



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

The Rural Ontario Institute Announces Launch of the 2026 Rural Change Makers Program

GUELPH, ON September 25, 2026 – The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) is pleased to announce the launch of the 2026 Rural Change Makers (RCM) Program and the 24 young leaders who have begun their transformational leadership journey.

“Young leaders are the future of our rural communities. It is inspiring to see the passion and talents this year’s cohort brings with them, as well as the ways they are involved in their communities. By taking part in the program, these changemakers will join a powerful network of more than 80 emerging leaders who are making a difference in over 60 rural communities across Ontario,” said **Emily Morrison**, Chair of the ROI Board.

“Rural Ontario feeds our families, powers our economy, and helps make Ontario the best place to live, work and raise a family. As we face trade disruptions and global uncertainty, our government is proud to invest in the next generation of leaders who will protect our rural communities, strengthen our economy and ensure families can continue to count on a strong supply of food grown and made right here at home,” said **Sam Oosterhoff**, Minister of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness.

The Rural Change Makers program builds young leaders throughout rural and northern Ontario, equipping them with the practical skills needed to lead meaningful change and act on complex priorities in their lives and communities. It offers incredible benefit for young adults and communities by ensuring emerging leaders are agile, connected, skilled and ready to lead the future of communities. This transformative program is supported by regional partners including Opiikapawin Services LP (OSLP) ᐅᐱᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ ᐃᑦᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦᑲᑦ - representing a collective of 24 First Nations from Northwestern Ontario, Community Futures Huron, TRENVAL Business Development Corporation, Four County Labour Market Planning Board, Metis Nation of Ontario Women’s Council, Town of Hanover, Town of Minto, Municipality of Thames Centre and the People’s Archive of Ontario.

“Strong rural communities depend on forward-thinking leaders who can inspire innovation, build connections, and create opportunities for future growth. The Rural Changemakers Program will help emerging leaders develop the skills and confidence to support rural businesses and communities alike. I offer my heartfelt congratulations to the 2026 cohort as they begin their journey this September and wish them every success in the months ahead,” said **Lisa Thompson**, Minister of Rural Affairs.

Throughout the program Change Makers will participate in a series of developmental Learning Labs, come together for experiential learning opportunities including an Ignite Action Lab and Rural Youth Summit culminating their program journey. They will complete community and self-assessments, establish planning committees that inform the program, and develop Community Economic Development SMART Action Plans to guide their leadership projects as they build their preferred futures and create strong rural communities across Ontario.

“Working closely with Rural Change Makers over the past 6 years, I have learned they have something in common: they care deeply about their communities and are committed to building strong futures in rural Ontario. They are curious and brave with incredible passion, creativity, and good ideas. I’m excited to welcome this year’s young leaders and discover the positive impacts they will make,” said **Melanie Bidiuk**, ROI Communications and Program Manager.

“Change makers come from all walks of life and share a strong desire to make a positive difference throughout rural Ontario. Change makers and stewards are strengthening local economies, with the program seeing a 45% increase in rural youth retention since 2019. I’m excited to get to know these remarkable young leaders and discover the meaningful change they are creating in their communities,” said **Kimberly Earls**, ROI Executive Director.

Please join us in welcoming the 2026 Rural Change Makers:

- **Aditya Bandla** (GTA) – Aditya is an ecosystems scientist with a deep passion for connecting science, sustainability, and community impact. Through the Rural Change Makers program, Aditya hopes to deepen his understanding of the climate challenges facing rural Ontario communities, strengthen his leadership skills, and learn how community-driven initiatives can support resilient local economies, and long-term environmental and social well-being.
- **Afreen Shabbir** (Dryden) – Afreen works in community and regional workforce development across Northwestern Ontario, with a focus on research, partnership development, community engagement and initiatives that respond to the needs of rural, Northern and remote communities. Through the Rural Change Makers program, Afreen hopes to strengthen her leadership skills, learn from people working in communities across Ontario, and build meaningful relationships with other rural leaders.
- **Alexander Thorne** (Guelph) – Alex supports the administration of leadership programs at the Rural Ontario Institute, where he brings a unique blend of skills and stories, including economics, admin, and rural policy. In the Rural Change Makers program, Alex is looking forward to learning more about municipal policy, the practical steps to creating a successful community initiative, and leadership.



- **Amy Rushlow** (Frankford) – Amy is a passionate advocate for entrepreneurship and economic development in the Bay of Quinte region. In her role, she leads provincial and federal grant programs, provides business advisory services, and creates learning opportunities and events that support the local business community. Through the Rural Change Makers program, Amy hopes to strengthen her leadership skills, prepare for future managerial opportunities, and build meaningful connections with new people in her community.
- **Andrew Grose** (Alma) – Andrew works in sales and administrative support as part of the third generation at the family business with his brother. He is a community volunteer with the Alma Optimist Club, Wellington County Farm Safety Association, and Silver Lake United Church Camp. Andrew is passionate about photography, working with computers, gaming, and building Lego.
- **Angelina Bishnoi** (Penetanguishene) – Through her support of local youth-led projects and community events, Angelina discovered a real passion for youth advocacy, mental health, creativity, and giving back to her community. Angelina joined the Rural Change Makers program because she wants to keep pushing herself outside of her comfort zone, meet new people, and learn how she can take the things she cares about and turn them into meaningful change in her community.
- **Berkley McQueen** (London) – As the founder of a women's fitness community, Berkley has built a business that goes beyond fitness by creating a supportive space where women can build confidence, improve their health, and develop meaningful connections. Through the Rural Change Makers program, Berkley hopes to expand her leadership skills, learn from experienced community leaders, and build meaningful relationships with others who are passionate about creating positive change.
- **Brianna Maltais** (Barrie) – Brianna is a multidisciplinary tap dance artist. She has produced projects that explore the relationship between tap and drumming through collaborative research, and the creation of tap-based instruments. Brianna is curious about how expansive her practice can be, and how art can be a vehicle for building community and creating meaningful change.
- **Brittany Bachellier Cassibo** (Tweed) – Brittany works within her municipality to support initiatives that strengthen community connection and local opportunities. She is passionate about sustainable community development and finding ways to make small communities great places to live, work, and raise a family. Brittany is excited to participate in the Rural Changemakers program to expand her community development

toolkit, and she looks forward to absorbing as much as possible from the program, her peers, and the communities they represent.

- **Hasti Nateghi** (Guelph) – Hasti is studying rural planning and development, and she is particularly interested in how planning decisions affect people's everyday lives. Outside of university, she has volunteered at community events and enjoys meeting people from different backgrounds. Through the Rural Change Makers program, Hasti hopes to learn more about rural Ontario beyond the classroom, hear directly from people living and working in rural communities, and better understand how she can help create better living conditions while advancing equity and social justice.
- **Ishpreet Singh** (Belleville) – Ishpreet is the Founder and CEO of a Belleville-based company focused on delivering professional residential property management solutions across Eastern Ontario. Through the Rural Change Makers Leadership Program, Ishpreet hopes to expand his leadership capacity, learn from fellow changemakers across the province, and develop innovative ideas that help rural communities attract talent, encourage entrepreneurship, and create sustainable economic growth.
- **Jasmine Muszik** (Burlington) – Through her work and love of teaching, Jasmine enjoys creating opportunities for people to learn about where their food comes from, what life on a farm looks like, and the important relationships between rural communities and agriculture. She is especially interested in inspiring future generations and passing down her knowledge, expertise, and passion for farming. Jasmine is excited to join the Rural Change Makers program to meet others who care about rural communities, learn from their experiences, and turn ideas into opportunities that bring people together.
- **Jordyn Domio** (Fenwick) – Jordyn has always been a strong advocate for the agricultural community, and has spent many years serving on boards and associations. She has really enjoyed getting to help serve the agricultural community, and help shape it through meaningful discussion and policy development. Jordyn is really excited to be taking part in the Rural Change Makers program, and hopes to further develop her leadership skills and community understanding through this program.
- **Joshua Young** (Sudbury) – Josh is a planning consultant and proud Northerner with a strong connection to Northern Ontario and the rural communities that make it such a great place to live. He is passionate about building strong, resilient, and sustainable rural communities. Josh is looking forward to the Rural Change Makers program as an opportunity to learn from others, share experiences, and gain new ideas and tools to help build stronger and more resilient rural communities.
- **Kurstin Salisbury** (Foxboro) – Kurstin works in a social innovation research centre at Loyalist College, and sits on the board for several non-profit organizations in her community. Her passions include community development, collaborative initiatives that promote health and well-being, and systems-level change. Through the Rural Change



Makers program, Kurstin hopes to hone her rural community and economic development skills to support her mission as a change agent in her professional and volunteer roles.

- **Lindsay Shalitis** (Westmeath) – Lindsay is studying Social Work and currently works in rural community development and youth programming, supporting rural youth mental health. After graduating school, she wants to continue to pursue a career that directly supports rural youth with access to services and wrap-around support initiatives. Lindsay is excited to be a part of the Rural Change Makers program and is looking forward to connecting with fellow Rural Change Makers.
- **Matthias Brown** (Wapekeka First Nation) – Matthias has experience delivering programs within his community, particularly those focused on youth. He is passionate about hands-on learning and believes there is always an opportunity to learn something new, regardless of age or experience. Matthias enjoys travelling, meeting new people, sharing ideas, and exploring opportunities to become more involved in youth and community initiatives.
- **Mohammed Mubarik Mohammed** (Durham Region) – Mohammed's professional experience focuses on community development, stewardship, project coordination, environmental sustainability and supporting vulnerable communities. He has helped develop projects, secure funding, facilitate workshops, and support entrepreneurship and skills development programs. Throughout this program, Mohammed hopes to improve his leadership and professional skills, build meaningful connections, and learn how to make a greater impact in his community.
- **Morgyn McDonald** (Bancroft) – Morgyn McDonald is the founder of Nothing to Hide, a Métis Craftworks supplier of ethically sourced traditional crafting materials for artists, makers, educators across Canada. Through workshops and mentorship, she helps youth develop crafting skills and explore entrepreneurship. Through the Rural Change Makers Program, Morgyn hopes to strengthen their leadership skills, build partnerships with other rural leaders, and expand opportunities for youth to learn traditional Metis and Canadian crafts, start small businesses, and contribute to thriving rural communities.
- **Navishka Brahmbhatt** (Marathon) – Navishka has experience volunteering and working in healthcare, research, and youth-focused community initiatives, including research on barriers to healthcare access in rural and Northern communities. Passionate about equity, advocacy, and youth engagement, she is interested in creating supportive spaces and opportunities for young people in rural communities. Navishka hopes to pursue a career in medicine while continuing to contribute to community-focused initiatives that improve access and representation.

- **Nicole Flynn** (Centre Hastings) – Nicole is the founder of Nicole Flynn Enterprises, a speaking and presenting business. She shares her lived experience as a person whose life includes Down syndrome, and speaks about breaking down barriers and building real, authentic inclusion. Nicole believes every person deserves to participate fully in a just society. She joined the Rural Change Maker program to build connections and learn how to create lasting change in her community.
- **Prachi Dabholkar** (Kitchener) – Prachi is a dentist and public health researcher who has always been drawn to work that brings people together to improve health and well-being. She is especially passionate about health equity, rural health, youth empowerment, and building stronger, healthier communities. Through the Rural Change Makers program, Prachi hopes to learn from community leaders and fellow participants, strengthen her leadership skills, and explore innovative ways to support thriving rural communities.
- **Shannon Millar** (Trenton) – Shannon has a strong background in the heritage field, and currently works as a Tourism Coordinator within her community. She is passionate about creating welcoming, inclusive, and accessible spaces where people feel comfortable learning, connecting, and participating in their communities. Through the Rural Change Makers program, Shannon hopes to learn from other rural community leaders, strengthen her leadership skills, and explore new ways to make meaningful contributions to her community.
- **Sydney Buhrow** (Stratford) – Sydney has always been passionate about rural advocacy. Coming from a small town herself, she understands the unique challenges and incredible strengths of rural communities. Her role in coordinating clinical placements for medical students across rural Ontario opened her eyes to the beauty of rural medicine and shaped her own goal of practicing as a rural physician one day. Sydney is especially excited to keep growing as a leader and collaborator, and she has big ideas for community initiatives, and cannot wait to bring them to life as a Rural Change Maker.

Support for the Rural Change Makers program has been generously provided in part by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness, RBC Foundation, the Gloria Baylis Foundation, J.P. Bickell Foundation, Kawartha Credit Union, Farm Credit Canada, Northern Credit Union, Ontario Mutual Insurance Association and the Four County Labour Market Planning Board.

If you would like to support young rural leaders, we invite you to become a program sponsor. Your sponsorship ensures youth have access to expert training and necessary resources to make a difference in their community. For more information, please contact

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ABOUT ROI

The Rural Ontario Institute (ROI) is a non-profit organization committed to developing leaders, informing decision makers and connecting communities. ROI delivers the renowned Advanced Agricultural Leadership Program (AALP) and the Rural Change Makers (RCM) program, a leadership and rural development program working to creating meaningful change with communities. We provide data research and analysis, sharing information and equipping communities with tools through our Rural Community Wellbeing factsheets and dashboards, and Rural Housing Information System - addressing the housing and homelessness crisis faced by thousands of Canadians. The RCM program is funded in part by the Ontario Ministry of Agriculture, Food and Agribusiness.

ASSOCIATED LINKS

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