



SOUTHWEST VIRGINIA
HIGHER EDUCATION CENTER

ANNUAL REPORT 2024-2025



A Great Place, Doing Great Things, Because of Great People!

A Message from the Director

This year has been one of growth, innovation, and deepened commitment to our mission of serving Southwest Virginia. At the heart of our work is a focus on preparing the next generation of professionals, and we are proud to share several major milestones from the past year.

In healthcare education, we celebrated the launch of our healthcare partnership initiative, connecting educators and the workforce to help strengthen the pipeline of healthcare workers in our region. We continued construction on the The Southwest Virginia Regional Simulation Lab for Nursing and Allied Health, designed to provide students with hands-on, realistic training. Featuring an immersion room, high-fidelity manikins, and even a fully equipped ambulance, this space will allow students to gain critical experience in a safe, controlled environment, ensuring they are better prepared to meet the region's healthcare needs.

Our commitment to excellence extends beyond programming. We continued facility upgrades to create welcoming, functional spaces for students, faculty, and visitors alike, while maintaining our focus on exceptional customer service.

Looking to the future, we launched the Energy Education Academy Pilot Study, a planning grant to research the need for energy education within regional middle schools and explore career possibilities. We piloted a summer energy education camp design to equip students with the skills and knowledge they need to thrive in the growing energy sector. This initiative reflects our ongoing dedication to aligning education with the evolving workforce needs of our region.

These achievements underscore our belief that education is most powerful when it is practical, accessible, and forward-thinking. We are proud of the impact we are making in Southwest Virginia and excited for the opportunities that lie ahead.



A stylized, handwritten signature in dark ink, consisting of a large, flowing 'D' followed by a horizontal line.

David Matlock
Executive Director / Agency Head



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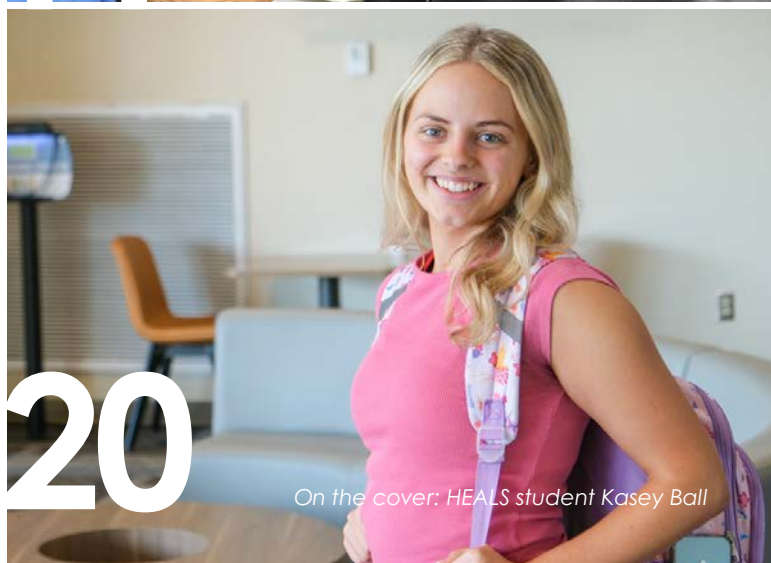
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On the cover: HEALS student Kasey Ball

About Us

The Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center located in Abingdon, Virginia is the first multi-college and university institution of higher education in the Commonwealth. Established as a freestanding and unique state agency in 1991, the Center partners with public and private colleges and universities to provide degree programs, certificates and professional development courses. With approximately 110,000 square feet of professional classrooms, large conference areas, labs, and administrative space, the Center accommodates hundreds of events annually. The Center operates under the direction of an Executive Director, employs its own staff, and is overseen by its Board of Trustees.



Our Mission

Our mission is to strengthen the regional economy of Southwest Virginia by providing higher education and professional development training of the current and future workforce.

Our Vision

To be a great place, doing great things, because of great people.

Our Values

We strive to live by our Core Values every day, with every interaction. Our Core Values are hospitality, innovation, regionalism, education and dedication.



Training Great Leaders

Scan to watch Crystal's story



Crystal Hunnicutt, a graduate of the Higher Education Center's first Nurse Anesthesia graduating cohort, now has a permanent place at the Center as the Director of Southwest Operations for VCU's Nurse Anesthesia program.

From Small Town Roots to Nurse Anesthesia Leadership

Crystal grew up in the small town of Haysi, Virginia, and after completing her associate's degree in nursing at Southwest Virginia Community College in 1998, she went on to earn a bachelor's degree from the University of Virginia's College at Wise. As her career progressed, Crystal's commitment to further education and healthcare excellence led her to pursue a master's degree in Nurse Anesthesia through Virginia Commonwealth University's program at the Center, which she completed in 2004. She went on to obtain a Doctor of Nurse Anesthesia Practice degree in 2010.

The Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center: A Catalyst for Success

The Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center played a pivotal role in Crystal's educational and professional development. "I was a single mother," said Crystal. "This was my opportunity to be able to obtain a degree from Virginia Commonwealth University but not have to leave the area."

She credits the dedicated faculty at the Center for creating a supportive environment that made it possible for her to achieve her goals and stay connected to her community.

Honoring Achievements

She was awarded the Center's Distinguished Alumni Award in 2017. "I was super excited and I still am so proud of that award," said Crystal. "It meant a lot to me that they recognized that I had achieved my degree and then was trying to give back to the community."

Blending Clinical Expertise with a Passion for Teaching

Today, Crystal continues to give back to the field that shaped her career by teaching the next generation of healthcare professionals in her role. She began teaching as an adjunct faculty member at UVA Wise and soon discovered her passion for education. Crystal now enjoys a rewarding career as a full-time educator, combining her experience as a clinician with her love for teaching. Her story is a testament to the power of local education resources like the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center, which help individuals like Crystal achieve their professional dreams while making lasting contributions to their communities.

A Great Place

A striking new centerpiece for our campus, the Foundation Clock was installed in February 2024 thanks to the generous support of the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center Foundation.



Exceptional Customer Service

We strive to provide our guests with exceptional experiences and customer service by being capable, enthusiastic, and engaged. More than 350 of our customers shared their feedback on our performance, and the results are truly impressive.



4.96

Helpfulness of
event staff

4.98

Quality & cleanliness
of facility



4.97

Overall experience



“The staff is top-notch. They're willing to go above and beyond because they truly care that you have a great event.”

Lennie Gail Mitcham
Executive Director, The Southwest Virginia
Alliance for Manufacturing

Scan to watch Lennie
Gail's full testimonial



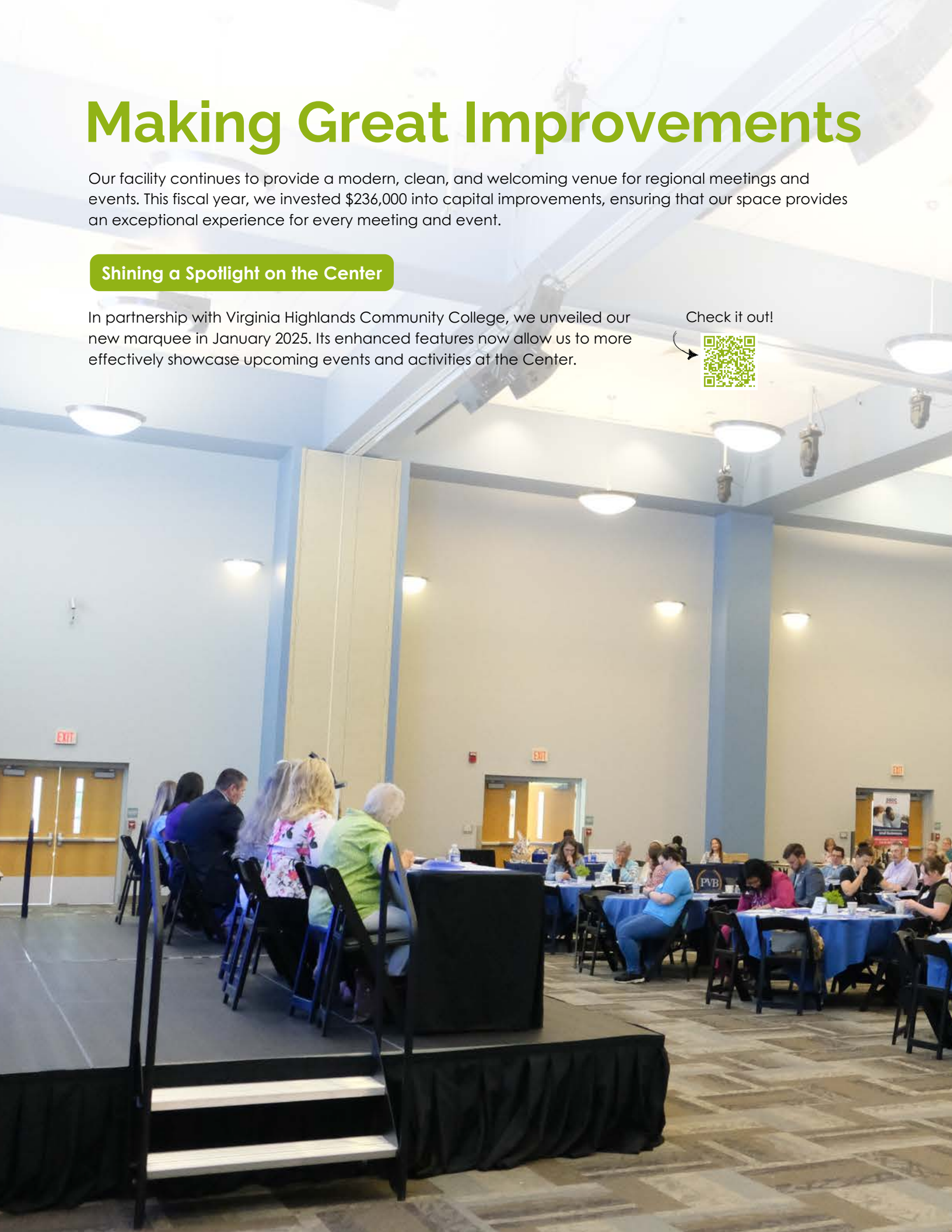
Making Great Improvements

Our facility continues to provide a modern, clean, and welcoming venue for regional meetings and events. This fiscal year, we invested \$236,000 into capital improvements, ensuring that our space provides an exceptional experience for every meeting and event.

Shining a Spotlight on the Center

In partnership with Virginia Highlands Community College, we unveiled our new marquee in January 2025. Its enhanced features now allow us to more effectively showcase upcoming events and activities at the Center.

Check it out!

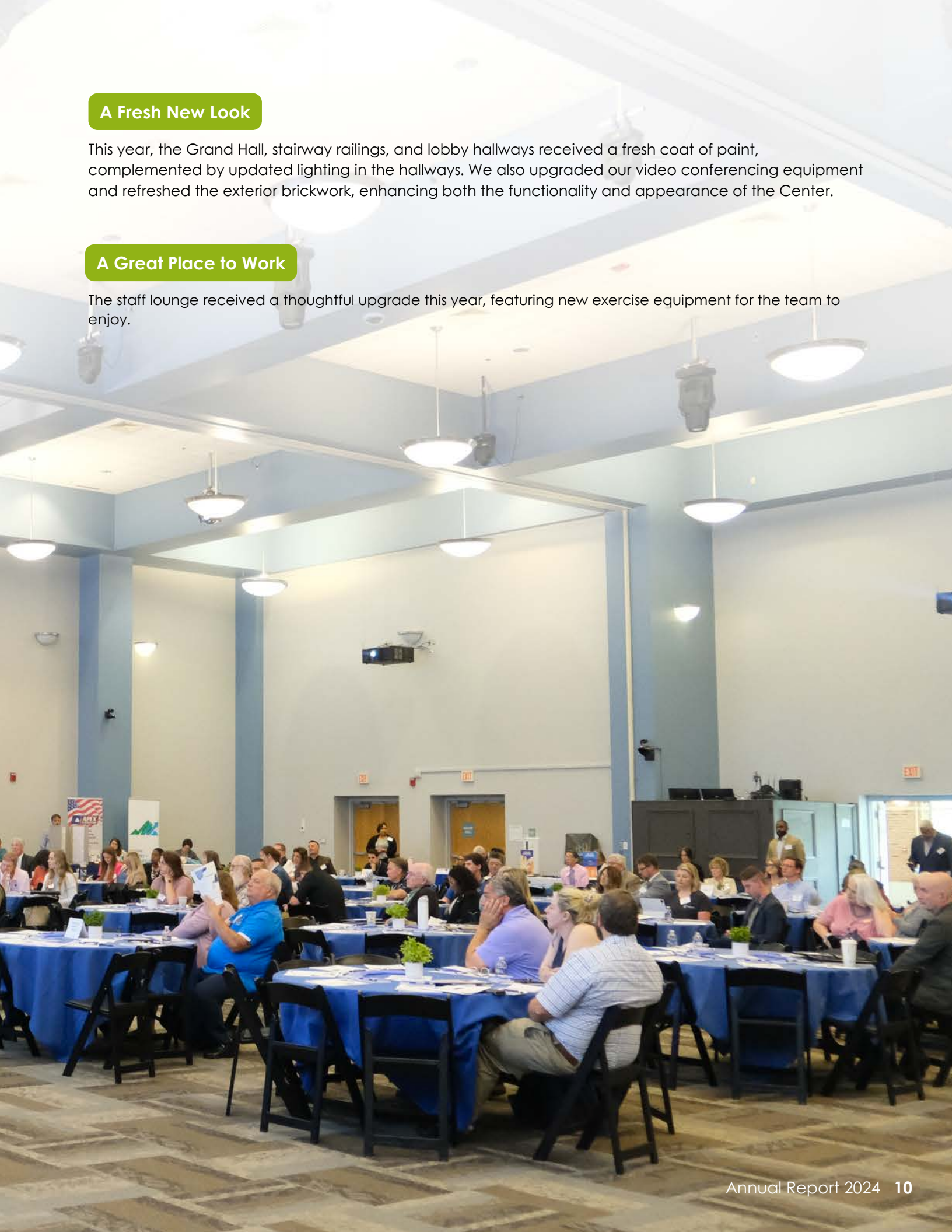


A Fresh New Look

This year, the Grand Hall, stairway railings, and lobby hallways received a fresh coat of paint, complemented by updated lighting in the hallways. We also upgraded our video conferencing equipment and refreshed the exterior brickwork, enhancing both the functionality and appearance of the Center.

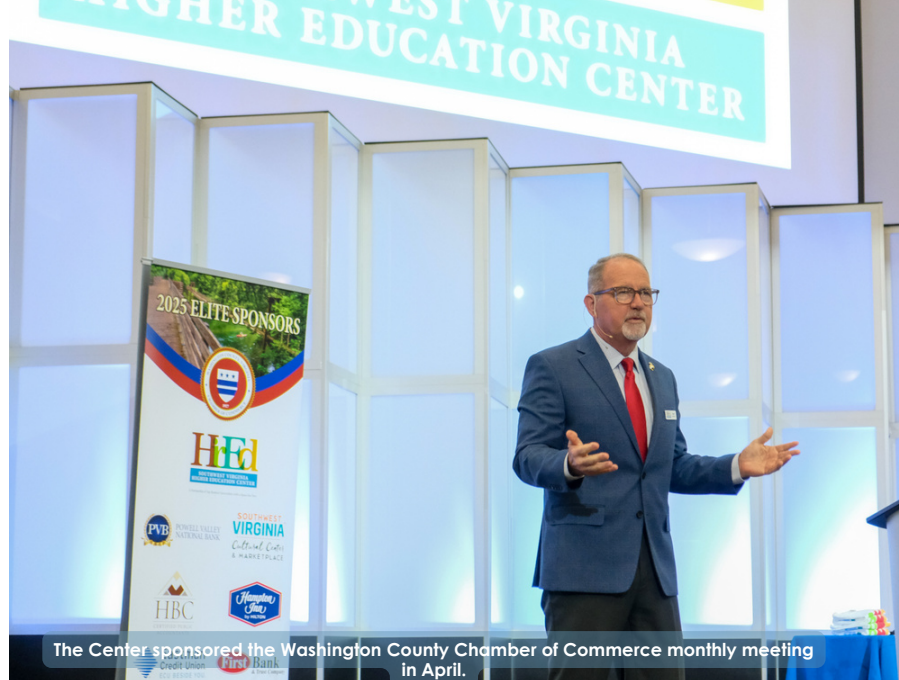
A Great Place to Work

The staff lounge received a thoughtful upgrade this year, featuring new exercise equipment for the team to enjoy.

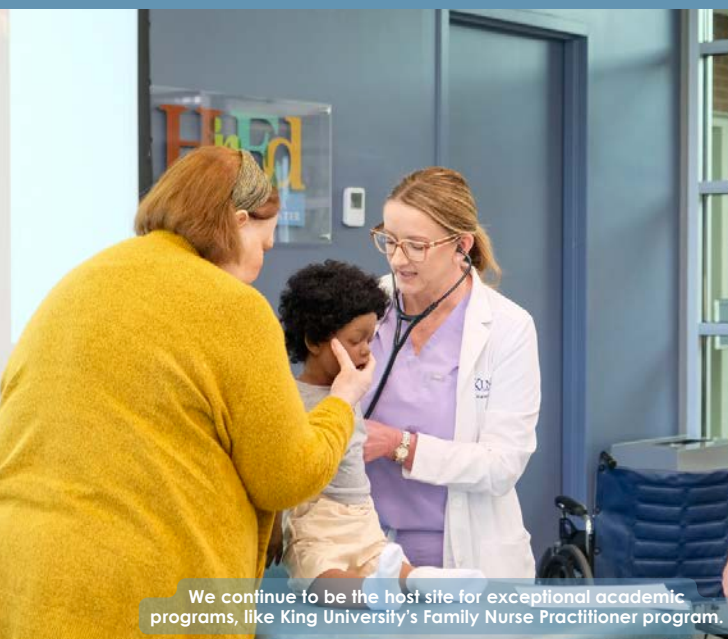


Doing Great Things

This year was filled with excitement as we welcomed regional leaders for meetings and events, inspired young learners through our K-12 programs, and provided a vibrant gathering place for the community. With a record-breaking event revenue, it's clear why we are proud to say that we're A Great Place, Doing Great Things, Because of Great People!™



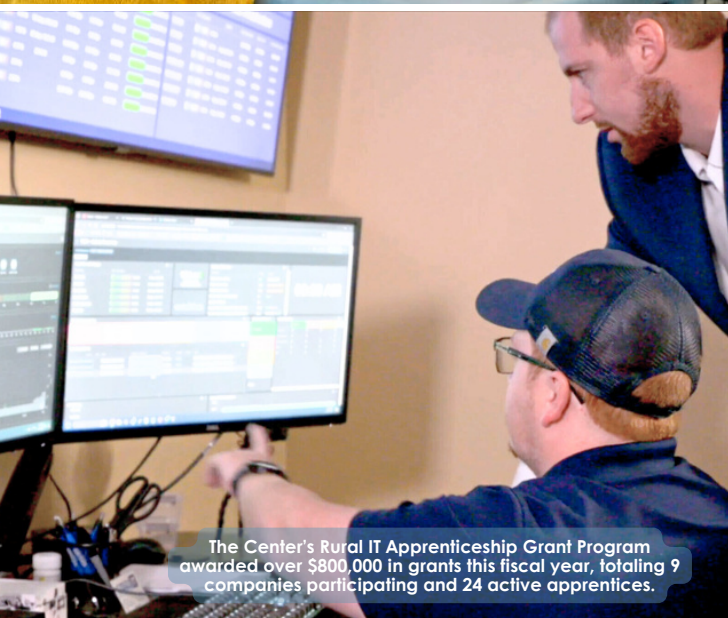
The Center sponsored the Washington County Chamber of Commerce monthly meeting in April.



We continue to be the host site for exceptional academic programs, like King University's Family Nurse Practitioner program.



The Center's annual Indoor Garage sale welcomed 1,700 attendees and raised over \$7,800 to support Center operations.



The Center's Rural IT Apprenticeship Grant Program awarded over \$800,000 in grants this fiscal year, totaling 9 companies participating and 24 active apprentices.



Young learners explored the world of STEM through our bi-annual camp.



The Governor's School celebrated a year of record enrollment, serving 602 students across 16 school districts.



We hosted a legislative breakfast, which allowed our local elected officials to share their priorities for the upcoming legislative session.



Our College for Older Adults enjoyed partaking in field trips, including a trip to Emory & Henry University's equestrian facility.



Empowering Futures in Healthcare

The Center is leading the way in strengthening Southwest Virginia's healthcare workforce, from K-12 through graduate-level programs. Through training, partnerships, and innovative opportunities, we are preparing the next generation of providers to learn, live, and work in our region.

Creating Exceptional Learning Spaces

This fiscal year we made progress on the Southwest Virginia Regional Simulation Lab for Nursing and Allied Health, a 1,200-square-foot Simulation Lab that will transform healthcare training in Southwest Virginia. This state-of-the-art facility will feature a surgery room and patient bays with a full suite of high-, medium-, and low-fidelity manikins from infant to critical care. Complete with simulated hospital facilities, a hydraulic ambulance simulator, and advanced A/V recording technology, the lab will provide a safe, hands-on learning environment that prepares students to deliver exceptional care and strengthens the future of healthcare across our region. This year saw completion of the Immersion Room, which utilizes A/V technology to create realistic sights, sounds, and smells to prepare students for real-world scenarios in an interactive environment.





Forging Strong Partnerships

This fiscal year, the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center led a new healthcare workforce partnership to strengthen the region's health science talent pipeline. Bringing together GO Virginia Region 1 employers, educators, government leaders, and community partners, this collaboration is focused on aligning education and training with industry needs. Together, we are working to expand opportunities for students and job seekers while building the capacity to meet the region's growing healthcare workforce demands.

From First Lab to Final Degree

We are helping to build a comprehensive healthcare pipeline to meet regional workforce needs. From early STEM engagement in the K–5 sector and the HEALS partnership for high school students to advanced degree programs in pharmacy and nurse anesthesia, the Center supports learners at every stage. Our Simulation Lab will provide professional development opportunities for practicing physicians and healthcare providers, ensuring that our region benefits from a strong, well-prepared healthcare workforce.



Inspiring the Next Generation

Preparing Kids for Careers in Energy

A New Grant

The Energy Education project is part of a broader effort to prepare students for future careers in the energy sector. In October 2024, the Southwest Virginia Higher Education Center received a grant to explore the feasibility of middle school energy education. The project focuses on research, curriculum development, career pathway exploration, and the launch of a pilot Energy Education Academy.

A collaborative initiative, the project involves key partners such as Virginia Tech, local school districts, and energy industry leaders. Together, we are shaping an educational experience that equips students with the knowledge and skills to thrive in a rapidly evolving workforce.

This pilot is supported in part by funding from GO Virginia, a state-funded initiative dedicated to strengthening Virginia's economy by fostering job creation in strategic industries.

Providing Resources for Teachers

The project has quickly initiated several programs this fiscal year, including a February 2025 workshop for county middle school science educators. This hands-on event allowed teachers to explore innovative curriculum materials and resources to enhance their classrooms and inspire future scientists. Additionally, as part of the Energy Education Academy, educators and parents were given ongoing access to energy-related curriculum resources.



Sweeping the KidWind Competition

The Virginia Renewable Energy KidWind Challenge provided students a unique opportunity to design, build, and test wind turbines and solar structures, all while gaining hands-on experience with renewable energy. Teams presented their projects to expert judges, took a quiz on renewable energy, and tested their wind turbines in the KidWind Wind Tunnel to measure energy output.

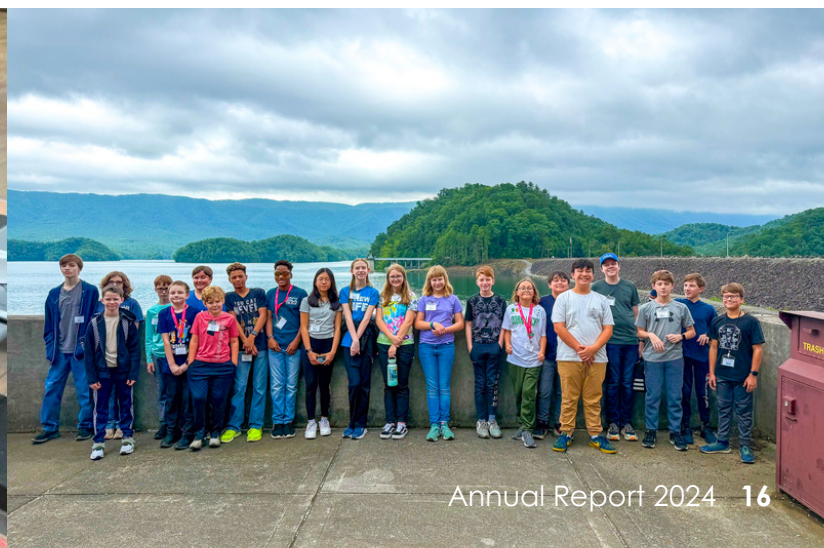
Thanks to the support of the grant, the Center sponsored several middle and high school students from the region to participate in this engaging competition. Students had the chance to design and test small-scale wind turbines and solar structures, deepening their understanding of renewable energy technologies.

At the Blacksburg Regional Tournament, five teams from Southwest Virginia earned top placements, with teams from Lebanon Middle School, Damascus Middle School, and Castlewood High School advancing to the State Challenge at James Madison University in April 2025. Lebanon Middle School received a "People's Choice Award" at the state tournament.

A Summer of Learning

As part of our Energy Education Initiative, the Center hosted a summer camp for middle schoolers. The camp offered students a hands-on opportunity to explore the world of energy through engaging, real-world activities. From building simple circuits and experimenting with solar panels to understanding how energy is generated, stored, and used, students participated in a week of interactive learning.

Throughout the week, students visited key regional sites including the Virginia City Hybrid Energy Center, TVA's South Holston Dam, and Bristol Virginia Utilities. Campers also enjoyed on-site visits from industry partners such as Virginia Clean Cities and the Metallurgical Coal Producers Association, gaining insight into the diverse careers and innovations shaping the energy sector.





Great People

Honoring Retirements

Deborah Hensley joined the Center in 2001 as the Office Manager for the Information Technology Department, where she dedicated nearly ten years of service. In January 2011, she transitioned to the Finance Department and took on the role of Senior Director of Finance in 2018.

During the Center's Board of Trustees meeting in December 2024, Senator Todd Pillion and Delegate Israel O'Quinn honored Debbie with a commendation certificate from both the Senate and the House, along with a Virginia flag that had flown over the Capitol, in recognition of her outstanding service.

Patsy Rhoten, who has been a custodian in Housekeeping since July 2015, also retired from her full-time position in February 2025.



New Faces in Leadership

Following Debbie's retirement, Alicia Smeltzer assumed the position of Senior Director of Finance in February 2025. She has been working in the Finance department at the Center since 2019. In her position, she manages overarching responsibilities, including the Center's budget and ensuring compliance with regulations.



Focusing on Healthcare

Karen Brown was hired as the new Director of Healthcare Education Initiatives at the Center in February 2025. In this position, she collaborates with regional partners to address health workforce shortages and enhance opportunities in Southwest Virginia.



Celebrating our Team

Center team members had a day to recharge and rejuvenate during the annual retreat in June 2025. Goldie's Refuge, perched high upon Whitetop Mountain, provided a perfect setting for the team to relax, bond, and celebrate a year of achievements together.



Preparing Students for the Next Step

We are proud to partner with the Healthcare Excellence Academy Lab School (HEALS) to train the next generation of healthcare professionals who will live and work in Southwest Virginia. The program is growing, with a record-breaking number of applicants, and continues to provide students with hands-on learning, shadowing, workshops, and experiences that prepare them for healthcare careers and college pathways.

Scan to watch Kasey's story



Embracing Lifelong Learning

Betty Carbary has been attending the College for Older Adults classes since the program's inception in 1991. At age 91, she's still a faithful member of the program each semester. "You never want to give up on learning," she says.

Scan to read Betty's story



Impact Data

Academics



808

Students enrolled
in academic
programs



468

College for Older
Adults participants



984

Testing Center
administered tests



2,432

STEM program
participants

Conference Services



265K

Conference
Revenues



3,974

Event
bookings



52,584

Event
attendees



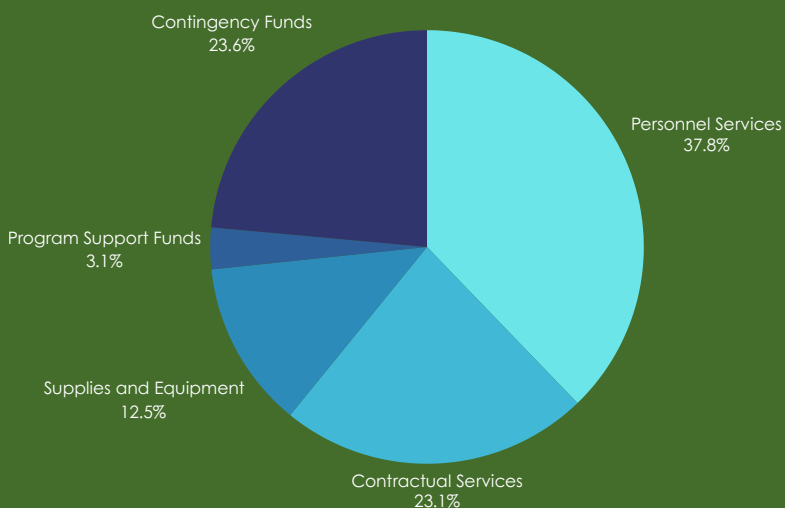
242

Organizations
served

Financials

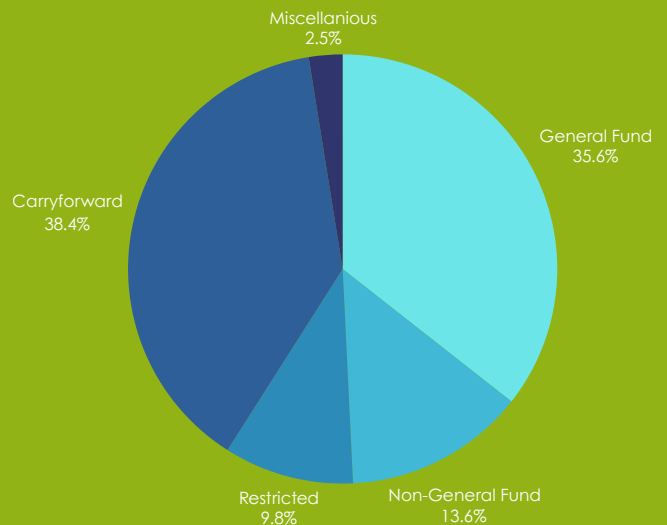
\$5.1M

Total Expenditures



\$6.9M

Total Revenues



Our Board of Trustees

The Board of Trustees unites a diverse group of individuals committed to our mission, who are essential in guiding the Center. Their expertise shapes strategic direction, ensuring responsiveness to community needs. Through governance and engagement, they promote innovation and accountability, enabling the Center to thrive and make a lasting impact while fostering a culture of excellence and collaboration.



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This list reflects the Board of Trustees members for the 2024–2025 fiscal year. To view the Center's current Board members, please visit [swcenter.edu](https://www.swcenter.edu).

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