

Spring 2024 Edition

North Central Massachusetts

Chamber Report

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On the frontlines of healthcare in North Central:

A PERSPECTIVE FROM THE REGION'S LEADERS



Chamber
Updates
page 10

Government
Affairs News
page 12

North  Central
MASSACHUSETTS

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Feature
Article
page 14


Tourism
Update
page 18

Cyber Security



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Chamber Report

a publication of
The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce

The Chamber Report (USPS 773-650) is published quarterly by the North Central Mass. Chamber of Commerce, 860 South Street, Fitchburg, MA, for \$15 per year which is withheld from annual membership dues. Periodicals postage paid at Fitchburg, MA.

About the Cover: For this edition of the Chamber Report we highlight the health care landscape in North Central Massachusetts. Health care is one of the largest industries in the region, and a priority industry in our economic development plan. It is also an industry that is facing significant challenges. For this edition, we interviewed several health care leaders to get their perspective. The feature article starts on page 14. In this edition you will also find news and updates from the Chamber, highlights of our activities in the last quarter, a report on our tourism marketing efforts during the Winter, and so much more. Thank you for your support. We hope that you enjoy reading the Chamber Report!

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Scan the QR code to view our "History & Milestones" page. Explore a full timeline of our history and learn more about the impact the Chamber has had over the years.

northcentralmass.com/historyandmilestones

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Scan the QR code to view sponsorship opportunities available to support our anniversary events/programs. Join an all-star list of businesses who have already signed on to support this major milestone!



The infographic features a central blue circle with the text: "We all encounter conflict. It can be as simple as a bad experience with a business or consumer OR as complex as a family or ongoing work relationship. Mediation Services of North Central Ma, Inc. can help you deal with yours. See our website for more information. mediationncm.org 978-466-9595". Surrounding this central circle are five colored circles connected by dashed lines: "Presentations & Workshops" (green), "Conflict Coaching" (orange), "Youth Conflict Resolution Programs" (blue), "Courses and Volunteer Opportunities" (yellow), and "Mediation" (purple). A QR code is located in the top left corner, and a logo of people holding hands is in the top right corner.



The advertisement has a dark blue background. At the top is the "Visiting Angels" logo with the tagline "LIVING ASSISTANCE SERVICES" and a bird icon. Below the logo is the text "Experienced local senior care for total peace of mind." in large, bold, light blue letters. Underneath is the text "Visiting Angels allows your loved one to remain where they are the most comfortable...in their own home." in white. The phone number "978.227.5263" and website "VisitingAngels.com/Leominster" are displayed in white. At the bottom, in small white text, it says: "Each Visiting Angels agency is independently owned and operated. NPI: #1093418915 *2024 Visiting Angels is a registered trademark of Living Assistance Services, Inc."



Community Leadership Institute Class of 2024 Announced

The Chamber is pleased to announce the participants selected in the Fall for the 2024 Community Leadership Institute (CLI). CLI is dedicated to providing participants with individual leadership skills and a deep understanding of the region. The nine-month program focuses on education, government, health care, social services, the justice system, media, arts and culture, the environment and history. The Chamber created the Institute to inspire a new generation of men and women to enthusiastically assume important roles in their community. The program challenges individuals from diverse backgrounds to be influential in our region's future.

The Community Leadership Institute began in 1988, known then as Leadership North Central. Over the last 25 years, more than 300 participants have graduated from the Institute and have become leaders in their communities, with over 100 in the last five years. Participants in CLI are sponsored by their business and are seen as leaders or potential leaders within that company. ♦

Participants in the Community Leadership Institute (CLI) Class of 2024 include:

Jennifer Armentrout, Rollstone Bank & Trust
Maureen Babcock, North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce
Lindsay Carpenter Connors, Fitchburg State University
Erin Carr, AIS, Inc.
Aimee Cotnoir, Fitchburg Art Museum
Sonia Demelo, Bemis Associates, Inc.
Jessica DeRoy, City of Gardner
Joeci Gilchrest, You Name It Creatives, LLC
Taylor Healey, Foster-Healey Real Estate
Ralph Hogan, Mount Wachusett Community College
Bob Jumper, Leominster Credit Union
Autumn Kelly, Montachusett Regional Vocational Technical School
Ethan Lin-Schwartz, Burkart-Phelan Inc.
Kat McLellan, Fitchburg State University
Patrick O'Connell, Enterprise Bank and Trust Company
Rosa Rivera, UMass Memorial HealthAlliance - Clinton Hospital, Inc.
Nathalie Rivera-Castro, Workers' Credit Union
Gissaury Rodriquez, IC Federal Credit Union
Shawn Tolf, Fidelity Bank

Katie White Joins Chamber Team

The Chamber is pleased to announce the appointment of Katie White as Manager of Talent and Education Initiatives. In this position, she will be responsible for working with employers, regional partners, and education leaders on developing strategies and programs to build and strengthen the region's current and future workforce. She replaces Terry Young, who left the Chamber in the Fall to pursue another opportunity.

Most recently, White worked at the Boys & Girls Club of Fitchburg, Leominster and Gardner, where she assisted in the planning, organization and implementation of services and activities for the Club's members. She previously worked for the James Monroe Wire and Cable Company, the Career Center of Lowell, and LUK, Inc.

A resident of the North Central region, White holds a bachelor's degree in education

from Keene State College.

"Katie's background and leadership will serve the Chamber and our members well as we work to enhance the business climate and advance the economy in the region," said Roy M. Nascimento, president and CEO of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce. "Her experience provides us with a unique perspective on how to actively engage our region's youth on job opportunities now and in the future."



Katie White.

She can be reached at 978.353.7600 ext. 244, or via email at kwhite@northcentralmass.com. ♦

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CHAMBER updates

CHAMBER WEBSITE

REFRESH: In February, the Chamber launched a refreshed website to offer a more dynamic and valuable resource for our members and communities. The project included redesigning the homepage and several interior pages. It also included consolidating our economic development website—choosenorthcentral.com—into the Chamber website to make it easier to manage and avoid duplication. The website refresh is a work in progress. Chamber staff are continuing to work internally on updating content in several portions of the site.



Pictured are Owner Marieke Cormier, Chef Kevin Williams and their team at Roots Natural Foods helping to celebrate the Chamber being named National Chamber of the Year.

CHAMBER OF THE YEAR TROPHY TOUR:

Thank you to all the members who have participated so far in the Chamber of the Year Trophy Tour! You can check out photos of the tour on our Facebook page. Please reach out to Maureen Babcock at mbabcock@northcentralmass.com if you would like to participate and schedule a trophy tour stop at your business or organization. We are extremely honored to have received this prestigious



The North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation provided Katallage Wellness Center in Shirley with a loan to expand. Pictured left to right in the photo are Dr. Henri Balaguera, M.D., owner of Katallage Wellness Center, and Norman Vigeant, vice president of lending at the NCMDC.

national award and have enjoyed the opportunity to share this with the people who helped us achieve this historic milestone—our members.

INITIATE SMALL BUSINESS PLATFORM:

The Chamber has launched a new online resource platform for members and NCMDC clients called “Initiate.” The platform can be accessed via the Chamber’s new website and provides access to new tools, resources and bilingual supports to help small businesses grow in North Central Massachusetts. The Initiate resource portal covers topics such as money, marketing, management, and resiliency resources by using a variety of learning methods including videos, templates, and guides. Email our team at chamber@northcentralmass.com to request access to the online platform. There is no cost for members.

NEW LOANS: Since the beginning of its fiscal year on October 1, 2023,

the Chamber’s economic development arm, the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation, has closed 5 micro-loans for a total of \$309,500, all of which went to underserved owners or underserved communities. The loans ranged from \$5,500 to \$250,000.

TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE:

In addition to the loans, our team also provided 434 hours of direct technical assistance and counseling to small businesses for the quarter, from October to December 2023. So far this fiscal year, we have funded 3 micro-grants totaling \$9,800 to support technical assistance needs of local small businesses, including assisting a business owner with Minority Certification.

NATIONAL APPOINTMENT:

Chamber President & CEO Roy Nascimento was recently named to the U.S. Chamber’s Committee of

100, a group of the leading chamber executives from around the country. This is one of the most prestigious appointments in the chamber industry. The group advises the U.S. Chamber on policy, recommends programming, and strengthens outreach to the chamber community.

SOLAR: Since its inception in August 2014 through December 2023, the solar field on Pleasant Street has produced 13,362,266 kWh of net metering credits to the manufacturers participating in the program. The total value of these credits is \$3,211,876, and the collective savings to participants totals \$2,730,095.

40th ANNIVERSARY:

This year marks our 40th Anniversary and we are celebrating throughout the year with some special events, spotlights and features. We hope that you will be able to join us for the special 40th Anniversary Member Celebration on April 25 at Oak Hill Country Club. Our 40th Annual Meeting and Business Luncheon will take place on June 20, so please make sure to save the date. Check out our website at northcentralmass.com for more information or to register.

SPONSORSHIPS: Our team has revamped our event sponsorship package, introducing new levels and options for every budget. Reach out to the Chamber, for more details or to explore sponsoring a program in the future. ♦

Chamber Launches Manufacturing Council of North Central Massachusetts

Council to enhance the Chamber's support of manufacturing industry, economy

The Manufacturing Council of North Central Massachusetts has been launched to enhance the Chamber's support of the manufacturing industry and the regional economy.

The Council, which is open to Chamber members and non-members working or interested in learning more about the manufacturing industry, will provide knowledge, resources, and support to create a stronger and prosperous manufacturing sector in North Central Massachusetts.

"The Chamber has always been a strong champion of local manufacturing, advocating and supporting the industry in multiple ways," said Roy M. Nascimento, president and CEO, North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce. "I believe that our strong advocacy and support of the manufacturing industry is one of the things that helps set our Chamber apart. From hosting manufacturing tours to publishing a manufacturing directory and supporting workforce efforts for the industry, the Council is a natural extension of our work and reflects our commitment to supporting and growing this important sector of our economy."

Manufacturing is the third largest industry in North Central Massachusetts, with more than 400 manufacturers



"The Chamber has long been an advocate of the local manufacturing sector. Pictured here is a manufacturing taskforce meeting that was convened by the Chamber. The Manufacturing Council is a natural extension of the work of the Chamber in supporting the industry."

"The Chamber has always been a strong champion of local manufacturing, advocating and supporting the industry in multiple ways," said Roy M. Nascimento, president and CEO, North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce. "I believe that our strong advocacy and support of the manufacturing industry is one of the things that helps set our Chamber apart."

in pharmaceuticals, medical devices, and electronics. It also accounts for 15 percent of the region's total employment and one-third of all private wages paid in the region. North Central Massachusetts is also unique in that

manufacturing is twice as concentrated when compared to the U.S. average.

Council members will have the opportunity to network with peers, participate in tours of manufacturing facilities to

learn best practices, attend quarterly meetings featuring experts in the industry, gain exclusive access to policy leaders, and collectively advocate for the industry. Additionally, connections to workforce and talent leaders, as well as the eligibility to participate in the Chamber's CEO Manufacturers' Roundtable Program, will be offered.

There is no fee to join the Council for members, however fees related to meetings or programming may apply, depending on the program.

The first meeting of the Manufacturing Council is scheduled for Tuesday, March 26 at 8:00 a.m. at Burkart-Phelan, Inc. in Shirley. Christine Nolan, director, Massachusetts Center for Advanced Manufacturing, will be the featured speaker at the March meeting. In addition, Lillian Burkart, founder and president, Burkart-Phelan, Inc., will provide an overview of the company and a tour for attendees. Coffee and continental breakfast will be provided. There is no cost for Chamber members to participate. Non-members are welcome to attend for a \$35 registration fee.

For more information about the Council or to host a future meeting, please contact Roy Nascimento at 978.353.7600, ext. 225. ♦

GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS UPDATE

Federal Affairs:

At the end of January, the House passed their Tax Relief for American Families and Workers Act. According to a House Ways and Means Committee summary, the bill includes \$78 billion worth of tax breaks for businesses, expands the small business expensing cap, expands access to the child tax credit, and would allow businesses to immediately deduct the cost of their U.S. based R&D investments instead of over five years through 2025. The last portion is of particular interest to a number of our members, and while it would not create a permanent solution, it would be a step in the right direction. At the time of this writing, we are monitoring the legislation as it moves over to the Senate.

In January, Congresswoman Lori Trahan along with staff from Senator Elizabeth Warren and Senator Markey's offices visited the region, making a number of stops including one at the Gardner Municipal Airport to celebrate the grand-reopening following the completion of the Gardner's recent Airport Revitalization Project. The project, which included a number of improvements to bring the facility into compliance with current Federal Aviation Administration (FAA) standards was made possible through nearly \$5 million in federal funding from the FAA, \$500,000 through MassDOT, with the city taking on the remainder.

Chamber staff also attended a number of New England Council events that



Jim Vander Hooven, chair of the Chamber's Board of Directors, and Roy Nascimento, Chamber president & CEO, pose with Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll and members of the state delegation and local officials at January's Good Morning North Central.

have allowed us to further connect with Congressman Jim McGovern and other members of the Massachusetts congressional delegation including Congresswoman Katherine Clark.

State and Local Affairs:

In early January, Lieutenant Governor Kim Driscoll joined the Chamber as a featured speaker during our Good Morning North Central Program. Lt. Governor Driscoll highlighted the administration's accomplishments over the past year and spoke about a number of challenges they are working to address including lower revenue growth resulting in 9-C cuts, housing shortages and the influx of immigrants in the Commonwealth.

Following her first State of the Commonwealth address, Governor Maura Healey filed



Pictured: Travis Condon, Chamber public affairs manager; House Minority Whip Katherine Clark; and Roy Nascimento, Chamber president & CEO, at a meeting hosted by the New England Council.

her proposed budget for fiscal year 2025. The proposed budget includes \$58.13 billion in total spending, representing a 3.7 percent

increase over the current fiscal year. As written, the proposed budget would fully fund the fourth year of the Student Opportunity Act,

boost Chapter 90 funds, increase funding for the new MassReconnect program and continue expanding access to higher education financial aid while also setting aside \$7.5 million for small business technical assistance grants.

Additionally, the proposal would direct \$1.3 billion from the recent income surtax toward investments in education and transportation. Education investments would include: the administration's new Gateway to Pre-K initiative, which puts Massachusetts on the path to universal Pre-K access in Gateway Cities by 2026, expansion of child care financial assistance to thousands more families, and funding for the new Literacy Launch program. Transportation investments would include: increased funding for roads and bridges, including dedicated road aid for rural communities, implement a low-income fares program at the MBTA, and make a new investment of \$250 million in transportation that will leverage \$1.1 billion in borrowing over the next five years to tackle deferred maintenance statewide.

Just prior to releasing the budget, the Healey Administration also announced the Municipal Relief Package in an effort to help cities and towns generate additional resources. The proposed legislation would allow municipalities to increase local option taxes on meals and lodging while also creating a new local Motor Vehicle Excise surcharge option. The bill would also make permanent a



Congresswoman Lori Trahan along with representatives from the FAA present a check to state and Gardner officials for over \$5 million dollars for runway and building improvements at the recent grand reopening of the Gardner Municipal Airport.

number of popular COVID-era allowances for hybrid public meetings, outdoor dining permits and to-go cocktail sales. The Chamber is monitoring both pieces of legislation closely.

In March, the Chamber will meet with our region's delegation as they work to craft the House and Senate versions of the budget. We plan to advocate for a number of priorities from our public policy agenda in the areas of small business support, tourism and education and workforce. ♦

For questions or concerns regarding the Chamber's public policy efforts, please feel free to contact Travis Condon, the Chamber's public affairs manager, at 978.353.7600, ext. 224; or via email at tcondon@northcentralmass.com. ♦



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On the Frontlines of Healthcare in North Central: *A Perspective from the Region's Leaders*

In January, the Worcester Business Journal announced its 2024 Economic Forecast. While it focused on the future of several topics in Central Massachusetts, it paid particular attention to the current health care landscape

find opportunities in the challenges while continuing to provide quality health care services to our communities.

Steve Roach, president, UMassMemorial Health—HealthAlliance Clinton Hospital, said he agrees with the WBJ's forecast,

people to get seen or to be sent to nursing homes or other long-term care facilities from the hospitals. When this happens, there is a bigger delay and creates a backlog of the inpatient flow as patients in the emergency room wait to get a bed in the hospital."

North Central Massachusetts has a strong collaborative network of healthcare services and community-based programs with a focus on supporting those who are most marginalized, but more resources are needed."

Penney said that through

"North Central Massachusetts has a strong collaborative network of healthcare and community based programs with a focus on supporting those who are most marginalized, but more resources are needed."



Rozanna Penney, CRNA, MBA
president and CEO of
Heywood Hospital.

here in North Central. The publication forecasted that our region would see more challenges related to access to health care services, especially with our most vulnerable populations.

While it's no surprise that our nation's health care system is at a critical tipping point with staffing challenges, more demand and long wait times to obtain care, our region's health care leaders are working diligently to combat the issues and

but added this is not just an issue in North Central, but everywhere.

"Across health care, we have a workforce issue, from general hospital staff to nurses and tech aides, while also dealing with the challenges of finding physicians. Many [physicians] have retired or moved on during the pandemic," he said. "These staffing challenges then present a domino effect, which results in additional wait times for

Rozanna Penney, president and CEO, Heywood Hospital in Gardner, agreed that bed capacity continues to be a challenge throughout the Commonwealth for medical as well as behavioral health patients.

"This is not unique to our region," said Penney. "The only way we will be able to effectively make an impact in this crisis is by investing and growing strong community-based programs.

Heywood Hospital's community engagement across schools and community partnerships, improved access and care coordination is how the hospital is focusing on the region's most vulnerable youth and families.

"School and community initiatives span across school-based acute care, behavioral healthcare, youth mentorship, trauma response, economic empowerment, access to

healthy foods, diversity, equity and inclusion, financial literacy, and entrepreneurship. These services and programs are designed to equip youth and families for a healthy future.”

But staffing challenges are not just being experienced in hospitals. In fact, these challenges stretch across the entire health care system, including home care.

While Holly Chaffee, MSN, BSN, RN, president and CEO, Care Central VNA & Hospice, Inc., also agreed with the forecasted

Chaffee said among the challenges is the current reimbursement landscape and the rise of the minimum wage, which results in lower wage workers moving into other industries.

“The most urgent concern [we have] is reimbursement of home health services by payer,” she said. “Our efforts with rate setting reform legislation here in Massachusetts can help to resolve these issues, while our efforts in [Washington, D.C.] regarding Medicare cuts and legislation can also help to resolve these concerns.”

“While the lack of workforce remains a very big issue, the rates we are reimbursed for home health aide services do not cover the cost of care provided.”

assessment, she said the managed care era has arrived, with 50 percent of Medicare beneficiaries enrolled in Medicare Advantage plans, as well as a severe working shortage of staff.

“Home health has been facing continual rate reductions, workforce shortages and increased regulatory scrutiny,” said Chaffee. “We do see an increased need for our services and there are multiple challenges.”

Of the workforce shortages, she added, “Home health care is a 24-hour business, and staff can move onto other jobs without having to work off-shifts while they make the same amount of money. While the lack of workforce remains a very big issue, the rates we are reimbursed for home health aide services do not cover the cost of care provided. So, as the wages were increased, the payers did not increase their rates to cover care.”

Just as home health systems are looking to find ways to solve the challenges, Roach and his team at UMassMemorial Health are doing the same.

“One major weakness in Massachusetts is the proliferation of urgent care centers that are not owned or operated by hospitals that don’t accept Medicaid,” he said. “As a hospital, we must treat everyone, but the private centers don’t have to accept Medicaid. It would be great if the state went back to these private urgent care centers and said they need to treat

bankruptcy and stopped construction on the planned surgical pavilion.

While Roach couldn’t specifically comment on the closing of the labor and delivery unit due to pending litigation, he said the hospital has committed to investing more than \$600,000 to meet patient prenatal and postpartum needs, including providing curb-to-curb transportation around the clock.

“Our initial year contract was a little more expensive, but as we get up and running, the additional funding from the transportation plan will go toward providing additional programs to ensure people are getting to appointments, are connected to doulas, and other things,” he said.

With the closing of the labor and delivery unit in Leominster, Heywood Hospital has noticed an incremental increase in obstetric (OB) patients, but Penney said the hospital has the capacity to accommodate more.

“We have been fortunate to hire some of the experienced OB nurses from HealthAlliance, have re-launched our doula program, and continue to recruit OB physicians,” Penney added. “Patients who come to Heywood rave about the community hospital ‘feel.’ The LaChance Maternity Center at Heywood offers beautiful private rooms to comfortably accommodate moms and their partners, and our obstetric physicians and nurses are second to none.”



Holly Chaffee, MSN, BSN, RN, president and CEO, Care Central VNA & Hospice, Inc.

Medicaid patients to help us alleviate the strain on our emergency rooms.”

Despite the challenges across the industry, our region’s health care systems have taken great strides to remain strong, even if their decisions were not popular among the community.

In 2023, UMassMemorial Health closed its labor and delivery unit, while Heywood Hospital announced its health care system filed for

Continued on page 16

Continued from page 15



While Heywood Hospital is providing continued care for the region's OB patients, financial stabilization of the hospital has been a priority over the last several months, which Penney said is essential in the hospital's ability to continue to provide services to the community.

"We have recognized significant annualized improvements through the renegotiation of contracts with commercial payers, vendors, and lease terminations, and this would not have been possible without the protection under Chapter 11," said Penney. "While we have consolidated certain service lines and underwent a

reduction in force, we also maintained focus on ensuring that patients in the Greater Gardner and Athol areas do not lose access to care."

Most recently, Heywood Hospital announced it will be reopening its inpatient Mental Health Unit, which was closed during the pandemic due to workforce challenges. Penney said the hospital also reaffirmed their commitment to providing regional maternity care and relaunched its doula services, while also launching a comprehensive transportation program to provide patients with a variety of non-emergency medical transportation options in partnership with

Woods Ambulance. Plans for the surgical pavilion remain paused.

"We are very fortunate to have the support of our community and our dedicated medical staff and employees, who are the reason Heywood Healthcare continues to deliver high quality care, despite challenging circumstances," she added.

Over at Care Central VNA & Hospice, Chaffee said the agency is working hard to provide quality care to as many people as possible. "There are limitations that hinder our ability to provide care, which are directly related to insufficient rates at a federal and state level," she added.

"These rates lag behind market rates which result in a home care agencies' inability to compete with others in the health care sector."

Chaffee pointed to a report released in June 2023 by the Massachusetts Health and Hospital Association which reported that 28 percent of the 1,057 patients waiting to be discharged from the 50 hospitals in Massachusetts were awaiting discharge to home health. This was an increase of 200 patients from the year before. "More than 38 percent of these patients reported they have been waiting for more than 30 days," she added.

Continued on page 17

Continued from page 16

"Across health care, we have a workforce issue, from general hospital staff to nurses and tech aides, while also dealing with the challenges of finding physicians as many [physicians] have retired or moved on during the pandemic," he said. "These staffing challenges then present a domino effect..."



Steve Roach, president of UMass Memorial HealthAlliance-Clinton Hospital.

Continuum of care remains at the forefront of importance at UMass Memorial Health.

"We realize not every physician has appointments available ASAP, but we do work to get access to schedules to help maintain the continuum of care," said Roach. "We are doing as

well as we can, and having our EPIC system allows for improved communications across care teams, patients, and their families. In today's health care environment, we realize families can be involved in the care of their parents, so by having these systems available provides caretakers the opportunity to see results to tests,

appointments and more to help mom and dad."

While our health care systems continue to pivot their respective services and programs to respond to the health care needs of our community, Roach said there is one thing we can all do that doesn't cost money and could make a difference.

"The most important

thing is that everyone needs to show compassion," he said. "Our caregivers to show compassion to patients, our patients to show compassion to the caregivers. If we can all be a little bit nicer to each other across the board, we will come out with a better situation overall in our current health care environment." ♦

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and growing their businesses, understanding financials, learning about marketing, and more.

We are pleased to offer this resource as a no-charge benefit to all Chamber Members and Small Business Loan Clients with the Development Corp.

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Members should email info@northcentralmass.com to request access to the online platform and a member of our team will help you through the process. ♦

TOURISM

Visit North Central Massachusetts

Update

Visit North Central Massachusetts Tourism Update

Here is a recap of efforts over the Winter from the Chamber's destination marketing arm, Visit North Central Massachusetts (VNCM).

Advertising & Promotion

Throughout the Winter, we continued to promote the region with a blend of print and digital advertising strategies across our target markets. The creative messaging for these ads focuses on "Everything You Love About New England... A Lot Closer to Home". We also encouraged travelers to visit the region with the tag: "Drive to, not through, North Central MA." To achieve this, we focused on developing fresh and engaging content for our website. This included creating captivating blog articles as well as compiling a comprehensive listing of upcoming events. To attract more visitors from the drive market, we implemented a range of strategies combining



Visit North Central Massachusetts hosted a Press Familiarization Trip in January as part of a tour of Central Massachusetts. The tour of our region included visits to **Great Wolf New England**, **Wachusett Mountain Ski Area** (pictured here), **Wachusett Brewery** and **Letz Rage**. The 2-day Fam Trip, attended by 5 regional bloggers and social media influencers specializing in 'Family Travel,' also included stops in the Discover Central MA and MetroWest areas. It was part of a major public relations program designed by CM Communications of Boston as part of the new collective "Heart of MA" marketing initiative the three regions are co-promoting. A second Press Fam Trip to the region is scheduled in early March.

both print, social media, paid search and digital advertising.

We invested in paid social media campaigns to reach a wider audience through MassLive, employed targeted and geofenced digital advertising to maximize our outreach through Cumulus, and utilized paid Search Engine Marketing

techniques to improve our online visibility through Local IQ. We also utilized print/digital campaigns through Boston Magazine and Boston Spirit, custom content listings and emails through Visit New England, and listings in Trip Advisor. All these efforts were carefully crafted to effectively showcase the diverse

attractions and offerings of our region and to increase web traffic. By utilizing a combination of print and digital platforms, we aimed to captivate potential visitors and encourage them to explore the unique experiences available in North Central Massachusetts.

Visitor Guide

We published 40,000 copies of the Fall/Winter edition of the Guide to North Central Massachusetts, a popular glossy, full-color magazine aimed at informing and inspiring readers. It showcases the region as a unique destination for living, working, and visiting. The guide was distributed to over 300 high-traffic locations throughout New England and a digital version was also shared on our website, social media, via email, and shared with the Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism (MOTT) to maximize its reach and engagement. We are currently working on finalizing the Spring/Summer edition.

Fam Trips & Travel Shows

We actively participated in FAM Trips & Travel Shows. We partnered with MOTT to host a familiarization tour for US Travel Media to our region. We also continued our collaboration with two other Regional Tourism Councils (Discover Central MA and MetroWest Boston Visitors Bureau), implementing an off-season marketing campaign funded from a federal grant. We have several advertising

campaigns underway and are working with CM Communications, a Boston-based PR Agency that specializes in destination marketing, to assist us with generating more interest in the region among the travel media and other travel influencers. We participated in the Dream Destinations Travel Show, American Bus Association Marketplace, and the North of Boston Tourism Summit to connect with tourism influencers and promote our region as a desirable travel destination.

Social Media & Website

From November 1, 2023 to January 31, 2024, Visit North Central Massachusetts' Facebook page had a reach of 269,873, a 81.6% increase over the same time frame the previous year. Our Facebook channel also attracted 3,515 new followers, a 11.4% increase. Total followers are currently at 34,700. In addition, the page also had 5,300 content interactions and 5,100 link clicks. Paid reach was 150,439 and 430,803 paid impressions. On Instagram, the page achieved a reach of 12,502, a 177.5% increase over the previous year, and gained 83 new followers for a total of

2,800. Our Instagram page also had 665 content interactions and 353 link clicks during the same timeframe.

Google analytics indicates that our website experienced a 21.5% increase in pageviews; a 27% increase in sessions; and a 24% increase in unique users from November 1, 2023 to December 31, 2023 when compared to the same timeframe the previous year. During the same time period we also had over 485,417 google impressions.

Lodging & Visitor Data

Data from Smith Travel Research indicates that hotel occupancy in January was 69.6%, a 7% increase over the previous year; ADR was \$166.34 which is a 7.2% decrease; RevPar was \$115.72, a 7% decrease over the previous year; total room revenue was down 3.9%; and rooms sold was up 3.5%. Data from Datafy indicates that our top four origin markets were Boston; Hartford/New Haven; New York; and Providence-New Bedford.

What's Next

As we move into the winter and spring seasons, our main objective is to raise awareness and attract

visitors to North Central Massachusetts. We will continue implementing our successful strategies that highlight the region's outdoor attractions and showcase traditional New England experiences. With people seeking outdoor activities, we aim to provide them with exciting itineraries for seasonal adventures in North Central Massachusetts. To achieve our goals, we are continuing to focus on a more digital marketing approach. This includes incorporating various tactics such as paid search, paid social media advertising, geofenced ads targeting the Route 2 corridor, digital display and sponsored content ads, print ads, targeted YouTube advertising, branded content, and organic social media engagement. In addition, we are continuing to work on refreshing our home page to ensure it aligns with our updated marketing efforts and provides a captivating user experience. By combining these strategies, we aim to engage a broader audience and encourage them to explore the benefits of visiting North Central Massachusetts compared to our neighboring states. ◇

Out & About



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See what Chamber members have been up to the last several months.



The Chamber was proud to donate treats from the **Johnny Appleseed Visitor Center** and our affiliate **Visit North Central Massachusetts**, for the Blue Star Mothers care package drive. The treats were added to boxes filled with donations from other organizations and community members and were shipped to local members of the military serving all over the US and the world. Thank you to the **Blue Star Mothers** for allowing us the opportunity to provide service members with a piece of home.



The Winchendon Community Action Committee (WCAC) received a loan of \$216,000 from the Chamber's economic development arm, the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation, in partnership with **Athol Savings Bank**, to renovate the space formerly known as Playaway Bowling Alley. The non-profit organization serves more than 450 households by providing healthy food, emergency heating services, housing assistance, economic mobility, and more.



In recognition of our 40th Anniversary, the Chamber hosted a special reception in February at the Fay Club where we brought together past and current directors of our board to honor them for their service, legacy and to celebrate four decades of leadership, collective action and of shared success! A heartfelt thank you to our incredible directors, both past and present, for their tireless efforts in shaping the chamber's success over the past 40 years. Special thanks to **Rollstone Bank & Trust** and **Mount Wachusett Community College** for sponsoring the reception.



The Chamber recently met with new member Paul Tocci, Principal of the Tocci Group, to discuss their planned development project in downtown Fitchburg. Pictured here are Chamber Ambassador Michelle Haggstrom of **Keller Williams North Central**; Tracy Gagnon, manager of membership recruitment and engagement; Paul Tocci of the **Tocci Group**; Roy Nascimento, chamber president & CEO; and Mayor Sam Squallia of the **City of Fitchburg**.



Networking at its Finest! Our February Business After Hours at **The Fix** in Leominster was a tremendous success. The night was a tasteful blend of connections, delicious high-end burgers and refreshing drinks. Thank you to our friends at the Fix for hosting and for everyone that was able to join us. Congratulations to Gabriele Rodriguez for winning the \$50 gift certificate to the Fix, courtesy of our hosts. If you're eager to connect with local businesses, make new acquaintances, and build your professional network, our Chamber events are the perfect opportunity for you. Be sure to check our website for information on upcoming events.



Chamber president & CEO Roy Nascimento presents to officials from **Ashby, Dunstable, Groton, Lunenburg, Pepperell, and Townsend** at an economic and community development collaborative meeting hosted by Representative Margaret Scarsdale.



In February, **Fitchburg Access Television (FATV)** hosted the Community Leadership Class of 2024 for their monthly session. The day was filled with valuable insights, including a session on navigating challenging conversations led by Pro. Michael Greenwood, Ph. D., chair of the business department and tenured professor at **Fitchburg State University**. Nate Glenny, executive director of FATV, presented on the significance of public access television. Additionally, participants delved into the intricacies of crisis management communication during an engaging session. The highlight of the day was a mock press conference, skillfully led by Matthew Bruun, director of communications and public affairs at Fitchburg State University, along with the expertise of Glenn Fossa, owner of **EDS** and a retired lieutenant from the Fitchburg Police Department, and Lauren Howe, Owner and principal at **empHowered PR**.



Our January Business After Hours was hosted by **Game On Fitchburg**. Attendees were able to throw axes, play corn hole, network, and enjoy the great atmosphere at this unique location. Thank you to the Game On staff for making it a great evening!

Congratulations to Lori Ruggerio from Great Wolf Lodge who won the door prize, a \$50 gift card compliments of Game On Fitchburg!





Congratulations to new Chamber member **Christ is the Center Church** on the recent opening of their Food Pantry. The Christ is the Center Church is focused on helping people from all different backgrounds discover the joy that comes from knowing and serving in the church and the lord. The food pantry is located at 7 Pierce Ave in Fitchburg.



In December, **the Young Professionals of North Central Massachusetts** gathered for the 5th Annual Holiday Party and Ugly Sweater Contest held at **Comeketo - Brazilian Cuisine Steakhouse** located in Leominster. The evening provided networking opportunities for the up-and-coming professionals in our region. Thank you to Rodrigo Souza and the staff at Comeketo for making the night extra special!



The Chamber was pleased to recently award a \$1,000 Small Business Grant to Chamber Member, **McKenzie Engineering Co., Inc.** Many thanks to **National Grid** for providing the funds to support this grant program. Small businesses are essential to the foundation of North Central Massachusetts' communities and economy. We are proud to partner with National Grid on this opportunity to support local businesses.



Congratulations to Chamber member, **Wood You Build It**, for their special spotlight on Channel 5 News in December! Founder/owner Justin Robichaud was interviewed about the heirloom furniture store's roots in Gardner and his vision and future plans.



Travis Condon, Chamber public affairs manager, with Congressman Jim McGovern at a New England Council event in Boston.



Thank you to all the members and staff who bought a gift for our Angel Tree over the holiday season. **The Salvation Army Fitchburg** works hard to provide clothes and toys to local families in need throughout the region. Your thoughtful generosity brightened someone's Christmas this year and made a huge impact on local families!



The January edition of Good Morning North Central breakfast featured **Lt. Governor Kim Driscoll** and Marc Dohan, Executive Director at **NewVue Communities**. Special thanks to our January premier sponsor **Resource Management, Inc.** and supporting sponsor **GFA Federal Credit Union** for their support. Thank you also to Jim Vander Hooven from **Mount Wachusett Community College** for serving as emcee and Andrea Seward of **Habakkuk Media Services** for photographing the event.



Thank you to the **Winchendon School** for hosting a Chamber Meet & Greet recently in the Town of Winchendon. It was a great opportunity to learn more the school and its connection to the community and region. Thank you to members in **Winchendon** and surrounding communities who were able to join us. The Chamber has been continuing to host our “Meet & Greet” series throughout the region. These smaller, focused gatherings are typically hosted by a member in one of our communities. They provide a great opportunity to convene local businesses and get an update from the Chamber, local businesses and municipal leaders. Check out the Chamber website calendar for future meetings and events.

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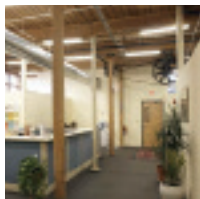
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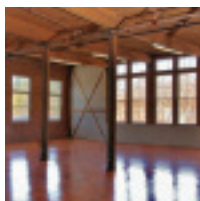
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Our very own version of Groundhog Day here in the region! Featherstone, the plastic lawn flamingo prognosticator, predicts an early spring with Leominster Mayor Dean Mazzarella on the Leominster common.



Thank you to all of our amazing members and community leaders who joined us in December at our Annual Winter Reception to celebrate the holiday season! It was a packed house with over 130 attendees from throughout North Central Massachusetts. Thank you to the **Old Mill Restaurant** for being such gracious hosts. And a very special thank you to **AIS (Affordable Interior Systems)** for sponsoring this amazing event.

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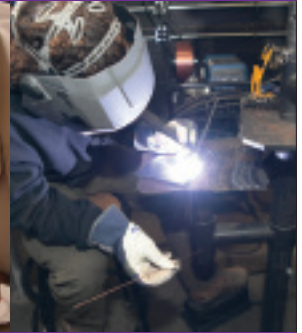
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Chamber Events

Connect. Network. Learn.



Looking to expand your business network? Want to stay informed about what's happening in the region? Looking to stay up to date on business practices? The Chamber organizes a variety of programs and events throughout the year for our members, ranging from traditional networking events and educational seminars to issue forums and more exclusive and high-profile signature events.

Check out our Calendar of Events by scanning the QR code or visiting our website at NorthCentralMass.com

Please contact the Chamber with any questions at 978.353.7600 ext. 235 or via email at chamber@northcentralmass.com.



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