



For immediate release

Visit St. Mary's MD Receives Rural Maryland Council Grant to Expand Tourism Ambassador Program

LEONARDTOWN, Md. September 16, 2026 – For the second year in a row, the county's destination marketing organization, [Visit St. Mary's MD](https://www.visitstmarysmd.com) (VSMMD), was awarded over \$5,000 through the Rural Maryland Council's Maryland Agricultural Education and Rural Development Assistance Fund (MAERDF) grant.

Specifically, the grant was awarded in support of the [St. Mary's County Tourism Ambassador Program \(SMCTAP\)](#), an initiative designed to educate, inspire and empower hospitality and tourism professionals through unique learning opportunities. The program builds strong partnerships among the area's attractions, restaurants, historical sites, and lodging options available in the county.

"The program strives to create a network of ambassadors that have firsthand knowledge of the attractions, culture, and businesses that make Southern Maryland unique," said Liz Mildestein, VSMMD Executive Director. "These positive experiences have the power to increase visitor spending, improve satisfaction, and promote higher rates of return trips."

Ambassadors may be front-line employees at hotels, restaurants, attractions or transportation, civic leaders, students, volunteers, realtors, and anyone else who has the power to influence a visitor's experience while in the county. Ambassadors demonstrate exceptional hospitality skills that support destination marketing objectives and stakeholder alignment; they understand the benefits of tourism to St. Mary's County and serve as advocates for tourism initiatives.

The MAERDAF grant program provides capacity-building support to rural-serving nonprofit organizations and community colleges. These grants strengthen efforts that advance statewide and regional planning, economic and community development, youth engagement and leadership development, energy, and agricultural and forestry education.

"The [FY2027 grant awardees](#) are turning vision into action and demonstrating the incredible impact that local organizations can have when they have the resources to meet the needs of their communities," said Susan O'Neill, Board Chair for the Rural Maryland Council. "The Rural Maryland Council is honored to support this year's recipients as they bring important projects to life and help shape a stronger, more resilient future for rural communities across Maryland."

Throughout 2025 and 2026, VSMMD focused on building and testing the ambassador program with a steering committee of tourism and professional development experts from throughout Southern Maryland. To date, 25 ambassadors have joined SMCTAP, representing various professions within the hospitality industry.



“Through the support of the Rural Maryland Council’s MAERDAF, VSMMD will expand marketing initiatives to ensure a steady candidate pipeline and strengthen familiarization tours and training opportunities,” said Mildenstein.

An ambassador’s journey starts with an orientation and education session, featuring hospitality training, activities, tourism economics overview, and a panel of museum interpreters and leaders. Following the education session, ambassadors participate in familiarization (FAM) tours, offered quarterly, that highlight various regions and activities in the county. To date, VSMMD has hosted three FAM tours, the first being in Leonardtown. Over the course of four hours, ambassadors met local business owners, took a trolley tour with the town administrator, enjoyed a “taste of the town” experience, and heard presentations from the St. Mary’s County Arts Council and town officials. Later in the program, VSMMD hosted a FAM tour on the north side of the county, including a visit to Maryland International Raceway, Xella Winery, The Barns at New Market, Suttler Post Farm and even a taste of Choptico Market chicken. The latest FAM tour was hosted by the Greenwell Foundation, at the corresponding state park; ambassadors got a glimpse of their inclusive programming including horsemanship and hiking opportunities.

Program feedback to date has been positive with 92 percent of survey respondents stating they were “extremely satisfied” with the FAM tours overall and 100 percent of respondents feel more comfortable talking to visitors and making local recommendations.

VSMMD will be accepting applications for the next cohort of ambassadors between October through 31, 2026. To learn more about the program and qualifications, visit: [Become a St. Mary’s County Tourism Ambassador | St. Marys County MD Tourism](#)

Photo captions (from left to right):

Jenna Guzman poses with one of the famous Suttler Post Clydesdales. Ambassadors are encouraged to capture and share their experiences on social media and within their networks. Photo credit: Alyssa Reeves, Visit St. Mary’s MD.

Members of the Beta Cohort had an opportunity to tour Leonardtown aboard a trolley. Throughout the tour, Laschelle McKay, Leonardtown Administrator, provided updates on upcoming developments and importance of tourism to the town’s economy. Photo credit: Liz Mildenstein, Visit St. Mary’s MD.



Members of Cohort 1 listen on as leaders from the historic sites in St. Mary's County discuss the significance of their site. From left: Susan Youhn of Point Lookout State Park, Travis Parno of Historic St. Mary's City, Peter LaPorte of the St. Mary's Historical Society, and Katherine Humphries of Historic Sotterley. The panel was moderated by Liz Mildenstein, Executive Director of Visit St. Mary's MD. Photo credit: Alyssa Reeves, Visit St. Mary's MD.



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VSMMD is a 501(c)(6) and the official destination marketing organization for St. Mary's County, focusing on attraction development, marketing, and helping tourism partners deliver unique visitor experiences.