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PRESS RELEASE

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RURAL MARYLAND COUNCIL HONORS RURAL COMMUNITY ADVOCATES

Annapolis, MD – The Rural Maryland Council (RMC) and its membership convened at the DoubleTree by Hilton in Annapolis on Wednesday, November 19, 2025, for its Annual Meeting and Rural Impact Awards Ceremony. This annual event provides an overview of upcoming events and activities for 2026 and honors outstanding advocates for rural Maryland communities. Board Chair Susan O'Neill served as the master of ceremonies for the evening and shared, "It was an honor to celebrate our Rural Community Advocates, whose commitment and leadership truly embody the heart of rural Maryland. Their efforts strengthen our communities, expand opportunity, and inspire us all to continue advancing a more prosperous, vibrant, and connected Rural Maryland."

This year, seven awards were presented for the 2025 Rural Impact Award Ceremony:

Outstanding Rural Community Volunteers Award to *John and Ann Richards for leadership, dedication, and noteworthy volunteer achievements beyond the call of one's professional duties to help improve their community.* John and Ann Richards have dedicated more than five decades to strengthening agriculture, youth development, and community life in St. Mary's County. Through their long-standing leadership with the St. Mary's County Fair, where John served 40 years as president and Ann led creative programs including the fair's sign and T-shirt design competition, they helped modernize facilities, support student learning, and preserve local traditions. Their service extends to 4H leadership, agricultural education, community fundraising, and faith-based work, and they continue to serve as active mentors and advocates for rural Maryland.

Outstanding Rural Economic Development Award to *Frederick County Agricultural Innovation Grant Program* for their leadership, dedication, and noteworthy achievement to help improve economic development opportunities in rural communities. Established in 2021, the program supports diversification, resiliency, and innovation within Frederick County's agricultural sector. To date, it has awarded \$1.76 million across nine grant cycles, funding 77 farm projects and generating 163 full-time and 221 part-time jobs. The program has also leveraged significant private investment, yielding \$6.40 for every \$1 of county funding. Katie Stevens, Director of the Office of Agriculture for Frederick County Government, accepted the award on behalf of the program.

Outstanding Rural Community Development Award to *Building African American Minds (BAAM)* for leadership, dedication, and noteworthy achievement to help improve rural communities. For nearly two decades, Building African American Minds (BAAM) has been a driving force for positive change in Easton and surrounding rural communities, growing from a small initiative into a comprehensive program that uplifts students, supports families, and strengthens Talbot County. With the new BAAM Academic Center, the organization now serves as a central hub for learning, mentorship, athletics, character development, and cultural enrichment. Through partnerships with Talbot County Public Schools, local employers, libraries, and cultural institutions, BAAM brings essential

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resources directly into the community, creating safe and supportive opportunities for youth to thrive and helping improve student outcomes, family engagement, and community involvement.

Outstanding Rural Community Development to Community Behavioral Health for leadership, dedication, and noteworthy achievement to help improve rural communities. Founded in 2013, Community Behavioral Health (CBH) provides a wide range of behavioral health services on Maryland's Eastern Shore, including outpatient psychiatry and therapy, addiction treatment, intensive outpatient programs, case management, psychiatric rehabilitation, early childhood support, school-based prevention, and food security assistance. With a strong multidisciplinary workforce and training partnership with George Washington University, CBH expands access to high-quality mental health and addiction care across rural Maryland through collaboration with state and local partners.

Rural Champion Award to *Delegate Steven J. Arentz for outstanding leadership and public service in promoting legislation and policy solutions to benefit rural communities.* Delegate Steven Arentz has represented the Eastern Shore in the Maryland House of Delegates since 2013, serving in key roles such as Deputy Minority Whip, Chair of the Eastern Shore Delegation, and House Chair of the Queen Anne's County Delegation. He has been a strong advocate for rural communities, including requesting a House floor budget amendment to fully fund the Rural Maryland Council at \$9 million. His leadership also extends beyond the legislature, having strengthened regional collaboration through the Upper Shore Regional Council and previously serving as President of the Queen Anne's County Commissioners. Delegate Arentz is recognized for his bipartisan approach and steadfast commitment to rural Maryland.

Rural Legacy Award to Delegate Charles J. Otto - The Rural Maryland Council presented the Rural Legacy Award posthumously to Delegate Charles J. Otto in recognition of his leadership and lifelong dedication to Maryland's rural communities. A lifelong Mt. Vernon resident, he brought decades of farming and Farm Bureau experience to his 14 years in the House of Delegates, where he represented Somerset, Wicomico, and Worcester counties and became a respected voice on agricultural and rural issues. He served as Deputy Minority Whip and on committees shaping policy for farmers, watermen, and small businesses, while also remaining active in organizations including the Maryland Grain Producers Utilization Board, local Farm Bureaus, Delmarva Poultry Industry, the Somerset Ruritan Club, and the Mt. Vernon Volunteer Fire Department. Known for his kindness and commitment to the Eastern Shore, Delegate Otto leaves a lasting legacy. In his memory, the Rural Maryland Foundation is donating \$500 to the Somerset County Young Farmers Association.

The Rural Maryland Council operates under the direction of a 40-member executive board in a nonpartisan and nondiscriminatory manner. It serves as the state's federally designated rural development council and functions as a voice for rural Maryland, advocating for and helping rural communities and businesses across the state to flourish and to gain equity to its suburban and urban counterparts. The vision for RMC is the ultimate realization that residents in rural communities are achieving success in education and employment, have access to affordable, quality health care and other vital public services, and live in an environment where natural and cultural resources are being sustained for future generations.

Photo Caption: *From left to right: BAAM representatives Dr. James Bell, Dr. William Ryan, Jamico Moon, Xavier Rahim, and Jair Deveraux; RMC Executive Director Charlotte Davis; and Mid-Shore Regional Council Executive Director Scott Warner.*