, and expanding public awareness. Due to leadership changes, staffing shortages, and fundraising challenges in 2024, these activities were not completed. Instead, the AmeriCorps member shifted focus to essential communications and organizational support, including newsletters, website management, and donor records, which ensured continuity during a transitional period. Forever Maryland, now led by the Board Chair, is seeking capacity-building resources to strengthen staffing and rebuild momentum. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported the stipend for the full-time AmeriCorps member.*

**LEAD Maryland Foundation, Inc.****Amount Awarded: \$35,000****Project Name: Leadership Foundations: Strengthening Capacity and Growing Servant Leaders for Rural Maryland**

**Project Summary:** The Foundation implemented six multi-day seminars for its Class XIII cohort of 23 LEAD Fellows, developed a new strategic plan with an external facilitator, and conducted a stakeholder needs assessment survey. Despite challenges such as the loss of Maryland Department of Agriculture funding and limited staff capacity, the organization successfully advanced the project Leadership Foundations: Strengthening Capacity and Growing Servant Leaders for Rural Maryland during a period of transition that included onboarding new trustees

and preparing for staff retirements. Project outcomes positioned the Foundation to implement its strategic plan, update its program logic model, strengthen fundraising, and address staffing needs. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported the implementation of the six seminars and the development of the strategic plan.*

**Maryland Nursery, Landscape, and Greenhouse Association, Inc.**

**Amount Awarded: \$39,000**

**Project Name: Maryland Horticulture Industry Statistical Profile and Economic Summary**

**Project Summary:** With a mission to serve and promote Maryland's diverse ornamental horticulture industry, the Maryland Nursery, Landscape, and Greenhouse Association, Inc. commissioned a *2024 Maryland Horticulture Industry Statistical Profile and Economic Summary*. The report will provide business owners, financiers, policymakers, and regulators with data on industry statistics and economic impacts, enabling thorough analysis of growth, strength, and opportunities across the sector. The Schaefer Center is actively engaged in the project; however, work was delayed when the survey was paused during the spring, the busiest season for respondents. Data collation is scheduled for summer, with the final report due January 15, 2026. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supports the survey contract with the University of Baltimore Schaefer Center.*

**The Greater Cumberland Committee (TGCC)**

**Amount Awarded: \$35,000**

**Project Name: Woody Biomass Cost-Benefit Analysis for Rural Counties in Maryland**

**Project Summary:** The Greater Cumberland Committee (TGCC) advances projects of regional importance in transportation, education and workforce development, energy and natural resources, and leadership. In partnership with the Maryland Clean Energy Center, this project analyzes the environmental and economic costs and benefits of increased biomass utilization in rural counties. TGCC received a six-month extension after delays in retaining a consultant through the request for proposals process, with the final report due January 15, 2026. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, were used to procure a contractor with expertise in clean energy, environmental, and economic research to complete the cost-benefit analysis.*

MAERDAF-Community Development Focus Area

**Chesapeake Culinary Center**

**Amount Awarded: \$45,000**

**Project Name: Healthy Kitchens & Happy Homes-mobile demo kitchen**

**Project Summary:** The mission of the Chesapeake Culinary Center is to create healthy, economically independent families through job training, food security, and support for local farmers and watermen. As part of its Food Connection Project, the organization is launching a mobile demonstration kitchen to address food insecurity at the household level while strengthening regional food resiliency through value-added use of local produce and blue catfish. The program will bring cooking classes directly to communities, teaching participants how to prepare nutritious meals. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, will*

support the purchase of a demonstration kitchen trailer and a pickup truck to transport it. Chesapeake Culinary was granted an eight-month extension as bids are being sought for the trailer, with the final report due March 15, 2026.

**Community Mediation Maryland**

**Amount Awarded: \$35,000**

**Project Name: Community Mediation Corps - Rural Maryland Centers**

**Project Summary:** Community Mediation Maryland (CMM) advances collaborative conflict resolution across the state through education, training, research, and innovative applications of mediation. Its AmeriCorps program, Community Mediation Corps, is central to this mission. CMM placed seven AmeriCorps members in centers serving Cecil, Harford, Queen Anne’s, Kent, Washington, Somerset, Wicomico, and Worcester Counties, where they conducted intake, mediated cases, and supported schools and correctional facilities. Outcomes included steady intake levels statewide, with Cecil County and Hagerstown Re-entry members surpassing the 25% growth goal; a 17% increase in mediation sessions overall, with Community Mediation Upper Shore and Tri-Community exceeding the 25% goal; and a 58% increase in outreach hours, far above target. The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported seven AmeriCorps stipends and travel expenses. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported seven AmeriCorps stipends and travel expenses.*

**Frostburg Fire Department No. 1, Inc.**

**Amount Awarded: \$45,000**

**Project Name: Student Firefighter Residence**

**Project Summary:** The all-volunteer Frostburg Fire Department (FFD), with 30 active members across two stations, serves 9,000 Frostburg residents, 4,000 Frostburg State University students, and 3,500 nearby residents within a 12-square-mile area, including 10 miles of I-68. To strengthen recruitment and retention, FFD is rehabilitating a student firefighter residence near Station 1 to house up to five FSU students who will serve as volunteer firefighters. Upgrades include individual bathrooms, new appliances, a hot water tank, drywall, paint, carpet, and lighting to create safe, modern housing. The grantee was approved a 3-month extension to complete the project by October 15, 2025. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, will support the remodel of the two-story brick residence to accommodate the student firefighters.*

**Habitat for Humanity Choptank, Inc.**

**Amount Awarded: \$45,000**

**Project Name: Home Repair Program**

**Project Summary:** Habitat for Humanity Choptank (HFHC) serves low-income families in Talbot and Dorchester Counties through its Critical Housing Repair Program, which provides essential health and safety repairs so homeowners can live with pride and dignity in their homes. During the project period, HFHC completed 15 home repairs, installed 16 smoke and carbon monoxide detectors, and added 15 handrails or grab bars for safety. Additionally, 18 homeowners participated in Home Repair Sweat Equity Hours, contributing through hands-on repair work,

financial education classes, and homeownership workshops. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported a subcontractor to complete the home repairs.*

**Habitat for Humanity Susquehanna**

**Amount Awarded: \$45,000**

**Project Name: Develop Rural Communities & Workforce; Promote Leadership; & Engage Youth through Habi-Tech Program**

**Project Summary:** Habitat for Humanity Susquehanna serves low-income families in Harford and Cecil Counties through its Home Ownership, Home Repair, and Financial Literacy programs. In partnership with Harford Technical High School and Cecil County School of Technology, Habitat launched the “Habi-Tech” program to expand affordable, energy-efficient housing while giving students hands-on training in modern construction. During the 2024–2025 school year, 339 rural STEM students gained marketable construction skills by contributing to homebuilding projects, resulting in the completion of one home at 109 Booth Street in Elkton and the first-year build phase of a second home at 113 Booth Street in Elkton. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported construction materials, including lumber, doors, windows, concrete, hardware, flooring, paint, insulation, drywall, cabinets, fixtures, and lightbulbs.*

**Interfaith Housing Alliance**

**Amount Awarded: \$25,000**

**Project Name: Purchase-Repair Homeownership Program**

**Project Summary:** Through its Purchase-Repair Homeownership Program, Interfaith Housing Alliance (IHA) advances affordable housing for very low- to low-income families in rural Frederick, Carroll, and Washington Counties. The program helps participants achieve housing costs below 30% of household income by improving credit, reducing debt, and building assets. During the grant period, IHA exceeded all projected outcomes by providing housing counseling to 199 clients and supporting six new homeowners. Financial stability outcomes also surpassed targets, with 71.43% of participants improving credit scores, 71.43% reducing debt or monthly expenses, and 34.69% increasing assets. The program demonstrated strong return on investment, with counseling services costing \$796.91 per client overall and \$125.63 per client with MAERDAF funds, and new homeowner support costing \$26,430.96 per client overall and \$4,166.67 with MAERDAF funds. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported staff travel for trainings, specialty power tools for participants, website and software for e-signatures and interpretation, office phone, video and payroll support, and annual National Rural Self-Help Housing Association dues.*

**MidShore Meals til Monday**

**Amount Awarded: \$38,100**

**Project Name: Drive Out Hunger to Deliver Much More than Meals til Monday**

**Project Summary:** Midshore Meals Til Monday fights food insecurity in the Mid-Shore region by providing weekend food bags to children who rely on school meals and by distributing fresh and frozen meals to families in need, ensuring households don’t go hungry between school weeks. To expand food access for low-income residents in Dorchester, Wicomico, and Caroline Counties, the organization purchased a refrigerated box truck. The truck has been essential in

scaling summer meal deliveries to 200–250 children and families weekly, up from about 125, providing more than 13,000 fresh and frozen meals in summer 2024 alone in partnership with local school food service departments. It also enabled safe transport of perishable items, delivery of “Meals til Monday” weekend food bags, and direct service to families in food deserts. Collaborations with partners such as the Wicomico County Library and 411 Kitchens expanded outreach, distributed gleaned produce, and supplied frozen items from local sources, bringing an additional 8,500 meals based on total poundage. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported the purchase of a new 12-foot refrigerated box truck with a lift gate and custom signage wrap.*

### **Rebuilding Together Eastern Shore**

**Amount Awarded: \$45,000**

**Project Name: Safe & Healthy Homes**

**Project Summary:** Rebuilding Together Kent County and Rebuilding Together Queen Anne’s County provide free critical home repairs and accessibility modifications to income-eligible homeowners, including seniors, veterans, families, and individuals with disabilities, helping them remain safe and independent. During the grant period, the organizations met their overall goals by completing projects at seven homes in both counties, though one property fell short due to rising construction costs. Instead, larger investments were made in two Queen Anne’s County homes: installing a new roof for a grandmother raising three grandchildren and completing major structural repairs and new windows for another homeowner. Typical projects included roof replacements, ramps and grab bars, and repairs to floors and plumbing—improvements that reduce hazards, prevent costly health complications, and preserve affordable housing for vulnerable residents. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported the purchase of construction materials to complete critical home repairs for 7 homes.*

### **Salisbury Neighborhood Housing Services**

**Amount Awarded: \$45,000**

**Project Name: Pear Street Project**

**Project Summary:** Salisbury Neighborhood Housing Services’ mission is to create affordable housing solutions and empower communities. In partnership with the Wicomico County Career and Technical Education (CTE) program, students gain hands-on construction experience by building single-family homes that are transported to Crisfield for permanent placement. During the grant period, 124 CTE students built two homes on Pear Street in Crisfield. The first home was completed and is listed for sale, while the second was moved to its permanent location on July 15, 2025, and is undergoing finish work, with listing anticipated this fall. This initiative expands affordable housing while equipping local students with valuable workforce skills. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported construction materials and water and sewer hookup on Pear Street.*

### **The United Covenant Union**

**Amount Awarded: \$3,500**

**Project Name: Informal Employment OutreachProject**

**Project Summary:** The United Covenant Union engages clergy, fixed-income seniors, and cash economy workers (primarily domestic workers) to address the dual challenges of poverty and social isolation. Its Informal Employee Outreach Project was designed to support two chapters in Chestertown and Crisfield through monthly community dinners, the launch of a thrift store, and training for domestic workers on drafting contracts to prevent wage theft and reduce poverty. By fostering peer group relationship-building, the initiative seeks to develop a holistic approach to addressing chronic poverty. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, will support the cost of meals served at the monthly dinners for the Informal Employee Outreach Project.* The grantee has not been in communication with RMC, and the project is not yet complete. RMC will continue efforts to work with the grantee to support project progress.

**Washington County Historical Society, Inc.**

**Amount Awarded: \$10,000**

**Project Name: Curating Community Internship Program**

**Project Summary:** Founded in 1911, the Washington County Historical Society (WCHS) preserves and promotes the history of Washington County, Maryland, maintaining key sites such as the Hager House, Burnside Bridge, Dunker Church, Washington Monument State Park, and the Miller House Museum. With grant support, WCHS advanced its Curating Community Internship Program, providing five college students with hands-on training in museum operations and archival research. Interns gained marketable skills in research, cataloging, public outreach, archival practices, and National Register of Historic Places documentation, while assisting with cataloging textile and art collections, producing social media content with thousands of views, writing newsletter articles, and supporting events and membership outreach. The program exceeded expectations, with one intern leveraging her experience into a National Park Service internship. Progress was tracked through journals, interviews, and evaluations, showing measurable growth and meaningful contributions to WCHS operations and community engagement. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported stipends for up to five Curating Community Interns.*

MAERDAF-Economic Development Focus Area

**Beach to Bay Heritage Area**

**Amount Awarded: \$22,911**

**Project Name: Beach to Bay Indian Trail**

**Project Summary:** The Beach to Bay Heritage Area (BBHA), a state-certified Heritage Area serving Maryland's lower Eastern Shore, works to promote, preserve, and protect the region's cultural, historical, and natural assets. In partnership with the Pocomoke Indian Nation, BBHA is re-imagining the Beach to Bay Indian Trail to more accurately present Native American history through 12 outdoor interpretive signs and a companion brochure. Due to the depth of research and content uncovered, the brochure has expanded into a larger magazine-style product, which delayed the start of sign design until content development was complete. The 12 sign locations have been identified, and design work is now underway. A three-month grant extension has been approved, with the final report due October 15, 2025. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, is being expended to support consultant services with the Pocomoke Indian*

*Nation for technical assistance and guidance, design and fabrication of the outdoor interpretive signs, and printing of the companion brochure.*

**Building African American Minds, Inc**

**Amount Awarded: \$44,000**

**Project Name: BAAM Workforce Development Connection Initiative**

**Project Summary:** Building African American Minds (BAAM), Inc. equips underserved children and adults with the academic, social, and workforce skills needed to reach their potential as responsible and productive citizens. Through the Workforce Development Connection Initiative, BAAM provides workforce education, employability training, and job coaching to adults in Opportunity Zones in Easton, Denton, and Federalsburg. During the grant period, the initiative achieved measurable outcomes: eight individuals secured employment with an average annual salary of \$35,000; 35 individuals received case management services; and a Business Resource Summit engaged 24 small businesses and entrepreneurs. The program also advanced financial stability through a Financial Freedom Class with 20 participants, including 12 individuals or couples who received personalized financial counseling. In addition, BAAM strengthened its partnership with Chesapeake College, which now offers General Educational Development (GED) and English as a Second Language (ESL) classes at the BAAM Academic Center, along with referrals to Commercial Driver's License (CDL) and trades programs, expanding educational and career pathways for participants. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, was expended to support a consultant to serve as a Job Coach and purchase materials and supplies, including a career exploration computer software program, esports and job center technology, and administrative supplies.*

**Germantown School Community Heritage Center**

**Amount Awarded: \$27,280**

**Project Name: Germantown School Structural Preservation and Interpretation**

**Project Summary:** The Germantown School Community Heritage Center preserves the history, heritage, and culture of its historic Rosenwald school through a museum, heritage walking tour, and community events. This project completed exterior restoration of the school by repairing and painting the cedar siding and installing new Rosenwald-style windows. Interpretive programming was expanded with the development of a Rosenwald Architectural station for the outdoor tour and a companion indoor exhibit, supported by compiled construction documents and graphic design work for signage. Key purchases included a 13x19 printer for display materials and window sashes, with receipts and invoices documented. Despite weather delays, all contracted work has been completed, strengthening the Center's role as a place of cultural connection and education. The Center has been approved for a three-month extension to complete indoor displays, with the final report due October 31, 2025. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported restoration of the building's exterior, replacement and installation of a window sash, signage design and production, an Epson printer, paper for printing handouts, flyers, and display posters.*

**Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area, Inc.**

**Amount Awarded: \$12,000**

**Project Name: America 250 GeoTour**

**Project Summary:** The Heart of the Civil War Heritage Area, a certified Maryland Heritage Area covering Carroll, Frederick, and Washington Counties, works with partners to preserve and promote historic sites, towns, cultural landscapes, and diverse stories. With grant support, the US 250 GeoTour is being developed to guide geocachers through the region, engaging them with local history while boosting heritage tourism, visitor spending, and overnight stays. To maximize impact, the GeoTour will launch in coordination with a Maryland Geocaching Block Party at Utica Park in September 2025, with an official release planned at the Westminster Branch of the Carroll County Library on September 19, 2025. A six-month extension has been approved, and the final report is due January 15, 2026. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported the purchase of thirty cache kits and 400 geocoins, website hosting and maintenance, travel for geocache placement, geocaching consultant services, marketing and promotion materials, and the launch event.*

MAERDAF-Youth Engagement and Leadership Development Focus Area

**Alpha Genesis Community Development Corporation**

**Amount Awarded: \$21,000**

**Project Name: Youth Intern Initiative**

**Project Summary:** Alpha Genesis CDC (AGCDC) builds authentic, creative communities by integrating arts and culture. Its *Youth Intern Initiative at Minty's Ice Cream, Treats & More*, located at 428 Race Street in Cambridge, develops entrepreneurial skills for 12 youth ages 15–24 in Talbot and Dorchester Counties, with a focus on economically disadvantaged and minority students. The 13-week program provides paid internships, mentorship, soft skills training, and workforce preparation, supported with transportation and uniforms. With grant funding received in December 2024, AGCDC purchased a 13-passenger 2013 Ford E-450 shuttle bus with a handicap lift in January 2025 to support the youth intern program. After completing repairs and registration, the vehicle is ready for use and will be wrapped with AGCDC branding and Rural Maryland Council acknowledgment, further connecting youth with community history, civic organizations, and pride of place. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported the purchase of a 12-passenger van to transport youth and uniforms.*

**Chesapeake Audubon Society-Pickering Creek Audubon Center**

**Amount Awarded: \$17,700**

**Project Name: Leadership on Wheels: Driving Environmental Connections in Youth**

**Project Summary:** Pickering Creek Audubon Center conserves natural habitats on Maryland's Eastern Shore by engaging the community through education, exploration, and stewardship. Programs include school partnerships in Dorchester, Caroline, Talbot, and Wicomico Counties, habitat plantings with organizations such as Habitat for Humanity, Summer Science Camp, and public programs. With grant support, the Center is working to acquire a dependable used pickup truck to meet program and site needs. Despite a consistent weekly search since November, locating a vehicle with the required layout, bed length, and four-wheel drive has been challenging due to a reduced award amount, limited inventory, and market conditions. A

six-month extension has been approved, with the final report due January 15, 2026. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, will be expended to purchase a used pickup truck.*

**Harford County 4-H Clubs, Inc**

**Amount Awarded: \$34,995**

**Project Name: 4H Camp Transportation Renovation**

**Project Summary:** The Harford County 4-H Camp, founded in 1925, provides quality youth development experiences while preserving the 4-H camping tradition for future generations. Serving about 10,000 youth and adults annually, the camp undertook a project to enhance safety, accessibility, and operational efficiency by rehabilitating camp roads, reconstructing the parking lot, and purchasing a small utility vehicle. The improvements have exceeded expectations: the main road and parking lot, once unlined rock, are now clearly marked, improving traffic flow without requiring volunteer direction, and the enhanced aesthetics are immediately noticeable to visitors. The new utility vehicle has proven essential for tours and daily operations, while the older cart has been repurposed for staff mobility. These capital improvements significantly strengthen the camp's ability to serve the community and ensure a welcoming, functional, and sustainable facility for years to come. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported 40 loads of millings and labor for grading and spreading the camp road and parking area, as well as the purchase of a utility vehicle.*

**The Child and Family Foundation (1 Year to Empowerment)**

**Amount Awarded: \$6,500**

**Project Name: 1 Year to Empowerment**

**Project Summary:** 1 Year to Empowerment, founded in 2014, is a free year-long program serving 30 middle and high school girls in Wicomico, Worcester, and Somerset Counties. Based in Salisbury, the program offers more than 12 annual activities focused on mental and physical health, life skills, and career exploration. The current participant group includes 22 middle school and 8 high school girls, predominantly African American. The program provides mentorship, community service opportunities, and a supportive environment for girls facing anxiety and self-esteem challenges, with future plans to partner with Salisbury University ShoreCorps to strengthen operations. In FY25, the AmeriCorps member completed over 900 hours of service, providing mentorship across program activities and representing the organization at community events, significantly contributing to participant growth and program visibility. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, was expended to support the stipend of the part-time ShoreCorps AmeriCorps member.*

**Western Maryland Area Health Education Center (dba AHEC West)**

**Amount Awarded: \$25,000**

**Project Name: ECHO- Exploring Careers in Health Occupations**

**Project Summary:** Western Maryland Area Health Education Center (AHEC West), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit, works to improve healthcare access and quality through education and collaboration. Its Exploring Careers in Health Occupations (ECHO) program addresses healthcare provider shortages in rural Western Maryland by engaging high school students from Allegany, Garrett,

Washington Counties (MD), and Mineral County (WV). With a 19-year history and more than 600 participants, ECHO offers a weeklong summer camp featuring hands-on medical experiences, facility tours, and aging simulations. The program has proven highly effective, with 89% of students reporting it helped guide career decisions and many alumni pursuing healthcare fields with the goal of returning to serve their rural communities. In June 2025, 24 students, exceeding the target of 20, took part in immersive facility visits, activities, and career education sessions, along with discounted SAT/ACT prep. The group was diverse, including African American, Asian, and Hispanic participants, and predominantly female. Nearly 75% of participants reported ECHO significantly increased their interest in health careers, while others reported some increased interest, noting the value of exploring healthcare fields, making peer connections, and enjoying the overall experience. *The MAERDAF grant award, along with matching funds, supported salary, wages, and fringe benefits of the part-time Program Coordinator, travel for the Coordinator, and transportation, lodging, and meals during field trips.*