

# PROGRESS CHENANGO

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Publication of The Evening Sun

## Chenango County Area Agency on Aging offers vital support to older residents

**KELLI MILLER**  
EVENING SUN

**NORWICH** — The Chenango County Area Agency on Aging (CCAAOA) offers home and community based programs designed to help county residents 60 years of age and older and provides access to well planned, coordinated packages of in-home and other supportive services designed to support and supplement informal care.

The agency has a multitude of services that include expanded in-home services for the elderly, outreach, case management, health and community activities, Personal Emergency Response System, Home Energy Assistance Program, legal assistance and more.

Through information and education, the agency brings public awareness of resources and issues impacting seniors and their families and caregivers.

“A few of the most significant programs we offer

are the Health Insurance Counseling and Advocacy program (HICAP),” said Chenango County Area Agency on Aging Director Heather Felter.

She said this program helps people enroll in Medicare, or if someone needs to change a plan, they make sure it’s appropriate. They also review savings plans.

“My job is to help navigate the services for the community and see what we can offer,” Felter said. “And some people don’t even realize the multitude of services we have to offer.”

“All of the work we undertake is in support of keeping people safe and in their homes longer,” she said. “We also offer home delivered meals, and have eight congruent meal sites during the day with activities.”

“One of the recent activities we offered was a craft class at the Norwich Senior Center,” said Felter. “It was a four series workshop in collaboration with the Chenango



Last year, the Chenango County Area Agency on Aging (CCAAOA) located at 5 Court Street in the county building, celebrated their 50th anniversary. They offer home and community based programs designed to help county residents 60 years of age and older and provide access to well planned, coordinated packages of in-home and other supportive services designed to support and supplement informal care. (Photo by Kelli Miller)

County Historical Society Museum.”

They usually have about five to six seniors sign up for classes and after the stained glass workshop, Felter said they took their finished

designs with them.

“Some sites offer Bingo and playing cards to help fight isolation,” she continued. “Seniors can come in and have a hot cup of coffee and mingle.”

“Those that can’t get out and visit, we go to them with our outreach workers and visit, taking the time to listen, care and show support for their needs,” she added.

Another service the agen-

cy provides is applying for Home Energy Assistance.

“We help seniors 60 and over apply for the Home Energy Assistance Program

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## Earlville Opera House preserves history and offers cultural entertainment



Santa and Mrs. Claus bring holiday cheer to children and families during the Earlville Opera House’s annual Holiday Open House. (Submitted photo)

**TYLER MURPHY**  
EVENING SUN

The Earlville Opera House (EOH), a historic cultural center between Chenango and Madison counties, celebrated a remarkable year in 2024, marked by a wide array of artistic endeavors and significant infrastructure improvements.

The EOH was founded as a non-profit in 1972 to bring arts programming to rural Central New York. Since then, it has grown into a community service organization that blends cultural, educational, and historical significance, explained Executive Director Michelle Connelly. Housed in an 1892 two-story theater listed on the National Register of Historic Places since 1973, EOH remains a part of the community, hosting performances, workshops, exhibitions, and grants that foster art and culture. “The arts drive economic growth,” Connelly said. “Our efforts to preserve this building and

create meaningful programming go hand-in-hand with supporting the vitality of our area.”

In its 52nd season, EOH sought to honor its rich history and embraced new changes. The highlights of the year demonstrated its dual role as a cultural institution and community hub.

The EOH’s Main Stage offered a lineup of local, regional, national, and international talent in 2024, reinforcing its commitment to cultural diversity and quality entertainment. Folk icon Richard Thompson, who drew attendees from neighboring states, was a standout performer.

“Presenting artists of this caliber helps establish EOH as a premier venue,” Connelly said. “It’s an honor to bring musicians like Thompson to our small community.”

Other notable acts included Grammy-winning banjo virtuoso Alison Brown, nine-time All-Ireland fiddle champion Eileen Ivers,

powerhouse Celtic group Gaelic Storm, and John McCutcheon, described by Johnny Cash as “the most impressive instrumentalist.”

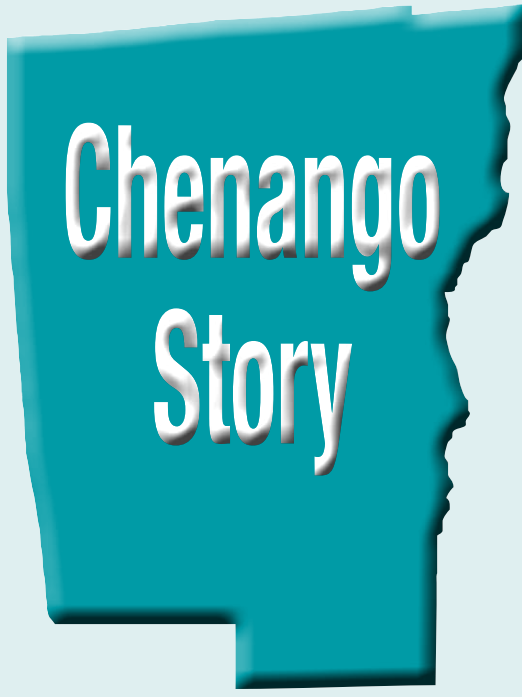
Local productions also shone brightly. The Sherburne Music-Theater Society’s (SMTS) performances of “Joseph and the Amazing Technicolor Dreamcoat” and “Yes, Virginia, There Is a Santa Claus” drew enthusiastic audiences, as did the Sherburne-Earlville High School’s rendition of “Little Women.”

EOH’s Arts Café series provided an intimate setting for acts like Tumbleweed Gumbo’s Irish-inspired tunes and Jim Paradis’ storytelling-driven folk music.

Outdoors, the Courtyard’s charming setting welcomed performances by Fish Creek Rodeo and JP Payton, offering audiences a chance to enjoy live music in a relaxed atmosphere.

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A hand painted community sign near the Berry Hill Fire Tower in McDonough created by local artist Ryan Warner. (Submitted photo)



The Berry Hill Fire Tower is near McDonough State Forest and Bowman Lake State Park. The fire tower is open for recreation at one of the highest points in Chenango County. (Submitted photo)

## Restoring a view of community beauty at McDonough's Berry Hill Fire Tower

**SOPHIA ROOT**  
EVENING SUN

When looking for natural beauty and a strong community, look no further than McDonough, New York.

Visitors and residents alike now have the opportunity to experience the great sweeping views at one of the highest points in Chenango County. The Berry Hill Fire Tower stands at an elevation of 1960 feet and offers a unique recreational experience. The tower is the only one open for recreation on public lands in Central New York and provides an impressive view.

Fire towers have played a crucial role in New York State's history. For nearly a century, observers watched the forests from

over 100 fire towers, reporting the first signs of fire to Forest Rangers. However, in the early 1970s, air surveillance began to replace these towers, leading to their gradual phase-out.

Thanks to volunteer-based initiatives and funding support, many of New York's fire towers, including the one in Chenango County, have been revived. In 2021, the Berry Hill Fire Tower reopened to the public after extensive renovations, supported by \$125,000 from NY Public Works. Improvements include a new driveway, parking area, and picnic spot. The tower and observer's cabin were also updated with new windows, reinforced stairs, and fresh paint.

Visitors can access the tower year-round,

and it is open to the public from sunrise to sunset. There is parking for about eight vehicles at the base of a 1,000-foot driveway leading to the tower. The New York State Chapter of the Forest Fire Lookout Association provides volunteers to maintain the site and educate visitors.

In April of this year, the McDonough community experienced the theft of a donated sign. Hand crafted and painted by local artist Ryan Warner, the sign was unbolted and stolen from its posts. This incident deeply affected the community, particularly those involved in town improvement projects. Tim O'Brien, a community volunteer, expressed his frustration on Facebook, emphasizing the effort that goes into such projects and the sense of community they

represent.

Since then, progress has been made to replace the sign. Commerce Chenango has contributed funds, and Warner is working diligently to create a new sign. "Ryan (Warner) put a large project to the side to help McDonough get back a piece of what was stolen," O'Brien reported, adding that the new sign is expected to be completed within weeks.

The Berry Hill Fire Tower is near McDonough State Forest and Bowman Lake State Park. It is the only fire tower open for recreation on public lands in Central New York.

The area stands as an example of natural beauty and community spirit.

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**This is the main summary of our Angel Fund:**  
Leatherstocking Veterinary Group donates 25% of the net profit from their online pharmacy sales to local animal related charities and individuals in need. As a small locally owned and operated business, we are extremely grateful for the support of our community.

**Robyn Genovese: Shelter Manager and Licensed Veterinary Technician - The Humane Society of Rome**  
Marcy Veterinary Clinic brought the year 2024 to a blissful end with a well-deserving donation to a nearby animal shelter. Leatherstocking Veterinary Group donates 25% of the net profit from their online pharmacy sales to local animal related charities and individuals in need. This program, the Angel Fund, is very special to the employees.

When given the option to pick a local animal-related charity the employees at Marcy Vet Clinic chose The Humane Society of Rome. It was an easy choice for the employees, not just because of what The Humane Society of Rome does and what they stand for, but because of their people. Robyn, shelter manager, was a huge reason for their decision to give back. Three simple, yet complex words to describe Robyn would be caring, selfless and hard working. She goes above and beyond for the animals at the shelter and does everything she possibly can to help animals that aren't at the shelter. Day or night Robyn will do what she can and what she thinks is right for the animals. Every day Robyn strives to place animals in a home that they deserve. All of the staff at Marcy Vet Clinic are animal lovers and truly appreciate her dedication. With this donation, we hope to lessen the burden on the Humane Society of Rome and help them to continue to care for our fur friends. As a small locally owned and operated business, Leatherstocking Vet Group is extremely grateful for the support of our community. It is our pleasure to give back!

**Koop Wildlife Rehabilitation: Dori and Charley Koop**  
New Berlin Veterinary Clinic was able to give a heart-warming surprise shortly after the holidays at the end of 2024. Leatherstocking Veterinary Group donates 25% of the net profit from their online pharmacy sales to local animal related charities and individuals in need. Our donation program is called the Angel Fund, and this year Koop Wildlife Rehabilitation was chosen to receive our donation.

Wildlife Rehabilitator Dori and Charley Koop of Koop Wildlife Rehabilitation have been helping the animals of Chenango County and the surrounding areas for 20 years.

Dori and Charley are very passionate about helping wildlife and truly enjoy what they do. If we have a wild bird or even a bunny come into the clinic from a good Samaritan, they will come offer care. They even volunteer their time and expertise to assist the DEC with rehabilitation. It was an easy choice to offer this donation to two people who help the animals in our area as much as our clinic does and we wanted to show our appreciation to their time and dedication to every animal and working with us to preserve and offering second chances to many animals big or small. As a small locally owned and operated business, Leatherstocking Vet Group is extremely grateful for the support of our community. It is our pleasure to give back!

**Chelsea Williamson - Rover's Do Over**  
Heritage Veterinary Clinic brought the year 2024 to a wonderful end with a well-deserving donation to a nearby nonprofit, no-kill animal rescue organization. Leatherstocking Veterinary Group donates 25% of the net profit from their online pharmacy sales to local animal related charities and individuals in need. This program is called the Angel Fund and this year HVC chose Rover's Do Over of Frankfort, NY

Chelsea Williamson, founder of Rover's Do Over, operates solely on donations and volunteers. They do not have a facility and rely on foster homes to house their rescue dogs. Their mission is to create a brighter future for the pets in our community by encouraging and inspiring our community to come together and be the heroes that these pets in need deserve. In Rover's Do Over inaugural year, they were able to assist 228 dogs, with 217 of them already finding their forever homes! HVC and Chelsea have been working closer together for years offering help in many ways to any furry friends in need. It was an easy decision to offer the Angel Fund to Rover's Do Over for the hard work and dedication to these pups for a second chance. As a small locally owned and operated business, Leatherstocking Vet Group is extremely grateful for the support of our community. It is our pleasure to give back!

**Athelas Therapeutic Riding, Inc. Anneliese Gilchrest, Program Manager and Leader Instructor**  
Athelas Therapeutic Riding Inc. offers many equine assisted activities to individuals who face physical, emotional and mental challenges with the help of instructors, volunteers and of course, therapy horses. Who better to support than an organization that gives back to others? The Leatherstocking Services employees truly appreciate and admire this group for all they do for those individuals who have special needs throughout the year.

Athelas Therapeutic Riding, Inc. is a 501 c(3) non-profit agency located at Northfield Farms in Otsego County, in scenic upstate New York. Athelas provides opportunities for people with varying ability levels to challenge themselves physically and emotionally and to set goals to improve their quality of life through activities with horses.

The Leatherstocking Veterinary Group donates 25% of the net profit from their online pharmacy sales to local animal related charities. As a small locally owned and operated business, Leatherstocking Vet Group is extremely grateful for the support of our community. It is our pleasure to give back!



## Chenango County Area Agency on Aging offers vital support to older residents -

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(HEAP) and everyday services to assist people with caregivers; getting them the resources they need," she said.

Felter noted if anyone shows up at their door and they can't help them, they turn to New York Connects and find the right person or department for their need.

She said their agency also provides legal services through the Legal Aid Society with an attorney visiting the office once a week to help families with estate planning, wills, deeds and more. It is all contribution based.

They also work with Social Services, The Impact Project, and Catholic Services.

Felter said they work with different agencies that provide aid services such as Chenango Valley Home that offers Dayhab. The Dayhab program supports and balances out the times when a caregiver needs to go to work, take a break, or must run errands.

Felter explained they solve housing issues with seniors and homelessness, finding the right path and direction to support their safety and well-being.

"We try to figure out how to keep people safe in their own homes and have worked with the Impact Project that offers roof repair, furnace replacement and handicap ramps," she said.

"We also have our own program, The Medical Loan Closet, that we can use if an insurance company doesn't pay for a walker or medical shower benches or transfer benches, things like that," said Felter.

During 2024, Felter said they celebrated their 50th anniversary in West Park with an invitation to the public to join the festivities, music and food. She said the amount of people that showed up to support their agency was overwhelming.

"Some of the avenues have changed in the last 50 years as we have State and Federal funding streams that help offset costs for taxpayers in the community," Felter said. "The Area Agency on Aging is multi-generational agency that supports all ages.



At the beginning of this year, the Chenango County Area Agency on Aging collaborated with Chenango Planning and Development to work on a grant through New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA) to receive four electric vehicles. The agency took possession of the vehicles to support meal deliveries and senior home visits by outreach workers. (Photo by Kelli Miller)

Recently, Felter said they had been working with the Director of Chenango Planning and Development Shane Butler, and he explained different grants that were available through New York State Energy Research and Development Authority (NYSERDA). He said different funding options were available for clean energy.

"It sounded like something we wanted for our agency as we were looking to change our fleet over and have our own vehicles for the home delivery program," she said.

Felter explained the vehicle would come at no cost to the county taxpayer, so this was a win-win, plus with the extra vehicle it would help expand their delivery program and get people off the wait list. Also, she said, giving the agency more availability to get to their seniors on the outreach program.

As the grant process moved along, they were informed more funding was available and ended up taking possession of four electric vehicles.

"We have the sustainability in our funding and budget to take care of the vehicles," she added.

Along with the grant came a lengthy and supportive warranty with the dealership to provide any servicing the vehicles may need. She noted charging the vehicles will come out of the agency's day to day travel, and paid by state and federal funding.

She said the Sultera electric vehicles charge faster than other electric vehicles and hold a charge longer.

"We're also excited about the extra space in the back, giving us plenty of room to load up meals for senior deliveries," Felter said.

The charging stations

for the agency will be built behind the Red Roof Inn and will also allow the public to charge their electric vehicles.

"These additional vehicles will better our services and allow our county employees to reach out to more seniors in Chenango County," said Felter. "We average about five home visits a day and that calls for a lot of driving."

"We're really excited to have the additional support," she added.

### Looking back over 2024

"If I could give myself any advise, it would be to give myself and my staff more grace and to have humility," Felter said. "I wanted to be able to fix it all, and at once, but come to find out, it takes time and with many people's supportive efforts."

"I really tried to take my time and listen, to be able to listen and be present with our older adults at home visits and senior centers by asking a lot of questions," she said.

### 2025 Goals

Felter said they are building collaborations with agencies and organizations such as The Mobile Food Pantry, and the Community Cupboard of Edmeston, owned by Maggie Johnson and her husband Andy.

"They are such amazing people and have been so gracious with our seniors," she added.

The agency is also partnering with Central New York Food Bank and taking on deliveries with food boxes and delivering to seniors in rural areas.

Felter said they're adding many new programs to the agency and look forward to offering additional support to area seniors.

She said New York State has embarked on the State Masterplan for Aging (MPA) which is designed to support older adults to live healthily lives while living independently. The bill was signed by Governor Kathy Hochul last year.

"We all know we're aging and one of the largest populations in Chenango County is the aging population," said Felter. "We're working on our four year plan and have our goals set to 2028."

She noted at one of the aging conferences, she met a husband and wife team that have created a wrist band to support seniors. The wrist band will store vital medical information and is waterproof.

"We'll be partnering with them to supply the wrist bands for our seniors," she added. "The band is inexpensive and has a one time fee of \$16.95."

"We'll be buying quite a few of those to have on hand," said Felter.

Recently she found another company called RELISH, and said they are servicing seniors with dementia/Alzheimer and the elderly. Their products offer a program with music, daily charts, medication counts, and loved ones can also check in to view activities on the app.

After analyzing county population graphs and stats, Felter has concerns as the aging population in Chenango County, ages 65 and older, are one of the largest contributors of revenue at 73%.

She said there is a large number of senior homeowners that are having a difficult time keeping up with home maintenance.

And she noted the numbers

show there are 5,200 caregivers in the Chenango County community that take care of a husband, a wife, children, grandchildren, parents, or grandparents.

Felter said in Chenango County, over 500 seniors receive personal care and services from the Area Agency on Aging, and that 31% having mobility issues and 82% are in need of help with house work, meal prep, laundry, and more.

She said Chenango County seniors aged 80 and above, living alone and with low income is over 50% and over 80% live outside of Norwich. "There are 486 of our clients living at home and as long as they live at home and safe, it is a lesser toll on the taxpayers dollar," she said.

"All of these stats are concerning as we see a definite decline of population headed our way and with that comes a decline in commerce," Felter added.

"However, we continue to support our seniors and move forward, trying to find grants through NYSRDA-Energy Assistance, Greater Opportunities, Salvation Army, Manufactured Homes and Improvement grants," she said.

"Our long term care council looks into these grants and find what we can use for senior needs," Felter added.

The challenges for the agency have mostly been with transportation. Felter mentioned they have collaborated with companies, "Get There", a rural health network offering uber ride support, and recently signed on with Go-Go Grandparent.

"We've been working with Go-Go Grandparent to get drivers and our seniors to make direct contact on their

app for transportation needs, but we can arrange the rides when we have drivers in our area," she said.

"We're working with the company to ramp up transportation for our community," Felter added.

An outreach worker said some challenges come from the seniors and their unwillingness to ask for help.

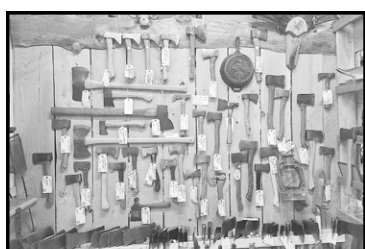
"Many of clients I have don't like to ask for help," said Outreach Worker Samantha Fransisco. "A lot of the seniors don't realize the program services are there for a reason and it's frustrating when they don't want to listen."

"I love this job," Fransisco added. "Heather is a great boss and a great person to be around and the job is one of the most thankful jobs I've ever had."

Felter said they have been fortunate to find people who are passionate about helping others and many of her staff have moved up in positions and changed titles and gained leadership positions.

We've added new positions within our agency along with a senior outreach worker and a new deputy director.

The agency has 31 employees and over 150 volunteers and is located in the county office building at 5 Court Street. Hours are Monday through Friday 8:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. For more information call 607-337-1770 or go to their website at [www.co.chenango.ny.us/aaao](http://www.co.chenango.ny.us/aaao)



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# Earlville Opera House preserves history and offers cultural entertainment -

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## Community workshops and events

Workshops and classes played a key role in the opera house's efforts to engage the community. Youth summer theater camps led by Jenni's Music Recital and Spot Dance Center introduced young participants to the performing arts, while Schmidt Dance Studio's line dancing classes offered a fun and inclusive way for people to stay active.

Reyna Stagnaro's three-part songwriting workshop was another highlight, empowering participants to explore their musical talents.

A particularly memorable moment came when "Downbeat Percussion," the official drumline of the Buffalo Bills, visited EOH. Hundreds of students from five local school districts participated in the event. "Seeing the kids light up as they engaged with professional musicians was incredible," Connelly said. "Opportunities like this

show the transformative power of the arts."

Seasonal workshops, including holiday-themed card-making and ornament-making classes, added a festive touch to the programming, while exhibitions in the EOH Galleries highlighted the diverse talents of local and regional artists. Community events like "Make Music Day" and Earlville Celebration Day's tie-dye activity further reinforced EOH's commitment to bringing people together through the arts.



Families and children embrace their creative side during a tie-dyeing activity at Earlville Celebration Day, one of the many community events hosted by the Earlville Opera House in 2024. (Submitted photo)

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### Preserving a historic landmark

As part of its mission to preserve the 1892 building, EOH undertook significant restoration projects in 2024. Nearly \$75,000 was invested in repairing the building's bricks, a key step in ensuring its longevity. The organization also acquired additional land behind the building,

laying the groundwork for an expanded "Courtyard" and a dedicated outdoor performance space.

"These improvements aren't just about maintaining the past," Connelly explained. "They're about building a future where the arts can continue to thrive in Earlville."

In another nod to sustainability, the opera house

removed an old oil boiler and unified its heating system by integrating a newer gas boiler. This upgrade improved efficiency while reducing costs, ensuring that the building remains both functional and environmentally conscious.

The Artisan Gift Shop celebrated its 27th annual Holiday Gift Shop in 2024.

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Featuring handcrafted items by local artisans, the shop offered a unique blend of creativity and commerce, while new EOH-branded merchandise — including handmade mugs, t-shirts, and magnets — bolstered revenue streams and community engagement.

### Supporting arts through grants

The opera house's impact extended far beyond Earlville through important grant-making initiatives. With funding from a senate initiative through the New York State Legislature, the organization distributed \$162,950 in cultural grants to 44 organizations and individual artists across Broome, Chenango, and Otsego counties. An additional \$15,000 from the Hoyt Foundation supported arts projects in Broome County.

"These grants allow us to amplify the reach of the arts across the region," Connelly said. "By supporting other organizations and artists, we're fostering a more vibrant cultural landscape for everyone."

Additional grant funding came from the Community Foundation for South Central New York, RC Smith Foundation, and Golden Artist Colors, among oth-

ers. These resources enabled EOH to sustain and grow its programs, ensuring that access to the arts remains a priority for diverse audiences.

As 2025 approaches, EOH is focused on expanding the Courtyard and developing an outdoor performance area that will increase the venue's size and ability to host larger programming. The organization is also preparing to assume stewardship of the Quincy Square Museum, which will allow it to introduce history-focused programming alongside its arts initiatives.

"Our goal is to continue growing the arts and flourishing as a community institution," Connelly said. "One of our long-term objectives is to create an endowment that ensures the Opera House's sustainability for generations to come."

Reflecting on the year, Connelly expressed gratitude for the community's unwavering support. "We had a truly successful year with robust cultural programming that helped grow our artistic community," she said. "We wouldn't change a thing and wish to replicate it."



Artist Phoebe Rotter's work drew crowds to the Earlville Opera House Gallery, part of a yearlong series of exhibitions showcasing regional talent and creativity.



The historic 1892 Earlville Opera House, a landmark of Central New York, received significant preservation updates in 2024, including brick repairs and plans for an expanded outdoor performance space.

## Chenango County Historical Society

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Chenango County Historical Society programs are made possible by the New York State Council on the Arts with the support of the Office of the Governor and the New York State Legislature.

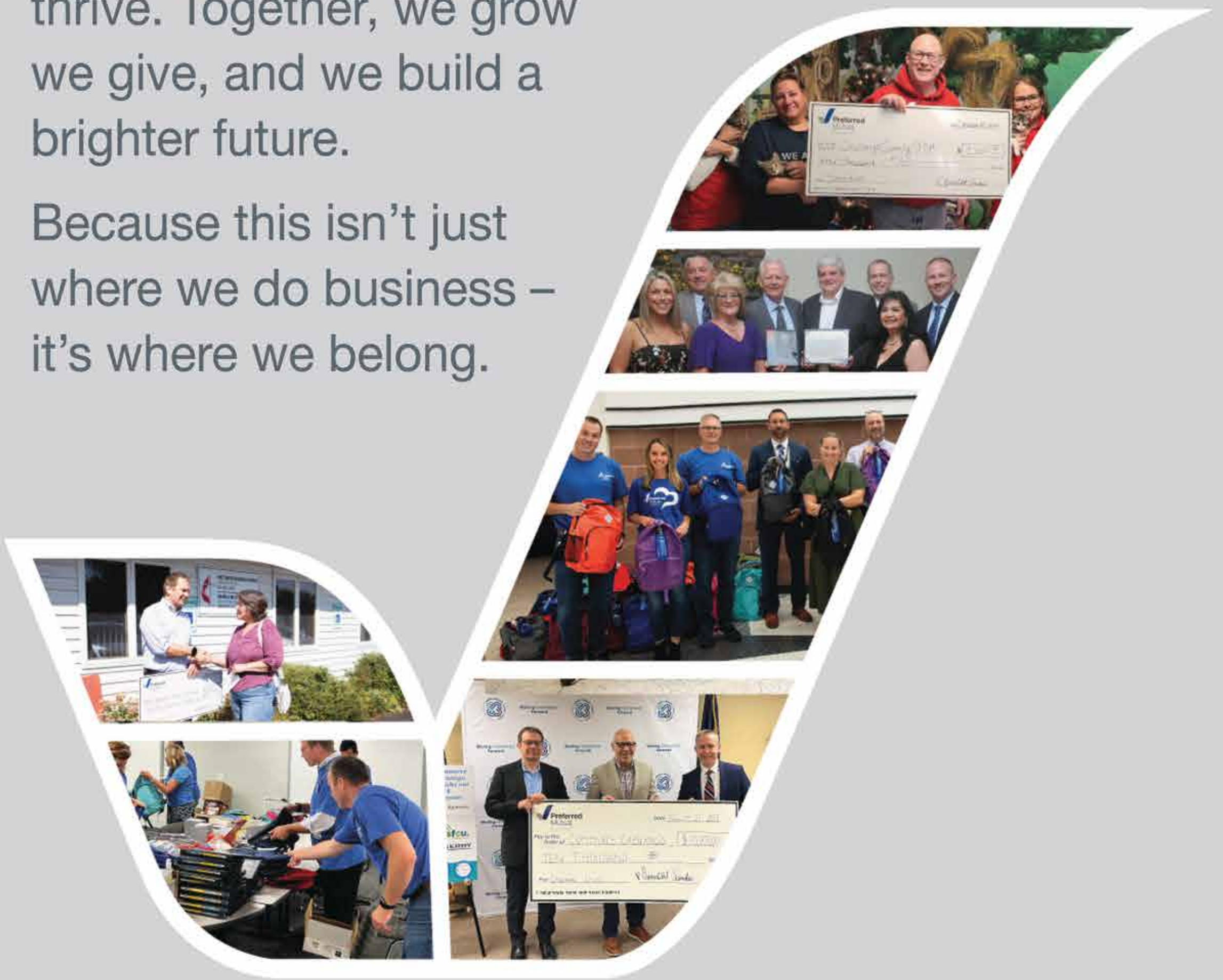


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