As Chair of the Southwestern Commission’s Board of Directors, I am proud to reflect on the collective achievements of this vital organization. The Southwestern Commission’s mission includes the phrase “to improve the quality of life.” I can tell you with certainty that each staff member at the Commission works tirelessly to that end—addressing the diverse challenges of the towns and counties in western North Carolina to improve life for us all.

The initiative to collaborate with the seven western counties to maximize opioid settlement funding exemplifies the Commission’s commitment to tackling complex issues head-on. Yet, as you can see in the following pages, the depth of this organization’s impact extends far beyond this singular initiative.

We often joke that many North Carolinians think “nothing exists past Asheville.” While it’s a funny quote, that mindset is why I feel so passionately about working jointly as a region. Our success hinges on working together—collaborating about our challenges, sharing in the successes of programs that work, and partnering to solve mutual problems. By leveraging relationships with member governments and stakeholders, we navigate complexities and identify opportunities for positive change.

As we celebrate our accomplishments in this annual report, we recognize the invaluable contributions of community leaders, volunteers, and partners. Together, we continue to strive towards a resilient and thriving region. To that end, I hope you will continue your involvement in the Southwestern Commission and help us as we improve the quality of life for all in Region A.

The Southwestern Commission is focused on a range of key issues in the seven western counties that are continually changing or evolving. Some of the projects we’ve worked on this past year include:

- Leading the initiative to optimize the opioid settlement funds.
- Working to expand broadband, housing, and transportation, which are vital for workforce, recovery, and elder care.
- Aiding businesses in training and staffing.
- Providing services to support older adults and help them age in place.
- Sustaining and recruiting regional businesses.

While these projects are led by different departments, they all interconnect—housing stability aids workforce recruitment and our neighbors in recovery, while high-speed internet supports business and telemedicine, in turn benefiting education. A robust transportation system is crucial for commerce and healthcare access, and addressing the substance use crisis bolsters community safety and workforce engagement.

Our job at the Commission is to connect the dots between all the seemingly disparate issues to engage the right partners...”
Connecting Partners to Respond to a Crisis

The March 6, 2023 news of Pactiv-Evergreen’s paper mill closure in Canton caused widespread uncertainty and anxiety in the region. Suddenly, more than 1,000 skilled workers were confronted with an uncertain future. In response, the Southwestern Commission’s Workforce Development Department quickly intervened, mobilizing a Rapid Response team within 24 hours.

RAPID RESPONSE

When Haywood County Commissioner Brandon Rogers heard about the closure, he immediately picked up the phone. “My first three calls went to my boss, the Canton mayor, and Russ Harris,” he explained. “I knew the Southwestern Commission had the relationships with regional partners to get them together quickly and collaborate to support our friends and neighbors in this community.”

The Rapid Response team consisted of representatives from the NC Division of Workforce Solutions, NCWorks Career Center, Haywood Community College, Mountain Projects and the Haywood County Department of Health and Human Services. “We are lucky that so many partners immediately stepped up and offered their expertise,” said Russ Harris, executive director of the Southwestern Commission. “This quick reaction is a prime example of how well leaders in this region work together, especially in a time of crisis.”

The paper mill’s closure wasn’t just an economic setback to the region; it was a sudden loss of jobs and livelihoods, and the families affected were unsure of where to turn next. One of the team’s first steps was to work with Pactiv-Evergreen to set up meetings with employees to make them aware of their available resources. “Because we created a space strictly for employees that were not open to the public, we were able to have candid conversations with displaced workers,” said Harris. “The goal was for them to leave with concrete information of what to do next while knowing that the region stands behind them 100%.”

The Rapid Response team also swiftly mobilized to offer a range of resources and programs to assist displaced workers in transitioning to new opportunities. Besides providing job fairs, financial planning workshops, and career/aptitude tests, the Workforce Development Team worked with Haywood Community College and others to provide the training needed to help workers reenter the workforce as soon as possible (see page 6).

Although it definitely isn’t the most ideal scenario, the plant closure underscored just how vital the Commission’s programs are for our region.

ECONOMIC IMPACT STUDY

Besides the efforts from the Southwestern Commission’s Workforce Development Department, the Community and Economic Development Department received a grant from Dogwood Health Trust to study the ripple effect of the regional impact on the closer. Syneva Economics developed a report that focused on the loss of tax revenue and income and, subsequently, the reduced spending for households in the region. They continue to use this information in planning the most effective and efficient use of the available limited resources to deal with the repercussions of the closure.

“Remarkably, current unemployment rates in the region are lower now than when the plant was operational,” noted Harris. “We believe that the majority of displaced workers have found new employment, undergone retraining for alternative career paths, or have transitioned into retirement.” To date, around 132 people have participated in these resources, including 39 for training services and 23 in the On-the-Job Training program.

Haywood County Commissioner Brandon Rogers commended the Southwestern Commission for its rapid response to the Pactiv Evergreen crisis and continued involvement. “From the day we found out that Evergreen was closing, they were on the scene the next day here, maybe that same day,” Rogers said.

WORKER GRANT

“We applied for and received a substantial National Dislocation Grant from the U.S. Department of Labor to help people who wanted to learn a new skill or pursue educational attainment up to an associate degree,” said Southwestern Commission workforce development director David Garrett. “These programs are designed to equip the workers with updated skills and certifications to compete in today’s job market.”

The support extended beyond mere retraining initiatives. The Southwestern Commission and Workforce Development provided counseling services, financial guidance and networking opportunities to help displaced workers navigate the challenging transition. These comprehensive efforts aimed to not only secure new job prospects but also restore confidence within the affected community.

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Eight workers displaced by the closure of Canton Paper Mill in 2023 have successfully shifted into new careers, thanks to tuition support provided by the Southwestern Commission.

These men, once facing uncertain futures after the mill’s closure, graduated from Haywood County Community College in August after completing classes that trained them for a Commercial Driver’s License. That training qualified them to take the CDL exam and be employable by commercial trucking firms, or they could become owner-operators and work as private contract haulers.

“It’s an amazing example of the importance of strong relationships that allowed us to collaborate so quickly,” says Workforce Development Director David Garrett. “The plant’s last day of operation was June 8. HCC didn’t even have that program available, yet found instructors and offered the class to people interested. In less than ten weeks, by August 16, eight people were on the road to a new career.

The tuition support for their training came from the National Dislocated Worker Grant, awarded to the Southwestern Commission by the U.S. Department of Labor in response to the mill closing. This grant not only provided these individuals with the opportunity to embark on new career paths but also addressed critical worker shortages in the region.

Data shows that truck drivers in the United States can earn salaries averaging $92,000 per year, highlighting the potential for financial stability and growth in their new careers.

Russ Harris, Executive Director of the Southwestern Commission, emphasized the dual benefits of the Dislocated Worker Grant. “It’s providing an opportunity to help those affected by the plant closing to start a new career and, at the same time, addressing some of the critical worker shortages we are experiencing across the region,” Harris stated. He also expressed gratitude for Haywood Community College’s partnership in offering these training opportunities.

In a concerted effort to support workers impacted by the closure of the paper mill, the Rapid Response Team organized a series of Mill Town Strong Career & Resource Fairs throughout 2023. However, these events were not exclusive to mill workers but to all job seekers in the region, offering a diverse array of employment prospects and career pathways.

Employers from various industries across Buncombe, Haywood, Henderson, Jackson, and Macon Counties participated, ensuring a wide range of opportunities for attendees. From education to manufacturing, hospitality to aerospace, these fairs showcased the breadth of employment options available in the region.

In a strategic partnership with E2D (Eliminate the Digital Divide), refurbished laptops were given to some attendees, aiming to bridge the digital gap and provide essential tools for job seekers to enhance their employability.

These job fairs symbolized a community coming together to support its members during times of transition and uncertainty. By providing access to a wide range of industries and essential resources like laptops, these fairs served as a collective effort to build a stronger, more resilient workforce in our region.
Connecting People to New Beginnings

One Student’s Inspiring Journey

At just 17 years old, Sienna Hartnett found herself in Cherokee County with no home, no job, and no high school diploma. Today, thanks to the transformative partnership between Bridge Academy of Tri-County Community College and HIGHTS WIOA Youth Program, Sienna’s story is one of resilience, determination, and remarkable achievement.

With the support and resources provided through these programs, Sienna was able to obtain her Adult High School Diploma. But her achievements didn’t stop there. With newfound confidence and skills, she secured a part-time job and stable housing, laying the foundation for her success. Encouraged by her progress, Sienna pursued higher education, a dream she once thought was out of reach.

In May 2023, Sienna’s hard work and dedication were recognized at her college graduation ceremony when she was honored with the prestigious Daniel Rattler Award. This accolade, newly established by the college, celebrates academic excellence and outstanding achievements, qualities Sienna embodies wholeheartedly.

Sienna’s journey is a powerful reminder of the transformative impact of education and support systems like Bridge Academy and HIGHTS WIOA Youth Program. Through their collaborative efforts, individuals like Sienna are given the opportunity to overcome adversity, pursue their dreams, and achieve remarkable success against all odds.

The Southwestern Commission and Workforce Development provides Peer Support Services to regional partners and the community at large. Two staff members are responsible for assisting persons in recovery to re-enter the workforce and supporting their efforts in personal growth and development. Below is an example of the impact this program is making on individuals in the region.

I first met Leah at NC Works, where she was filing for unemployment after losing her job. Couch-surfing from place to place, her daily existence was full of uncertainty and instability. Leah lacked means for potential employers to reach her so we provided her with phone minutes and an email address for connectivity.

Leah faced increasingly tough circumstances with homelessness, finding herself in some volatile situations. With no certainty of having a bed for the night, she sometimes sought refuge at the hospital—clean bathrooms and lighted safety areas go a long way, sometimes. Eventually, the stress became too much and Leah found her way to a crisis center.

We arranged temporary shelter where she had a place to stay at night, but she had to leave from 7 a.m. - 7 p.m. Then Leah fell and sustained two fractures in her heel. The instability of unemployment and shelter restrictions were now compounded by crutches and pain.

With our support, Leah found long term shelter to rebuild her strength. Once healed, she wasted no time to quickly secure a job as a shift leader in a downtown restaurant.

Throughout her journey, Leah received a myriad of support services: career counseling, transportation assistance, peer support, and vouchers for cell phone use, thrift stores, and grocery shopping.

Today, Leah’s perseverance shines as she continues her journey toward stability. With housing funding in sight, we are determined to help Leah find a home, solidifying her path to stability and success. Her journey is a testament to the transformative power of compassion, support, and unwavering determination.

One Step at a Time

By Lee Gibson, NC Community Peer Support System, Southwestern Commission

GOODBYE

A poem written by Leah S.

I said goodbye to the abuse, the pain, the trauma.
Goodbye to arguing, all the stress and the drama.
Goodbye to the days I’d feel unsafe, just trapped, shaking with fear.
Goodbye to that fake-ass smile cuz I didn’t dare shed a single tear.
Goodbye to all the sneaking around, the secrets, and the lying.
Goodbye to all the painful bruises and wishing I was dying.
Goodbye to things being thrown across the room and broken.
Goodbye to all hatred that was said and all that was unspoken.
Goodbye to the hurt, the bumps, the bruises.

Cuz in that toxic life everyone loses.

And as I say goodbye to all that toxic torture, I say goodbye to you...
Cuz I will never live like that again, to myself I will stay true.

Now I can finally move forward with my head held high.
As I calmly walk away, and I simply say goodbye.
Connecting Small Business to Expansion

Since Ward Plumbing Heating & Air began utilizing Train Up funding four years ago, its workforce has more than doubled. Funded through Dogwood Health Trust and the American Rescue Plan Act, the Train Up program supports businesses in training their workforce to maintain competitiveness. Businesses can receive up to $10,000 for initiatives such as restructuring, technology adoption, and leadership development.

Ward Plumbing Heating and Air used its grant to provide employees with Praxis S-10 training, a program designed to enhance technical HVAC skills and professional and communication aptitudes. This online and live training has empowered staff to install and repair systems while improving customer interactions and profitability.

The company also strategically utilized the funds to create internal advancement opportunities. General Manager Brad Waldrop highlights the impact on the company’s growth, stating, “This training has created defined career paths for our vital apprentice-to-technician process, contributing to our 25% growth this year.”

Linda Lamp, Workforce Program Manager, said the funding is especially helpful for small employers who often don’t have a large budget for training. “It is important now more than ever for employers to invest in training in order to retain their current workforce,” she said. “The Train Up program is a great way to build their expertise, which in turn helps the business.”

For more information on how to apply for Train Up funds, interested parties can contact Linda Lamp at linda@regiona.org or call 828.339.2207.

Connecting to Prosperity

In 2023, the Mountain West Partnership (MWP) unveiled five expansion projects in Region A that are poised to generate 257 new jobs with an average annual salary of $43,414, while contributing $47 million in new investments. Beyond the significant impact on job creation, the MWP provided support to 35 individual businesses and facilitated 77 business support meetings. This proactive approach to attracting new jobs included hosting three site visits to explore available industrial properties.

Notably, the MWP orchestrated a significant event by welcoming a trade delegation from Scotland. This initiative provided a platform for economic development directors in the region to engage with ten Scottish companies, fostering discussions on growth opportunities for these companies in the Mountain West region.

These achievements were accomplished through minimal marketing efforts and the dedication of a single full-time staff person. Subsequently, in late 2023, the MWP staff expanded its team to include Eli Hashemi as Business Retention and Expansion Coordinator, allowing more efforts to increase digital marketing strategies and refresh the MWP brand.

Josh Carpenter, Director for the Mountain West Partnership, expressed his pride in the MWP accomplishments in 2023 and credited others who collaborated with him. “Economic development is a team sport,” he stated. “These successes would not have been possible without the support of my colleagues at the Southwestern Commission and the partners around the region. I am very excited about the future of the MWP and its ongoing role in supporting the region’s economic development efforts.”

2023 Key Performance Indicators (KPIs)

OVERALL ORGANIZATIONAL METRICS

5 Expansion projects
257 Jobs Announced in Expansion Projects
556 Jobs Represented in Company’s Supported
$47 million dollars of investment
$43,414 Avg. Wage Level of Jobs Created
257 Jobs Announced
7 Counties Served

EXISTING BUSINESS SUPPORT KPIs

35 Businesses Supported
77 Business Support Meetings

BUSINESS RECRUITMENT KPIs

3 Site Visits
4 Investment Leads Generated
1 Delegation Hosted
Statistics now show that the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population is 85 and older. This knowledge makes the Southwestern Commission's Area Agency on Aging Department even more vital, especially in Region A, where the proportion of persons ages 60 and older is 44% higher than in the rest of North Carolina.

Designated by the state to address the needs of older adults in Western North Carolina, the Area Agency on Aging (AAA) serves as a central hub for information, assistance, and advocacy for older adults and their caregivers. The most event-driven department at the Commission, the AAA collaborates with many community partners to deliver a comprehensive array of services tailored to meet the unique needs of older adults. They are dedicated to empowering older adults and enabling them to age with dignity, respect, and independence.

By advocating for older adults and promoting age-friendly policies, AAAs contribute to creating inclusive and supportive communities for older adults. AAAs serve as champions for aging individuals, ensuring their voices are heard and their needs are prioritized while providing essential support to family caregivers.

In the far-west region of North Carolina, in the last fiscal year, the AAA offered:

**INFORMATION AND REFERRAL SERVICES:** AAA staff provides information, assistance, and referrals to citizens in Region A and beyond our boundaries. Explaining topics such as healthcare, housing, transportation, and legal assistance, to name a few, is very helpful for older adults and their caregivers who are new to the options within the complex network of programs and benefits.

**COMMUNITY-BASED SERVICES SUPPORTED BY OLDER AMERICANS ACT FUNDING:** By ensuring that Older Adults have access to community-based services, these programs address food insecurity among older adults and provide opportunities for socialization and community engagement. Support and encouragement are also provided for programs to promote healthy aging, empowering older adults to take control of their health and adopt positive lifestyle behaviors. The numbers below are indicative of the array of opportunities that older adults across the region have participated in.

- **63,909** Congregate Meals
- **122,190** Home Delivered Meals
- **18,506** Hours In-Home Aide I and II
- **18,842** Transit Rides
- **3,255** Adult Day Program Days
- **288** Adult Day Health Days
- **3,199** Senior Companion Hours
- **5,904** Consumer Directed In-home Aide Hours

**LONG-TERM CARE FACILITY OMBUDSMAN OUTREACH AND MEDIATION**
- **25** Long-term Care Ombudsman Cases
- **385** Long-term Care Ombudsman Information and assistance opportunities

**FAMILY CAREGIVER SUPPORT PROGRAM:** AAAs offer support services for family caregivers, recognizing their vital role in caring for aging loved ones. These services may include respite care, caregiver training, support groups, and counseling designed to alleviate caregiver stress and enhance their ability to provide quality care.

- **68** caregivers served across the region by Family Caregiver Support Program
- **$79,370.80** awarded throughout the region to help support Caregivers and their loved ones by the Family Caregiver Support Program.

**REGIONAL COMMUNITY EDUCATION AND OUTREACH EVENTS**
- **2,400** individuals served at Community resource Fairs
- **2,100** families served at Manna Food Bank distributions
- **2,000** families served at Med Assist Distributions
- **2,500** pairs of shoes distributed to Older Adults at Samaritan's Feet Events
- **700** Older Adults, volunteers, and staff in attendance at Senior Celebration 2023
- **5,000+** veterans supported at Veteran’s Health Education and Support supports
- **150+** people received information at the Spring Conference and Aging in Place Seminar
- **40+** people received training at Evidence-Based Health Promotion Classes
Connecting Communities to Funding

GRANT WRITING

In 2023, the Community and Economic Development team continued to focus on securing funding for projects deemed essential by our local governments and partners. While the need for broadband access persists in our region, substantial investment has been made in North Carolina to extend services to areas lacking adequate coverage. Yet, as connectivity expands, it’s evident that not everyone possesses the necessary tools to navigate the digital landscape. Our team is collaborating with partners to implement solutions such as digital skills training and device lending programs to address the digital divide.

The Southwestern NC HOME Consortium is gaining momentum, and, as demand for housing remains a critical issue across our entire region, we are delighted to witness the commencement of the first projects. Throughout 2023, we allocated funds to enhance existing rental properties and support local organizations offering housing assistance.

Infrastructure development remains a top priority for local governments, and we are proud to help find funding for numerous vital projects. Our efforts in 2023 also encompassed downtown revitalization initiatives, bolstering outdoor recreation facilities, comprehensive planning endeavors, and supporting workforce development and business retention initiatives.

GRANT ADMINISTRATION

Beyond grant writing, the Southwestern Commission offers comprehensive grant administration services. Thankfully, our region has undeniably benefited from unprecedented grant funding in recent years. As projects take shape, we are actively engaged in providing grant administration support across all seven counties to ensure the smooth execution of funded initiatives.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GRANT WRITING RESULTS BY CATEGORY</th>
<th>%</th>
<th>Amount</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Digital Inclusion</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td>$300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>$475,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Infrastructure</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>$1,400,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Business Assistance/Workforce</td>
<td>5%</td>
<td>$469,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Downtown Revitalization</td>
<td>9%</td>
<td>$737,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Broadband</td>
<td>38%</td>
<td>$3,470,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical Assistance</td>
<td>7%</td>
<td>$659,331</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Opioid Planning</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>$300,000</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Outdoor Natural Resources</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>$876,475</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>$9,057,806</td>
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GRANT ADMINISTRATION BY COUNTY

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>County</th>
<th>Amount</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Graham</td>
<td>$2,125,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Swain</td>
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<tr>
<td>Macon</td>
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<tr>
<td>Haywood</td>
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<tr>
<td>Cherokee</td>
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<tr>
<td>Jackson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional Projects</td>
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<tr>
<td>Clay</td>
<td>$160,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Regional Projects</td>
<td>$260,000</td>
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</table>
When discussions emerged concerning the nearly $30 million opioid settlement funding destined for the region, the Southwestern Commission saw an opportunity to aid member governments in planning the funds’ utilization. “Substance use and the problems that come with it don’t stop at a county line,” Executive Director Russ Harris said. “If the seven counties can work together on this issue and combine resources, then we’ve got a chance to make a radical difference.”

Haywood County manager Bryant Morehead also advocated for a collective approach. “If we can work together with all those other counties we can come up with a regional approach that stretches our dollars. We have to at least consider it, I think,” Morehead said.

In June, the Commission enlisted the Omni Institute to spearhead a strategic effort addressing the epidemic. This data-driven plan will utilize public health data, overdose reports, and community surveys to pinpoint hotspots, demographic trends, and specific challenges in the region. This approach enables tailored interventions by local governments to meet the unique needs of western North Carolina communities. “Accurately identifying the issues will help our member governments take that next step to address them,” Harris said.

“Our goal is that this plan will create a strategic roadmap for immediate challenges and long-term, community-driven solutions,” Harris explained. “I think we can also be a model for other areas in the nation by demonstrating the power of unity and collaboration, while also benefiting the people in our region.”

The report is set to be public by July, 2024.

Financials

Receipts

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>JAN–DEC 2023</th>
<th>Workforce Development</th>
<th>Aging</th>
<th>Community &amp; Economic Development</th>
<th>Local Dues, Fees, Interest</th>
<th>TOTAL</th>
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<tr>
<td>Workforce Development</td>
<td>1,695,203.00</td>
<td>3,244,022.06</td>
<td>4,292,668.94</td>
<td>1,205,657.13</td>
<td>10,437,531.13</td>
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</table>

The report is set to be public by July, 2024.
Each July, the Southwestern Commission celebrates its partners in government, nonprofit, and private businesses by hosting an evening of food and fun. Thank you to our 2023 sponsors: Western Carolina University, Duke Energy, Murphy Electric Power Board, McGill, and BalsamWest.

Staff

Russ Harris, Executive Director
Sarajane Melton, Administrator Area Agency on Aging
Jeanne Mathews, Aging Program Coordinator
Anna Rogers, Long Term Care Ombudsman
Lisa Allen, Health and Community Educator
Kellie Dula, Family Caregiver Resource Coordinator
Pat Baker, Aging Program Assistant
Becca Scott, Director Community and Economic Development
Rose Bauguess, Senior Planner/RPO Coordinator
Anne Wade, Project Manager
LeNay Shular, Project Manager/Housing
Coley Bartholomew, Project Manager
Alex Curry, Lead for NC Fellow
David Garrett, Director Workforce Development
Linda Lamp, Business Services Representative
Laura Grindstaff, WIOA Program and Accountability Manager
Lee Gibson, Peer Support Specialist
Candace Mink, Peer Support Specialist
Jake Goottoehl, WIOA Project Manager
Doug Nelson, WIOA Project Manager
Derrick Edwards, WIOA Project Manager
Chuck Williamson, WIOA Project Manager
Jeff Hill, WIOA Project Manager
Ryan Scaggs, Finance Officer/HR
Debra Ivey, Office Manager/Clerk to the Board
Josh Carpenter, Director Mountain West Partnership
Eli Hashemi, Business Retention Expansion Coordinator

Counties, Towns and Municipalities in Service Area

CHEROKEE COUNTY
Andrews
Murphy
CLAY COUNTY
Hayesville
GRAHAM COUNTY
Fontana Dam
Lake Santeetlah
Robbinsville
HAYWOOD COUNTY
Canton
Clyde
Maggie Valley
Wayneville
JACKSON COUNTY
Dillsboro
Forcer Hills
Sylva
Webster
MACON COUNTY
Franklin
Highlands
SWAIN COUNTY
Bryson City
EBCI
Region A
The Southwestern Commission is the council of government (COG) for North Carolina’s Region A, covering the western most part of the state; Cherokee, Clay, Graham, Haywood, Jackson, Macon, and Swain Counties, the Qualla Boundary, and the 17 municipalities therein.

The mission of the Southwestern Commission is to improve the quality of life in its seven-county service area by assisting local governments in reaching their goals.

SINCE 1965