

Fall 2026 Edition

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North Central Massachusetts Chamber Report

Building Businesses. Building Communities.

Building Tomorrow's WORKFORCE



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North  Central
MASSACHUSETTS

CHAMBER OF COMMERCE

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Chamber Report

a publication of
The North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce

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About this Issue: Workforce remains North Central Massachusetts's #1 business challenge, and in this edition's feature article, "Building Tomorrow's Workforce," we spotlight the many ways your Chamber is tackling it from every angle: building career pathways early, removing barriers to employment, advocating for policy change, and keeping talent invested in our region for the long term.

You'll hear from members and partners across the region on how our initiatives, programs and partnerships are helping employers find the people they need to grow.

Inside these pages, you'll also meet our new Board Chair, Allie Catlin, and welcome new and returning members to our Board of Directors, celebrate our Community Leadership Institute Class of 2026, and catch up on the latest from our Annual Meeting, government affairs, tourism, and Chamber programs.

Thank you for reading. We hope you find this edition both informative and inspiring!

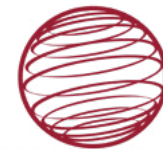
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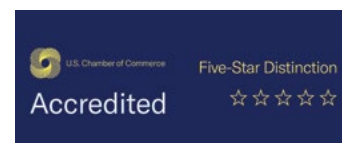
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CHAMBER updates: Your Chamber in Action!

As your partner in North Central Massachusetts, the Chamber continues to drive initiatives that strengthen our business community and foster regional growth. Our impact spans from direct business support to workforce development to regional infrastructure, and we're pleased to share these updates with you. For Tourism news, see page 22. Government Affairs updates are on page 12.



EMPLOYERS & CHILD CARE COALITION OF NORTH CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS.

\$800,000 in new state funding, that's the milestone the **Employers & Childcare Coalition of North Central Massachusetts** reached this summer after three years of research and coalition-building, when it was awarded a grant through the Commonwealth's Employer Child Care Innovation Fund to launch a pilot program with **Heywood Healthcare**. The coalition is a program of the **United Way of North Central Massachusetts** and **Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts**. This funding will allow Heywood Healthcare to provide fully subsidized child care for employees with the greatest financial need, while building longer-term, sustainable childcare solutions for the region. The Chamber has been a member of the coalition throughout this process, supporting a regional effort to address one of the most significant barriers to workforce participation in North Central Massachusetts.



WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT/TALENT COMPACT.

The Chamber convened a Talent Compact roundtable this August, bringing together representatives from higher education, workforce boards, municipalities, and community organizations from across the region. The conversation surfaced shared priorities, from transportation and childcare to durable skills training and career exploration, and laid the groundwork for closer collaboration among the region's workforce partners. A second roundtable is being planned for early October.

Members interested in getting involved can contact Cory Wells at cwells@northcentralmass.com or 978.353.7600, ext. 228.



NORTH CENTRAL MASSACHUSETTS RIDES (TMA).

Two new tools are now live for employers and commuters, courtesy of North Central Massachusetts Rides, the region's Transportation Management Association (TMA) established by the Chamber to help employers address workforce transportation barriers. GoMassCommute, a new statewide commuter platform, helps users explore commute options, connect with rideshare partners, and earn rewards for choosing sustainable transportation. A new on-demand microtransit pilot also launched recently, offering same-day rides for just \$2 within a defined service area covering healthcare, employment, education, and shopping destinations across Fitchburg, Gardner, and Leominster. In its first year, NCM Rides secured nearly \$785,000 in state and legislative funding to support these and future mobility initiatives. **Members interested in learning more can contact Julie Quinn**, TMA Manager, at jquinn@transactionassoc.com.




NCM Rides TMA is now on GoMassCommute! Join our community to explore commute options, connect with rideshare partners, track your trips, and earn rewards for choosing smarter ways to travel.



CM Rides TMA's new GoMassCommute platform helps users explore commute options, connect with rideshare partners, and earn rewards for choosing smarter ways to travel.

JOBS BOARD.

Nearly 30,000 page views and 1,000+ job postings, that's the past year of activity on WorkNorthCentral.com, the Chamber's online jobs board connecting member businesses directly with job seekers across the region. **Postings remain complimentary for members.**

SMALL BUSINESS LENDING AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE.

Small business lending remains one of the North Central Massachusetts Development Corporation's most vital services to the region. **New loans:** 14 closed this year totaling \$592,438, plus one more approved for \$50,000 and ready to close. **Pipeline:** \$965,000. **Active portfolio:** 88 loans with a combined principal balance of more than \$3.42 million. **Business assistance:** 1,154 hours delivered from January through August, helping local businesses start, grow, and work through challenges. Since 1996, NCMDC has deployed more than \$27 million in microloans to businesses across North Central Massachusetts.

SOLAR INITIATIVE.

More than **\$4 million in cumulative energy savings and counting**, that's the impact of the Chamber's Pleasant Street solar field since its August 2014 launch. Participating manufacturers have earned over \$3.5 million in savings through net metering credits, with the program producing more than 16.3 million kWh in credits to date. The Chamber itself has realized more than \$330,000 in direct energy cost savings as a participant. This collaborative program continues to demonstrate the kind of tangible, ongoing financial value that Chamber membership and partnership can deliver for regional businesses.

NEW MEMBER HUB.

The Chamber recently launched a new Member Hub on its website, designed to help new members quickly get oriented, find key resources, and connect with the right programs and staff. Existing members

are encouraged to check it out too at **northcentralmass.com/welcome**, and members can also now request one-on-one onboarding sessions with Chamber staff to walk through the full range of membership benefits and how to make the most of them.

WELCOME ORIANA CABAS JIMENEZ TO A NEW ROLE.

The Chamber recently welcomed Oriana Cabas Jimenez into a newly created role, Member Services Coordinator, dedicated to helping members get the most out of their Chamber membership. Oriana previously served as a paid intern with the Chamber while a student at Fitchburg State University, and we're thrilled to now have her on staff full-time. Whether it's navigating membership benefits, building out a member profile, designing an ad, scheduling a ribbon cutting, or simply knowing who to call with a question, Oriana is a direct, dedicated resource members can turn to. Fluent in Spanish, she also serves as the Chamber's staff lead for the LIDER steering committee. **We encourage members to reach out and get to know her** at ojimenez@northcentralmass.com or 978.353.7600, ext. 260.



Oriana Cabas Jimenez recently joined the Chamber as Member Services Coordinator, a new role dedicated to helping members get the most out of their membership.

RIBBON CUTTING SCHEDULING MADE EASIER.

The Chamber has streamlined how members schedule ribbon cuttings, making it easier than ever to celebrate a grand opening, anniversary, or expansion. A new online scheduling system at **northcentralmass.com/ribbon-cutting** ensures requests are handled quickly and

connecting members directly with the right Chamber staff from the moment a request comes in. **Jessica Yakusik now serves as the main point of contact for scheduling** and can be reached at 978.353.7600, ext. 222, with Oriana Cabas Jimenez coordinating on-site the day of the event.

INTRODUCING GROW NORTH CENTRAL: A BUSINESS, TALENT & OPPORTUNITY SUMMIT.

Coming this spring, the Chamber is combining its Career & Hiring Event and Small Business Showcase into one new flagship event, Grow North Central: A Business, Talent & Opportunity Summit. One Region. One Day. Unlimited Opportunity. The new summit brings job seekers, students, entrepreneurs, and employers together under one roof, replacing two separate events with a single, higher-energy gathering designed to make it easier for members to participate and connect. More details, including the date and how to get involved, will be shared soon, stay tuned!

We value your input on how the Chamber can better support your organization! Share your thoughts at rnascimento@northcentralmass.com. ♦



WANT TO KNOW ABOUT THE LATEST NEWS AND EVENTS?

If so then check out **northcentralmass.com** to see community updates such as who's hiring, business accomplishments, and events you can participate in!

Twenty-Five Stories, One Region

Community Leadership Institute Graduates 25 New Leaders



CLI class of 2026.

Rising leaders from across North Central Massachusetts graduated from the Chamber's **Community Leadership Institute** this June, but ask any of them what stayed with them most, and the answer probably isn't a session topic. It's each other.

At the Chamber's Annual Meeting, Class of 2026 representative **Julie McNamara of Workers Credit Union** described a February exercise that shaped the group's nine months together: each participant was handed a blank sheet of flip chart paper and told to draw the story of their life, no words allowed, then share it with the class.

"What struck me most wasn't just the vulnerability, it was the way everyone listened," McNamara told the room. "We weren't just classmates anymore."

That kind of connection is exactly what CLI, now in its 38th year, is designed to build. Since 1988, the program has helped more than 375 emerging leaders across North Central Massachusetts deepen their understanding of the region and each other through eight day-long sessions covering

everything from healthcare and manufacturing to media, law, and economic development.

This year's class put that learning into practice through two community projects: one supporting regional farmers markets and the agricultural businesses that help keep North Central Massachusetts' quality of place intact, and another establishing a network of **Little Free Libraries** to expand access to books and support literacy across the region.

"Every class teaches me something new, and this one was no exception," said **Dr. Mike Greenwood, Chair of Fitchburg State University's Business and Technology Department and longtime CLI Program Chair**. "What stood out this year was the genuine commitment these participants showed to each other and to the region."

24 rising leaders from the Class of 2027 will shortly be embarking on the next CLI journey. Learn more about the Community Leadership Institute at northcentralmass.com/community-leadership-institute or contact Jessica Yakusik at 978.353.7600, ext. 222. ♦

Congratulations to the CLI Class of 2026

Susan Beddes
Fitchburg State University

Joe Madden
Bemis Associates

Valerie Bruno
*North Central Massachusetts
Chamber of Commerce*

Terrance McCormack
IC Credit Union

Magnus Carlberg
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Julie McNamara
Workers Credit Union

Laura Pearsall
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Alicia Favereau
Empower Collective

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Questions? Contact Valerie Bruno: 978.353.7600 ext. 235 | vbruno@northcentralmass.com



CHAMBER CELEBRATES A LANDMARK YEAR AT *42nd Annual Meeting*

Nearly 400 members, community leaders, and elected officials gathered at **Great Wolf Lodge** on June 11 for the **Chamber's 42nd Annual Meeting** and Business Expo, an afternoon that combined a look back at a milestone year with recognition for the volunteers and leaders who made it possible.

Governor Maura Healey joined as keynote speaker, sharing remarks with the North Central Massachusetts business community before staying afterward to engage with members. The Governor's visit capped an event that also featured the graduation of the Community Leadership Institute's Class of 2026, the presentation of several volunteer and leadership awards, and the passing of the gavel to a new Board Chair.

Ambassador of the Year

Rosa Rivera, a licensed social worker and longtime Chamber Ambassador, was named the 2026 Ambassador of the Year, an honor voted on by her fellow Ambassadors. After more than 20 years in banking, Rivera transitioned into social work and community advocacy, all while remaining an active Chamber volunteer, recruiting new members, supporting Spanish-speaking businesses, and serving on the **Women's Leadership Connection**

Committee and the steering committee of **LIDER**, the Chamber's Latino business council.

"Rosa represents everything we hope an Ambassador will be: generous, authentic, inclusive, and deeply committed to the people and businesses of our region," said Roy Nascimento, President & CEO.

Volunteer Leadership Recognized

Eric Chouinard, a financial advisor at **Edward Jones** in Gardner, was honored for his service as outgoing chairperson of **Connect North Central**, the Chamber's monthly networking series. **Quinn O'Connell**, a Realtor with **Keller Williams North Central**, was recognized for her leadership as chair of **Future Leaders of North Central (FLNC)**, where her work has helped engage the region's next generation of young professionals.

The Chamber also recognized its full team of volunteer Ambassadors, who welcome new members, staff ribbon cuttings, and connect the region's businesses throughout the year.

Retiring Board Members and a Milestone Volunteer

Two longtime Board members, **John Heroux**,



Ray LaFond recognized for his 40 years of service on the Board of Directors.



Rosa Rivera receiving Ambassador of the Year.

President of **Micro Machine & Electronics**, and **Dr. James Vander Hooven**, President of **Mount Wachusett Community College**, were honored for their years of service. Vander Hooven's tenure included terms as

Treasurer, Vice Chair, and Board Chair before serving as Immediate Past Chair.

The Chamber also marked an extraordinary milestone: **Ray LaFond's** more than 40 years of service on the board of the **North Central**

Massachusetts Development Corporation, the Chamber's economic development arm, including years chairing its **Loan Committee**. Lafond, former Vice President of **Enterprise Bank & Trust**, continues to serve the region as Chair of the Community **Health Connections Board** and the **Gardner Zoning Board of Appeals**.

Community Leadership Institute Graduates 25th Class

The meeting also marked the graduation of the Community Leadership Institute's Class of 2026, bringing the program's total to more than **375 alumni** over its 38-year history. This year's class completed community

projects supporting regional farmers markets and establishing a network of **Little Free Libraries** across North Central Massachusetts. See page 6 for the full list of graduates and their reflections on the program.

New Board Leadership

The meeting also marked a leadership transition, as outgoing Chair **Tony Fields** of **ClearTech Group** passed the gavel to incoming Chair **Allie Catlin**, owner of **Smith's Country Cheese**. **Melissa Glenn** of **Franklin Professional Associates** will serve as Vice Chair, and **Chris Hendry** of **IC Credit Union** as Treasurer, with Fields continuing on the Board as Immediate Past Chair.

Johnny Ahern of **Aroma Joe's** and **Rozanna Penney** of **Heywood Hospital** join the Board as new members, alongside re-elected directors **Nicole Moorshead**, **David Moura**, and **Donna Hodge**.

"Our Chamber's strength has always come from people who believe in collaboration, who invest their time and energy in something bigger than themselves," said Fields in his closing remarks as Chair.

See page 21 for the full list of newly elected and appointed board members and officers.

A Year Worth Celebrating

Between the recognitions and the graduation, the afternoon also served as a

reminder of what the region accomplished together this past year, from continued investment in growing our regional tourism economy to new small business lending to expanded tools helping members find and hire local talent. As Nascimento put it in his remarks to the room: "This organization exists because of your belief in it. Not because of any one program or award or initiative, but because you keep showing up, keep investing, and keep pushing this region forward."

For more information about Chamber programs, membership, or volunteer opportunities, contact the Chamber at 978.353.7600. has been developing the lead. ◇

Put Your Business in Front of the Region

Sponsoring a Chamber program or event is one of the most effective ways to build visibility, demonstrate community leadership, and connect with the North Central Massachusetts business community. With sponsorship opportunities at a variety of levels and price points, there is something for every budget — from title sponsorships of our signature events to supporting roles across our breakfast series, networking programs, publications, and more.

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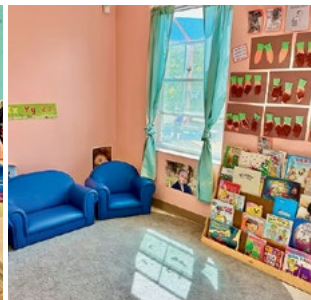
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GOVERNMENT AFFAIRS UPDATE

ADVOCACY IN ACTION



Chamber staff testify before a local city council, part of the Chamber's ongoing effort to represent members' interests in municipal decision-making.

As we head into the fall, the Chamber has stayed active on behalf of our members at the federal, state, and local levels. We testified to protect regional funding, advocated on major energy legislation, and deepened our work with municipalities across North Central Massachusetts. We also have two signature events this season that connect our members directly with the officials and candidates who shape the policies affecting their bottom line: our Legislative & Candidates Reception on September 24 and our 11th Annual Congressional Luncheon on October 15. Details on both are below.

FEDERAL AFFAIRS

Congressional Luncheon. We are pleased to host our 11th Annual Congressional Luncheon on Thursday, October 15, 2026, from

11:30 a.m. to 1:30 p.m. at the DoubleTree by Hilton. This popular event gives members the opportunity to hear directly from Congressman Jim McGovern and Congresswoman Lori Trahan about the issues being worked on in Washington and what they mean for our region's business community. We are grateful to our Premier Sponsor, **Fitchburg State University**, and our Supporting Sponsor, **GAAMHA**, for making this event possible, and we thank Matthew Bruun for serving as emcee.

Races we are watching. Our region spans both the 2nd and 3rd Congressional Districts, so we are following this fall's federal races closely. At the top of the ticket, U.S. Senator Ed Markey faces a challenge from John Deaton. In the 2nd Congressional District,

Congressman McGovern advanced without a primary opponent and currently faces no Republican challenger in November. In the 3rd Congressional District, Congresswoman Trahan was unopposed in her primary and faces Republican Gary Grossi of Acton, who also had no primary opponent. We will keep monitoring these races given how much the delegation matters to our region's businesses.

STATE AFFAIRS

Energy legislation. Energy affordability remains a top concern for our member businesses. This session, the Chamber supported the House's energy affordability bill (H.5151), which aimed to address rising costs. We opposed the Senate's competing measure, S.3166. Our concerns centered on the costs to ratepayers and businesses,

the loss of consumer choice, open-ended new government spending, and new risks to grid reliability and Massachusetts jobs. We continue to push for energy policy that puts affordability and reliability first for the employers and families of our region.

State budget. Governor Healey signed the \$63.4 billion Fiscal Year 2027 state budget into law on July 9, a roughly 4 percent increase over the prior year that raises no new taxes or fees. The budget makes targeted investments in economic development, workforce, education, and housing, and delivers increased support for cities and towns, including a \$40 million increase in Unrestricted General Government Aid, and \$30 million in new funding distributed by population to better support small and rural communities. We were especially glad to see funding

for the Regional Economic Development Organization (REDO) program included in the final version, and we appreciate our regional delegation's support for this vital program that supports regional partnerships and technical assistance that helps our businesses grow.

Tourism funding. We continue to advocate for strong, predictable tourism funding for our region. The FY2027 budget moves the share of state gaming revenue dedicated to tourism from 1 percent to 2 percent, a change expected to represent roughly a \$2.5 million increase for tourism efforts statewide. On a separate track, we are also working to secure language in legislation that will ensure the state tourism grant marketing dollars are distributed in full by a date certain, giving regions like ours the timing and certainty needed to run effective marketing campaigns.

State races we are watching. In addition to the race for Governor between Governor Maura Healey and challenger Mike Minogue, a number of state representative and state senate districts across our region feature contested races this fall, including two open state representative seats. We are following these closely, as the outcomes will shape the legislative delegation that represents North Central Massachusetts on Beacon Hill and advocates for our business community.

LOCAL AFFAIRS

Municipal engagement.

Our staff continued to meet with local officials throughout the region this summer and fall. We provided testimony in Fitchburg that successfully fended off a proposed 50 percent reduction to our tourism funding during the city's budget process. In Leominster, after the \$15,000 supplemental appropriation restored to our funding earlier this year, we again saw a \$15,000 reduction for the FY27 budget. We are actively engaging the Mayor to restore that funding and hope to see it solidified in the budgeted amount going forward. We also met with the Town Administrator in Templeton to share the Chamber's economic development and tourism resources, and we are exploring ways to further partner on economic development with Ayer. Our staff continued to attend city council meetings in both Fitchburg and Leominster, which keeps us in the room when decisions that affect our members are being made.

A regional milestone in Lancaster. In August, we joined local officials in Lancaster to recognize the new "Welcome to Lancaster" sign installed by the Chamber, the 10th welcome sign sponsored across the region as part of our One North Central economic

development plan. See page 26 for the full story.

Legislative & Candidates Reception. Our signature Legislative & Candidates Reception returns on Thursday, September 24, 2026, from 5:00 to 7:00 p.m. at the Chocksett Inn in Sterling. This event puts our members in the room with local officials, mayors, our legislative and congressional delegation, statewide constitutional officers, and those running for office for an evening of networking and conversation. We thank our Premier Sponsor, **Mount**

Wachusett Community College, and our Supporting Sponsor, **Open Sky Community Services**. This is an open invitation to candidates. Any candidate who has not yet signed up is welcome to contact Travis Condon to take part.

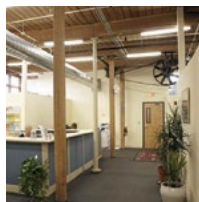
For more information about any of these government affairs updates or to discuss specific policy concerns, please contact Travis Condon, Director of Public Affairs, at 978.353.7600, ext. 224, or via email at tcondon@northcentralmass.com. ◇

THE LEXVEST GROUP

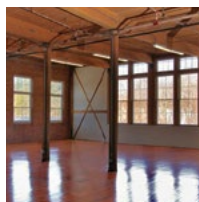
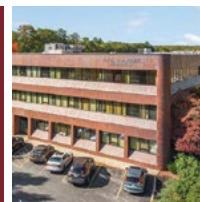
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Celebrating a new addition to the Leominster business community, **ChristCare Wellness** marked its opening with a ribbon cutting surrounded by community members, supporters, and local leaders. The event was an opportunity to welcome ChristCare Wellness to the area and celebrate the beginning of its journey in serving the Leominster community. We're excited to see this new business grow and become part of the local community.



We were excited to celebrate the opening of **Diligent DMC** with a ribbon cutting! This special occasion brought together Chamber members, community leaders, and supporters to welcome Diligent DMC to the North Central Massachusetts business community. We're proud to celebrate new businesses, new opportunities, and the entrepreneurs helping our region continue to grow. Congratulations to the Diligent DMC team, and welcome to the Chamber!



The Chamber hosted a **Business Benefit Series Quarterly Roundtable** focused on conflict resolution and turning workplace challenges into opportunities for growth. Led by Karyn Rossacci of **TaraVista Behavioral Health**, the session encouraged business leaders to share experiences, exchange ideas, and explore practical strategies for effective communication, managing workplace tension, and strengthening team dynamics. The collaborative conversation gave attendees valuable tools and actionable takeaways they can apply in their workplaces.



A little learning, a little friendly competition, and plenty of time on the green! Chamber members joined us at **Ellinwood Country Club** for a hands-on golf lesson before putting their skills to the test in a nine-hole game. It was a great opportunity to learn something new, connect with fellow members, and enjoy a beautiful day on the course. From the first swing to the final hole, the event was all about building connections and having fun along the way.



Celebrating a new addition to Barrett Park, the **Barrett Park StoryWalk** brings reading, learning, and the outdoors together in a unique way. The project was made possible with the help of students from CTEI at **Leominster High School**, along with generous community support. It's a wonderful example of collaboration and an opportunity for local families to enjoy stories while exploring the park.



At this year's Annual Meeting, we were proud to celebrate the graduating class of the **Chamber Leadership Institute (CLI)** alongside **Governor Maura Healey**. The CLI program brings together emerging leaders from across North Central Massachusetts for a year of professional development, community engagement, and leadership growth. We congratulate the **Class of 2026** on this accomplishment and look forward to seeing the impact they will continue to make throughout our region.



Our first **Meet & Greet** of the program year brought us to **Plain View Farm** in Hubbardston for a wonderful morning of connection and discovery. Members and guests enjoyed a tour of the farm, had the chance to meet the alpacas, and learned more about the people, passion, and experiences that make Plain View Farm such a special part of the community. It was a great way to kick off the year and connect with one of our Chamber members.



In July, we proudly launched **LIDER (Latino Initiative for Development of Entrepreneurship and Resources)** with a kickoff event at the North Central Massachusetts Chamber. The new initiative brings together Latino entrepreneurs and business owners from across the region to build connections, access resources, share opportunities, and strengthen their businesses. The kickoff was an exciting first step in creating a stronger network and greater visibility for the Latino business community throughout North Central Massachusetts.



We were proud to celebrate **IC Credit Union** and the opening of their new location in Leominster with a ribbon cutting. The celebration brought together Chamber members, community leaders, and supporters to welcome IC Credit Union to its new space and recognize this exciting milestone. We're always grateful for the opportunity to celebrate the growth and continued investment of our members throughout North Central Massachusetts. Congratulations to the IC Credit Union team on their new Leominster location!



Settlers Crossing Golf Course

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La Colombiana celebrated an exciting new chapter with a ribbon cutting at the North Central Massachusetts Chamber as they launched their new food truck. After starting out at the Fitchburg Market Place, the restaurant is continuing to grow and expand its presence in the community. We were happy to celebrate this milestone with the La Colombiana team and recognize their continued growth as a local business. Congratulations to La Colombiana on the new food truck!



We had the opportunity to learn more about Remaking Main Street in Athol and hear directly from members of the team about their vision for supporting local entrepreneurs and revitalizing downtown Athol. The event highlighted the importance of bringing community leaders, local businesses, and residents together to create new opportunities and build a stronger future for the town. We're excited to see the continued work taking place to invest in Athol's downtown and the people and businesses that make the community unique.



The second stop on our summer Golf Tour brought us to **Settlers Crossing Golf Course**, where Chamber members enjoyed a round of nine holes while connecting and networking with fellow members. The day offered the perfect combination of time on the course, friendly competition, and opportunities to strengthen relationships within our business community. It was another great stop on the tour and a wonderful way to bring members together outside the office.



Our **Chamber Board of Directors** had the opportunity to gather with **Governor Maura Healey** during this year's Annual Meeting. We're grateful for the leaders who continue to come together to support the businesses, people, and communities that make North Central Massachusetts strong.



Members of the **Future Leaders of North Central (FLNC)** gathered for a planning meeting to discuss their upcoming fundraiser and begin laying the groundwork for another successful event. The group continues to bring together emerging leaders from across the region, creating opportunities to collaborate, build connections, and give back to the North Central Massachusetts community.



The third stop on our summer Golf Tour brought us to **Templewood Golf Course**, where members enjoyed nine holes of golf surrounded by beautiful scenery and an amazing view. It was another great opportunity to step away from the office, enjoy the course, and connect with fellow Chamber members while taking in all that the North Central Massachusetts region has to offer.



The Chamber had the opportunity to attend a screening of **Shattered Ice** after joining a podcast to learn more about the film and the important message behind it. Hearing firsthand about the purpose and impact of the film made the screening an especially meaningful experience and gave us a deeper understanding of the story and the conversations it hopes to inspire.



The **Women's Leadership Connection** kicked off the new program year with a great afternoon of connection, conversation, and wellness. Attendees heard from Kaitie Roux of **RouxFit and Nutrition Inc.**, who shared valuable insights on energy, hormones, and metabolism along with practical ways to better support overall well-being. A special thank you to our food sponsors, **Mountainside Bakery** and **Smith's Country Cheese**, and to our new Chamber photographer, Doiron Digital, for helping make the afternoon memorable and capturing the connections made throughout the event.



Bringing our supporters together, the Chamber hosted a special **Sponsors Reception at the Old Mill** to recognize the businesses and organizations that sponsored events throughout the past program year. The evening provided an opportunity to thank our sponsors for their continued support while giving them a chance to meet, network, and connect with others who are invested in the growth of North Central Massachusetts.



The final stop on our summer Golf Tour brought us to **Woods of Westminister**, where members enjoyed nine holes with a beautiful view overlooking the hills and Wachusett Mountain. It was the perfect setting to wrap up the summer series, combining a great day on the course with opportunities to network, connect, and enjoy the scenery of North Central Massachusetts.

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Building Tomorrow's Workforce:

How Your Chamber is Tackling North Central Massachusetts' #1 Business Challenge

A multi-pronged approach to solving the region's talent puzzle

Ask any business owner in North Central Massachusetts about their workforce needs, and you'll likely hear a complicated picture. Manufacturing and healthcare continue to report real difficulty finding and retaining workers, while other industries navigate a shifting landscape as hiring patterns evolve and technology changes the nature of entry-level roles. But even as short-term conditions fluctuate, the region's long-term workforce challenges remain, driven by an aging population, persistent skills gaps, and barriers like transportation and childcare that keep otherwise capable workers out of the labor pool.

The Chamber's own research, including a comprehensive regional workforce study conducted with the **UMass Donahue Institute**, has long identified these barriers as significant obstacles to full workforce participation in North Central Massachusetts, findings consistent with what we hear directly from members and with other state and national research. Regardless of where

any individual business stands today, these structural issues require sustained, long-term investment rather than a response to any single moment in the hiring cycle.

Your Chamber has taken this challenge seriously, building a comprehensive toolbox of programs and partnerships designed to address workforce development from every angle: building pathways into careers, removing barriers to employment, advocating for systemic change, and keeping talent here for the long term.

"Workforce isn't a single problem with a single solution," says **Melissa Glenny, President of Franklin Professional Associates, Inc. and Vice Chair of the Chamber's Board of Directors**. "It's transportation, it's childcare, it's education, it's skills training. Every day in my own work, I see employers dealing with all of these challenges at once, and that's exactly why the Chamber has to stay engaged on so many fronts."

Building Pathways Early

For many students, the path to a career starts long before graduation, and



Job seekers gain industry-recognized credentials through the Chamber's partnership with Mount Wachusett Community College and the Spanish American Center.

the Chamber's scholarship programs are designed to invest in that pipeline early. Through both traditional scholarships for graduating high school seniors and industry pathway scholarships for adult learners, career-changers, and those pursuing vocational or technical training, the Chamber Foundation helps remove the financial barriers that keep talented individuals from pursuing further education or credentialing.

"A scholarship like this is workforce development, not philanthropy. When the Chamber removes the cost barrier for someone pursuing technical training, that person often ends up building things



Mark Dyment presents a scholarship to a student at the Chamber's Scholars Breakfast.

for a company like ours a few miles away," said **Mark Dyment, President & CEO of YMC America**. "We've expanded our Devens facility because demand is growing, and we need the talent pipeline to grow with it."



Employers and job seekers connect at a past Chamber hiring event, one of the many tools helping members find and hire local talent.

Removing Barriers to Employment

Beyond scholarships, the Chamber has invested in removing systemic barriers that prevent qualified individuals from entering the workforce. Through a partnership with the **Spanish American Center** and **Mount Wachusett Community College**, the Chamber supports an equitable pathways and micro-credentialing initiative designed to help underrepresented job seekers access short-term, industry-recognized credentials that lead directly to employment.

"So many people in our region have the skills and the work ethic, but they hit roadblocks navigating traditional education and training systems," says **Jim Vander Hooen, President of Mount Wachusett Community College**. "Our partnership with the Chamber and the Spanish American Center meets people where they are and gets them into good jobs faster, and it's just one of the many ways our college and the Chamber are working together to strengthen the region's workforce."

Job seekers with disabilities are an often-overlooked part of the regional talent pool.

To help close that gap, the Chamber has helped connect employers with **MassAbility** and the region's network of supported employment agencies.

The Chamber also recently convened a Talent Compact roundtable, bringing together representatives from higher education, workforce boards, municipalities, and community organizations to listen, identify shared challenges, and align efforts around real employer needs.

"Workforce challenges don't belong to any one organization, they're shared across employers, educators, and workforce partners," says **LeeAnn Johnson, Executive Director of the MassHire North Central Workforce Board**. "When the Chamber steps into that convening role, whether it's through the Talent Compact, hosting manufacturing tours, or bringing employers and job seekers together, it helps all of us move in the same direction instead of working in isolation."

Practical Tools for Members

The Chamber also provides members with practical, everyday tools to find and hire talent. The Work North

Central Jobs Board connects member businesses directly with job seekers across the region, and is free for members. Over the past year alone, the board has hosted more than 1,000 job postings and attracted nearly 30,000 page views.

These tools aren't just for large employers. Whether you're hiring one person or fifty, the jobs board, manufacturing tours, workforce convenings, and the Career & Hiring Event are designed to work for businesses of every size, and opportunities like sponsoring a scholarship in your company's name remain accessible and affordable regardless of size.

This coming spring, the Chamber will also debut a redesigned Career & Hiring Event, merged with the popular Small Business Showcase and moved from its traditional October date to March, giving job seekers and entrepreneurs a single, high-energy venue to connect with employers and explore career pathways.

Advocating for Systemic Change

Beyond direct programs and partnerships, the Chamber has been an active voice at the state and federal levels for policies that better prepare students for the workforce our employers actually need, including expanded industry pathways within our school systems and greater access to vocational and technical training, work-based learning, and career exposure well before graduation. At the state level, the Chamber has pushed for increased investment in vocational-technical education and policy changes that align funding and curriculum requirements

with real employer needs, while in Washington, the Chamber has advocated for federal workforce development funding and policies that support employer-driven training models.

"We can build all the partnerships and programs in the world, but if state and federal policy isn't aligned with what employers actually need, we're fighting an uphill battle," says **Travis Condon, the Chamber's Director of Public Affairs**. "Advocacy is how we make sure the systems producing our future workforce are actually built around real jobs in our region."

Solving the "Whole Person" Barriers

Finding a job is only part of the equation, keeping it often depends on factors that have nothing to do with skills or qualifications. The **North Central Massachusetts Rides Transportation Management Association (TMA)** was created to address the "last mile" problem, connecting workers to jobs in communities where public transit options are limited or nonexistent. For many employers, workforce transportation is the difference between a fully staffed shift and a chronic vacancy.

The Chamber is also a member of the **Employers & Childcare Coalition of North Central Massachusetts**, an initiative launched by the **Community Foundation of North Central Massachusetts**, with infrastructure support from the United Way of North Central Massachusetts, to develop sustainable models for accessible, employer-supported childcare. As a coalition member, the Chamber

Continued on page 20

Continued from page 19

supports this broader regional effort to address a barrier that keeps parents, particularly mothers, out of the workforce or limits the hours they're able to work.

"Transportation and childcare aren't side issues, they're workforce issues," says **Rozanna Penney, President & CEO of Heywood Healthcare**. "As a founding member of the TMA and a participant in the new Childcare Coalition's employer-supported childcare pilot, we're seeing firsthand how removing these barriers helps us recruit and retain the people we need to care for our community."

Each October, the Chamber also hosts a manufacturing bus tour for regional superintendents, media, and public policy leaders, building awareness and support among decision-makers for the modern manufacturing careers available right here in North Central Massachusetts.

"The outdated image of the dusty assembly line is holding our workforce back," says **Kevin Kassekart, President & CEO of VulcanForms**. "When local leaders walk our smart factory floors and see data-driven production in action, it instantly changes the narrative. They see that modern manufacturing demands advanced technological proficiency, highlighting exactly what our educational pipelines need to be teaching right now."

Keeping Talent Here

Solving the workforce challenge isn't just about getting people into jobs,

it's about building a region where people want to stay and grow their careers long-term. Through programs like the Chamber's **Community Leadership Institute (CLI)** and **Future Leaders of North Central group (FLNC)**, the Chamber invests in developing the next generation of regional leadership, ensuring that talented individuals see a future for themselves in North Central Massachusetts rather than looking elsewhere.

Connecting the Dots

None of these programs work in isolation. Scholarships build the pipeline. Credentialing partnerships remove barriers to entry. Convening employers, educators, and workforce partners helps align efforts with real needs on the ground. The jobs board and hiring event connect employers with candidates. The TMA and childcare coalition address the barriers that keep people out of the workforce even after they're hired. Advocacy at the state and federal level works to align policy and funding with what employers actually need. And CLI and Future Leaders keep talent invested in our region for the long haul.

"Workforce development isn't a problem any one organization solves alone," says **Roy Nascimento, President & CEO**. "It takes partnership, schools and colleges, employers, municipalities, along with workforce and community organizations all pulling in the same direction. Our role is to help connect those dots and ensure North Central Massachusetts has the talent pipeline it needs to

compete and grow."

This is workforce development in action. This is what your membership supports.

Have a workforce challenge affecting your business? Interested in getting involved with any of the opportunities above? Contact Cory Wells, Community Economic Development & Loan Operations Administrator, at cwells@northcentralmass.com or call (978) 353-7600 ext. 228. ◇

Put These Tools to Work

- 1 Post job openings on the Chamber's Jobs Board
- 2 Sponsor a Traditional or Industry Pathways Scholarship through the Chamber Foundation
- 3 Connect with the Chamber's workforce and education partners
- 4 Join a workforce convening or roundtable discussion
- 5 Participate in the Career & Hiring Event to connect with students and job seekers
- 6 Host a tour for students, educators, or policy leaders
- 7 Partner with the Chamber to advocate for education and training policy reforms
- 8 Host interns or co-op students
- 9 Work with MassAbility or agencies that help place workers with disabilities
- 10 Sponsor a CLI participant or get a rising team member involved with Future Leaders

Allie Catlin Named New Chamber Board Chair

Melissa Glenny, Chris Hendry Join Executive Committee;
New and Returning Board Members Welcomed

Allie Catlin, co-owner of **Smith's Country Cheese**, a working dairy farm, creamery, and retail destination in Winchendon, was elected Chair of the North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce Board of Directors for 2026-2027 at the Chamber's Annual Meeting in June. Catlin, who has served on the Chamber's Board for several years including a term as Vice Chair, succeeds Tony Fields, President of ClearTech Group, who moves into the role of Immediate Past Chair.

Under Catlin and her family's ownership since 2016, Smith's Country Cheese has grown into one of the region's most beloved agricultural destinations, employing 14 people and producing roughly 180,000 pounds of handcrafted cheese annually.

"The Chamber has been

such an important partner to our farm and to so many small businesses across this region," said Catlin. "I'm honored to take on this role and to continue the work of connecting our business community, supporting our members, and championing the people and places that make North Central Massachusetts such a special place to live and work."

"As a farmer and small business owner, Allie brings a perspective to the board that's vital to understanding the full picture of our regional economy," said Roy Nascimento, President & CEO. "Her leadership will help ensure the Chamber continues to serve businesses of every size and sector."

Joining Catlin on the Executive Committee are Melissa Glenny, Founder and CEO of Franklin Professional Associates, as Vice Chair;



Allie Catlin, the Chamber's new Board Chair and co-owner of Smith's Country Cheese.

Chris Hendry, President and CEO of IC Credit Union, as Treasurer; and Mark Hettinger, President and CEO of GFA Federal Credit Union, and Patrick McCarty, President of the McCarty Companies, filling the Executive Committee's two

non-officer seats.

The Chamber also welcomed several new and returning voices to its Board of Directors, including Kenneth Hodges, Plant Director at Georgia-Pacific/Dixie in Leominster, who was appointed to fill a one-year board vacancy. ◇

Elected to New Terms:

Tony Fields
ClearTech Group

Dr. Donna Hodge
Fitchburg State University

Johnny Ahern
Aroma Joe's

David Moura
Moura's Cleaning Service

Nicole Moorshead
Chocksett Inn & Colonial Hotel

Rozanna Penney
Heywood Healthcare

Kenneth Hodges
Georgia-Pacific/Dixie
(appointed to fill a one-year vacancy)

Continuing Their Terms:

Marieke Cormier
Roots Natural Foods

Joseph Basile
Catania Oils

Patrick McCarty
McCarty Companies

Mark Hettinger
GFA Federal Credit Union

Barbara Mahoney
All-One Credit Union

Joshua Page
JP Electric and Son

Alex Matthews
Great Wolf Lodge New England

Kayla Nault
Central Mass Real Estate

The Chamber
congratulates its newly
elected and appointed
board members and
thanks all those who
continue their service
to the region's business
community.

TOURISM

Update

Visit North Central Massachusetts

The following is an update from Visit North Central Massachusetts, the Chamber's tourism promotion arm, on the region's tourism marketing, visitor data, and related initiatives.

Wrapping Up FY26, Looking Ahead to FY27

Visit North Central Massachusetts closed out Fiscal Year 2026 in June, a year that brought mixed results for the region's tourism industry, and has since finalized its annual marketing plan for the year ahead. In July, we presented our FY27 funding request to the Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism (MOTT), which provides annual grant funding to regional tourism councils like ours, funding Visit North Central Massachusetts matches dollar for dollar to maximize our promotional reach, prioritizing the advertising and media outlets that delivered the strongest results for the region last year.

Fitchburg TDMD: Building the Foundation

This past year also brought the region's first Tourism Destination

Marketing District (TDMD) outside of Boston, following unanimous approval from the Fitchburg City Council and officially launching January 1, 2026. A TDMD works by adding a small assessment to a guest's stay at a participating hotel, funds paid by visitors themselves, not businesses or local taxpayers, and reinvested directly into marketing and promoting that destination. It's a self-sustaining model already used successfully in tourism destinations across the country: the more visitors a property attracts, the more resources are available to market the community and its destinations and attract even more visitors. **Great Wolf Lodge** is the District's first participating property, and for our region, that means a new, sustainable tool to drive visitation and strengthen the broader visitor economy that benefits restaurants, retailers, and attractions well beyond the property itself.

Over the summer, the Chamber worked closely with Great Wolf Lodge to establish a budget framework and develop a preliminary marketing plan for the District. While

we had initially expected to launch our first marketing campaign under the District this past July, that timeline shifted slightly as planning continued, and we're now finalizing the plan and rolling out our first campaign this fall, starting with a video and content campaign produced with WCVB Hearst (see below). This work is separate from, and in addition to, our broader regional tourism marketing efforts, the TDMD is specifically focused on driving visibility and visitation tied to Fitchburg and Great Wolf Lodge, while our other tourism marketing continues to promote North Central Massachusetts as a whole.

Advertising & Marketing Update

This fall, we are producing two video content campaigns with WCVB Hearst, building on our WCVB advertising campaign from last year, which significantly exceeded its goals with 1.3 million impressions and more than 21,000 engagements.

One of this year's campaigns, funded through the Fitchburg

TDMD, will promote Great Wolf Lodge, while the other promotes the region as a whole, meaning every member business benefits from this campaign's reach, regardless of industry.

We're also continuing to work with the **Massachusetts Office of Travel & Tourism (MOTT)** throughout the year to reach new audiences, from a summer social media collaboration spotlighting the region's farms and orchards to an October content creator visit and a fall presence at the Big E, where we'll distribute our regional guides to the millions of visitors who attend from across New England.

And speaking of guides: our newly released Fall/Winter edition of the Guide to North Central Massachusetts is now in circulation, distributed locally and throughout New England as one of the region's primary tools for reaching prospective visitors.

Digital & Social Media: FY26 Recap and a New Fiscal Year Underway

VisitNorthCentral.com attracted more than **63,000** users and generated over **107,000**

page views in FY26, with **2.9 million** impressions.

On social media, our Facebook and Instagram following grew to more than **49,000** followers generating **2.62 million** impressions and **2.2 million** views over the course of the year, with a 3.35% engagement rate.

The new fiscal year is off to a start as well: this summer, our social media content generated more than **310,000** views and over **10,000** engagements, a **3.18%** engagement rate, while our website drew more than **10,000** active users, up 2.2% year-over-year, and logged more than **47,000** visits. Organic search traffic declined notably year-over-year, consistent with a broader industry trend toward "zero-click" searches, where users get the information they need directly from search results without visiting a website.

Lodging Performance

Fiscal Year 2026 (July 2025 – June 2026) closed with regional lodging occupancy at 63.2%, down 8.4% from the prior year, and total lodging revenue of \$61.4 million, down 4.9% year-over-year. The most recent quarter (April–June 2026) showed a similar pattern, with occupancy at 62.7% (down 11.4%) but average daily rates up slightly (+1.1%), suggesting properties are holding pricing even as occupancy softens.

The new fiscal year opened with July 2026 occupancy at 70.1%, still down 6.2% from July 2025, consistent with the softer trend seen throughout FY26. For our hospitality members, this data helps inform where we focus advertising dollars and outreach in the months ahead, and it's part of why our marketing plan continues to prioritize driving overnight stays, not just day visits, to the region.

Local Option Tax Collections

Local option meals tax collections across the region totaled \$3.99 million in FY26, up significantly from \$2.13 million in FY25, though much of that increase reflects several larger communities implementing a local option meals tax for the first time this year rather than organic growth in spending. While meals tax reflects both resident and visitor dining, we track it as a key indicator of visitor spending and overall restaurant industry health. With a full fiscal year of data now in hand, FY26 will serve as a more accurate baseline for tracking meals tax trends going forward.

Local option room tax collections totaled \$2.91 million in FY26, compared to \$3.07 million in FY25, a modest decline consistent with the softer lodging occupancy numbers reported above.



In The Meadow Alpacas at the Johnny Appleseed Visitor Center.

Visitor Center Update

The **Johnny Appleseed Visitor Center** welcomed more visitors this past fiscal year than the year before, with total traffic for FY26 (July 2025–June 2026) reaching 124,568 visitors (up approximately 3,000, or about 2.5%, compared to FY25). June was a particularly strong month, and July carried that momentum into the new fiscal year with another year-over-year increase of about 6.7%. August saw a dip of about 6.6% compared to last year, but the overall trend for the year remains positive.

After a long-awaited process, the EV charging station project at the state-owned Visitor Center property, which the Chamber operates, is finally moving forward. The state's Request for Response

(RFR) officially closed in late August, and a contractor is expected to be selected by mid-September. We'll continue to share updates as this project progresses.

Looking ahead this fall, the Chamber is continuing two of the Visitor Center's favorite seasonal traditions. As part of our annual celebration of the region's apple heritage, we're once again handing out fresh apples to everyone who stops by the Visitor Center, generously donated by member orchards **Red Apple Farm** in Phillipston, **Sholan Farms** in Leominster, and **Hollis Hills Farm** in Fitchburg. Thank you to all three for helping us share a taste of North Central Massachusetts with our visitors.

We're also kicking off our popular Showcase Events

Continued on page 24

Continued from page 23

series, running Saturdays from 10 a.m. to 2 p.m. from September 12 through October 12. Each Saturday brings a different lineup of local musicians, crafters, farms, and authors to the Visitor Center, including a return visit from Plain View

Farm's alpacas. Thank you to the **Ashby, Clinton, Fitchburg, Lancaster, and Royalston** Cultural Councils, whose support helps make this programming possible each fall.

Data in this update reflects the most current figures available at time of publication; lodging

data in particular typically lags by one to two months, so more recent figures may be available by contacting us directly.

Want to get involved? Whether it's being featured in the Guide to North Central Massachusetts, participating in a Visitor

Center Showcase Event, or learning more about our marketing initiatives, we'd love to hear from you. For more information on the Chamber's tourism and marketing initiatives, contact Jon Ashley, Marketing Manager, at jashley@northcentralmass.com or 978.353.7600, ext. 240. ♦



Musician Jae Mannion performs (left) and Plain View Farm's alpacas greet visitors (right) at past Showcase Events at the Johnny Appleseed Visitor Center.



Why Tourism Matters to North Central Massachusetts

Tourism is far more than a single industry—it's a catalyst for community vitality. When you build a place where people want to visit, you've built a place where people want to live, work, and invest. Every visitor we attract becomes a potential business lead, future resident, or investor who experiences our region's unique assets and becomes an ambassador for North Central Massachusetts.

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Lancaster's New Welcome Sign Marks Another Gateway Into North Central Massachusetts

Visitors and residents arriving in Lancaster via Route 117 and Route 190 now have a new landmark greeting them. The Chamber recently sponsored the installation of a welcome sign at the **Bartlett Conservation Area**, the latest in an ongoing series of gateway signs going up across the region. Crafted by **Add-A-Sign** in Leominster, the sign carries Lancaster's seal and is finished in the town's signature maroon, continuing a design tradition the Chamber has used for welcome signs in **Fitchburg, Gardner, Groton, Hubbardston, Leominster, Lunenburg, Pepperell, Sterling, and Westminster.**

The project supports goals laid out in One North Central, the region's economic development roadmap, which



Pictured left to right: Ralph A. Gifford III, Lancaster Select Board; State Senator John Cronin; State Representative Meghan K. Kilcoyne; Roy M. Nascimento, President & CEO, North Central Massachusetts Chamber of Commerce; Brian Keating, Director of Community Development and Planning for the Town of Lancaster; and John Woodsmall, Lancaster Town Administrator.

emphasizes building a strong sense of place across North Central Massachusetts communities. "This sign is a small but meaningful way to celebrate Lancaster's identity and give visitors a warm welcome as they arrive," said Chamber President & CEO

Roy Nascimento.

Lancaster Town Administrator **John Woodsmall** echoed that sentiment, noting the sign reflects the pride residents take in their community. "We're grateful to the Chamber for helping mark

this gateway into Lancaster for the residents and visitors who pass through it every day," Woodsmall said.

The Chamber plans to continue installing welcome signs in additional communities as funding allows. ♦

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