



# Community Informed Evaluation & Recommendations for Chesapeake Bay Submerged Aquatic Vegetation (SAV) Watchers

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# About Me

- Frederick, MD
- Juniata College 2020
- ALLARM & Chesapeake Monitoring Cooperative
- W&M Batten School of Coastal & Marine Sciences & VIMS 2025
- Chesapeake Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve in VA
- Catch the King Coordinator at Wetlands Watch



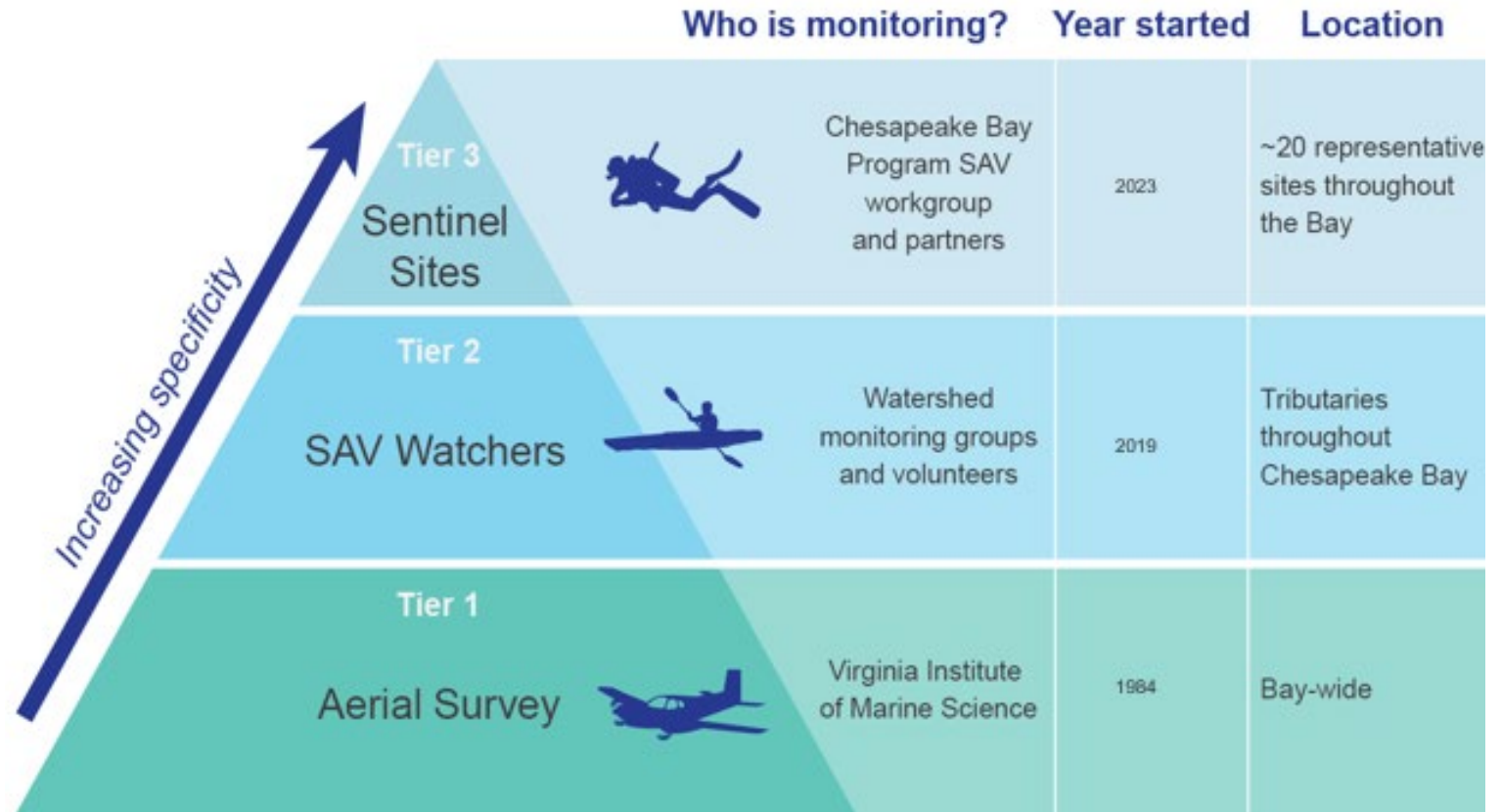




**A project was seeded...**

# SAV Watchers Overview

- Chesapeake Bay Program SAV Workgroup
- Provide an engaging and educational experience while also generating useful data
- Pilot began 2017 → full rollout in 2019
- Uses “Train-the-Trainer” approach



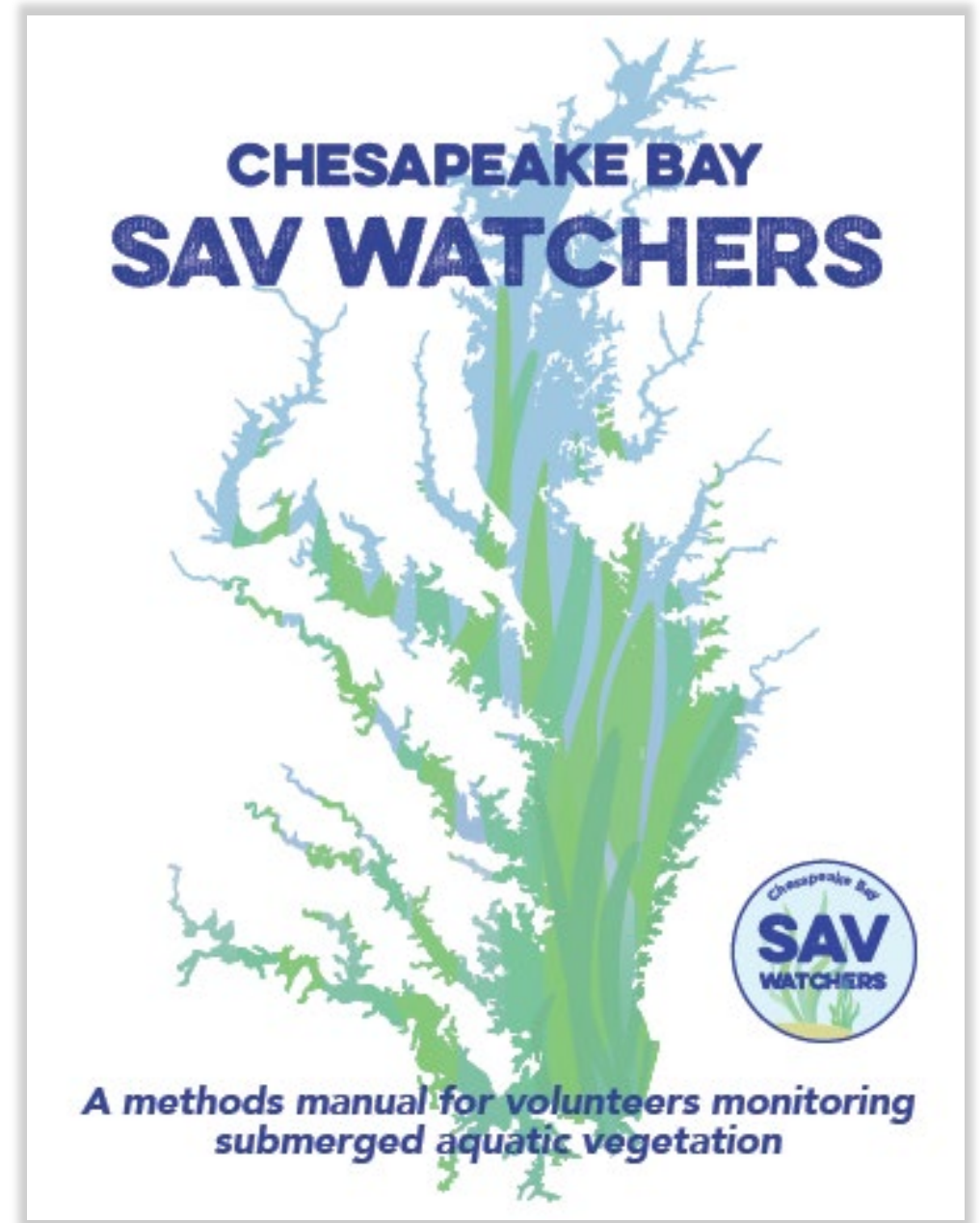
Program = SAV Watchers & coordinator  
Organization = trainers implementing volunteer groups



# Program Evaluation: Main Questions

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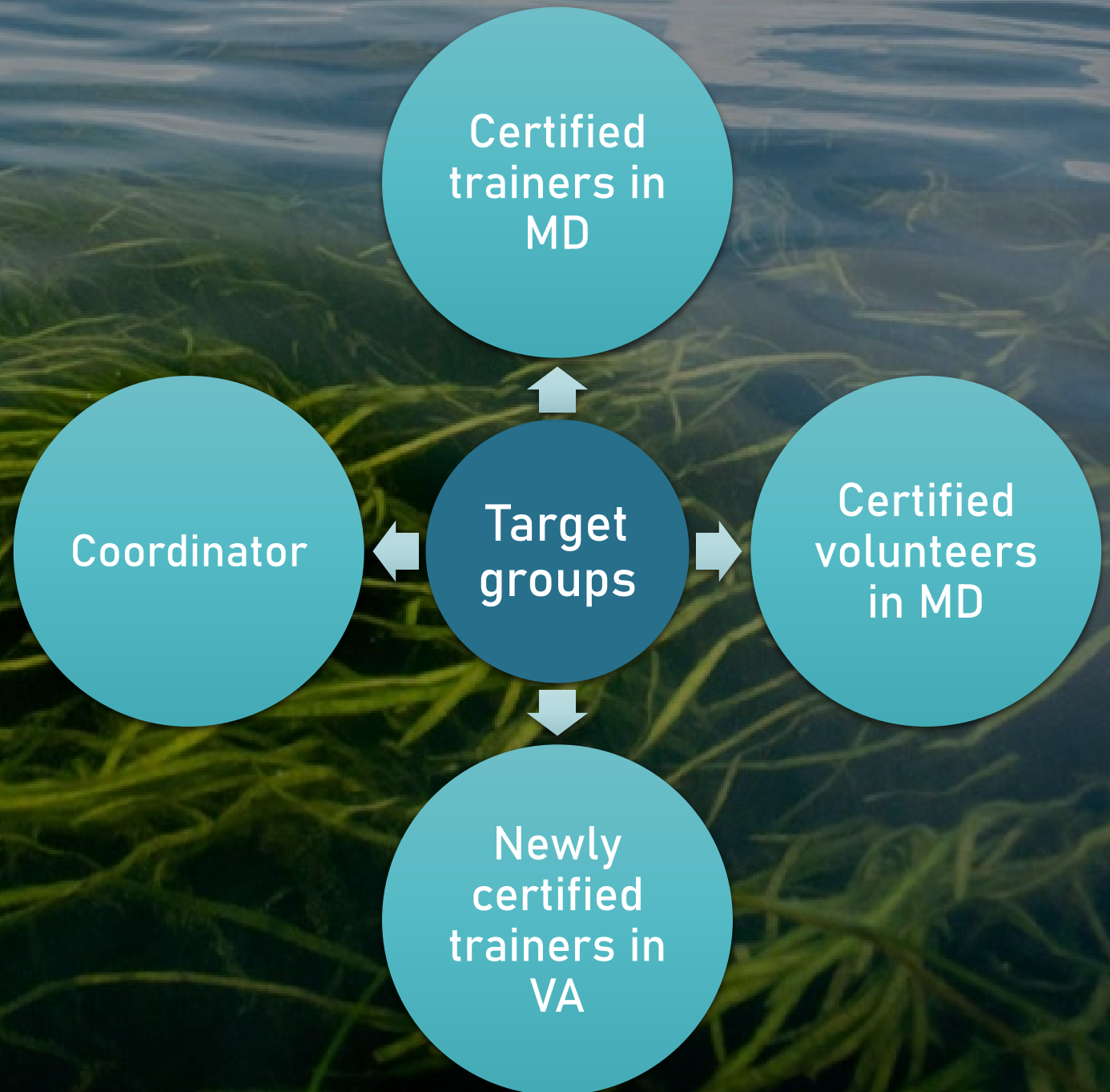
- 1) What is the SAV specific **scientific literacy** of SAV Watcher trainers and volunteers?
- 2) What is the **effectiveness** of the program, including successes and areas for improvement?
- 3) What are the anticipated **challenges of expansion** into VA\*?



\*First VA training was in August 2024 to introduce program and gauge interest

## Mixed methods:

- ✓ Surveys
- ✓ Interview
- ✓ Focus groups



# Surveys

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- Three content areas:
  - Background
  - SAV literacy (analyzing volunteers' scientific observation skills)
  - Program evaluation
- Validation of survey instruments (4 reviewers)
- Virtual & asynchronous via Qualtrics (Dec – Jan)
- Participation incentive: stickers
- Response totals:
  - 19 MD Trainers
  - 11 MD Volunteers
  - 9 VA Trainers







Photo: CBNERR-VA/Erin Shields

## Focus Groups & Interview

- Questions informed by survey results & interview
- Facilitated via **Zoom** (Feb)
- Recorded digitally and **transcribed**
- Member **checking**
- **Thematic coding** with an **inductive** approach in MaxQDA
- Participation incentive: **sun shirts**
- **Participation** totals:
  - 7 MD Trainers
  - 5 Volunteers (same org)
  - 2 VA Trainers
  - 1 coordinator



# Theme 1: Growth and Development

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A word cloud featuring various adjectives and descriptive terms in shades of blue. The words are arranged in a cluster, with 'helpful' and 'good' being the largest and most prominent. Other significant words include 'able', 'different', 'great', 'own', 'sure', 'important', 'cool', 'new', 'initial', 'specific', 'difficult', 'easy', 'big', 'nice', 'long', 'interested', 'same', and 'great'.

able helpful  
difficult  
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nice  
big

# Theme 1: Growth and Development

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Trainer &  
volunteer  
motivations

- Want to help Chesapeake Bay conservation and monitoring efforts
- Personal interest

Volunteer  
successes

- Enjoyable
- SAV Stewardship 
- Volunteer ingenuity

Overall  
successes

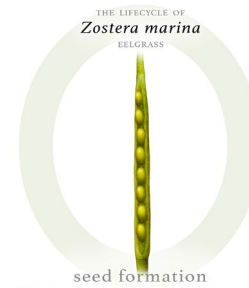
- Growth
- Materials & resources
- Data & discoveries 



# Theme 2: Invest Further, Achieve More

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1. Program  
Infrastructure  
2. Data use



## Theme 2: Invest Further, Achieve More Program Infrastructure

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- #1 challenge = species identification!
- More practice wanted by trainers
  - Post-training support helps
  - Improvement in progress
- Most volunteers somewhat comfortable
  - Increases w/time, practice, & trainer support
- Monitoring quiz!
  - Overall – 90%
  - VA trainers – 94%
  - MD trainers – 90%
  - Volunteers – 82%



Photo: Skyler Ballard





## Theme 2: Invest Further, Achieve More Program Infrastructure

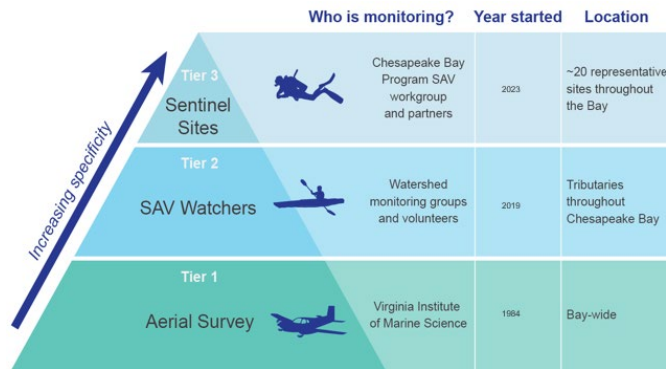
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- Train-the-Trainer event experiences
- Training with volunteers
  - In-person
- Increased communication pathway between trainers & volunteers
  - Clarifications
  - Technology
- Funding
  - Barrier to implementation!

# Theme 2: Invest Further, Achieve More

## Data Use

- Regulatory frustrations
  - SAV protection zones
  - MD State Code



- Lack in communication



# Theme 3: Sustained Engagement

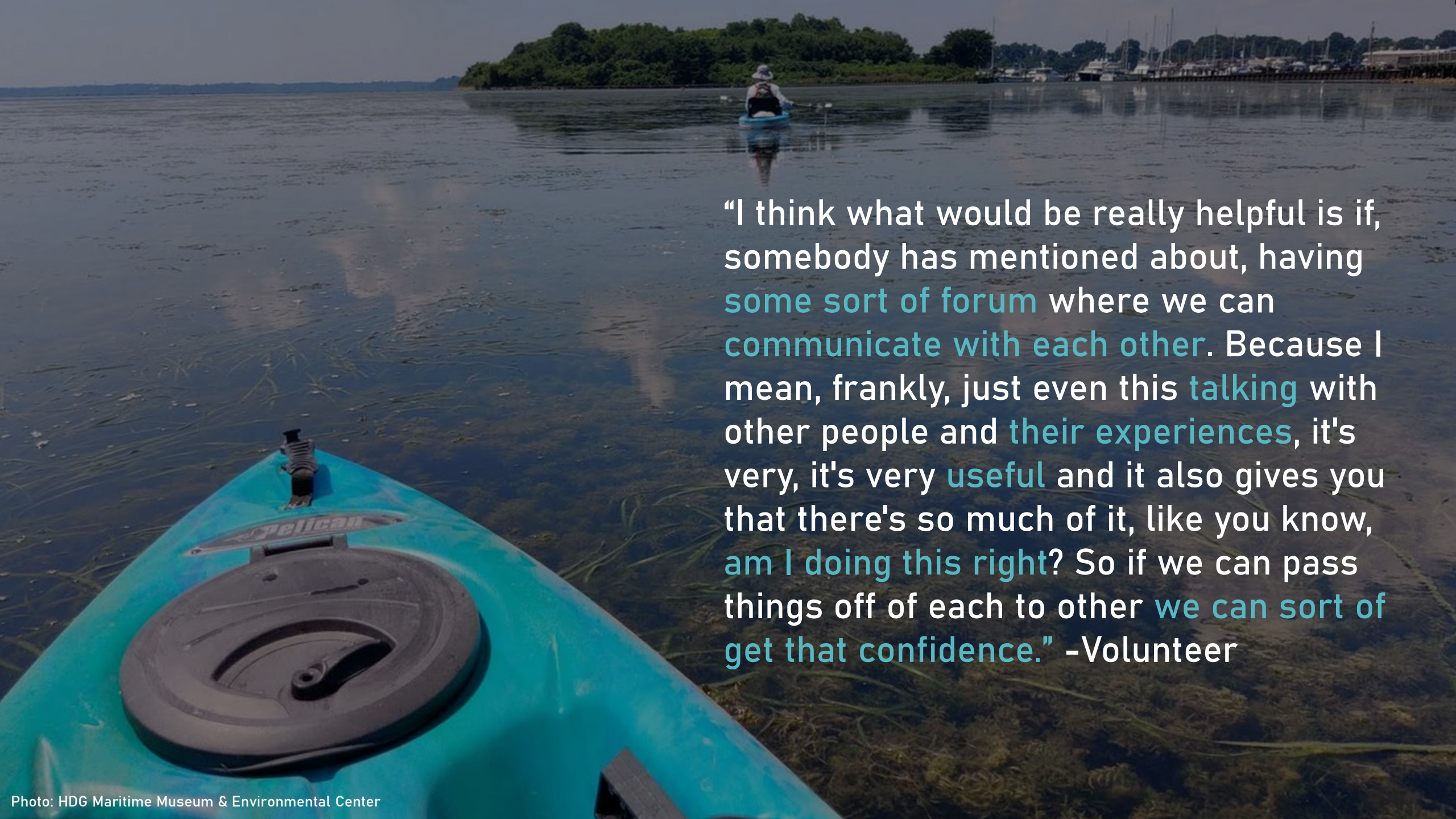
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- Volunteer to volunteer communication
- Trainer to trainer communication



Photo: Marielle Scott/Chesapeake Bay Program





“I think what would be really helpful is if, somebody has mentioned about, having some sort of forum where we can communicate with each other. Because I mean, frankly, just even this talking with other people and their experiences, it's very, it's very useful and it also gives you that there's so much of it, like you know, am I doing this right? So if we can pass things off of each to other we can sort of get that confidence.” -Volunteer



# Suggestions: Overall

1. Ensure in-person training opportunities and refreshers
2. Increase communications about data use
3. Formalize feedback pathways







## Suggestions: Overall

4. Ensure Train-the-Trainer event is effective and efficient
5. Provide trainers with more resources and additional “how to” training
6. Foster community and collaboration
7. Secure funding for increased coordination efforts



# Suggestions: Expansion

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1. Invest in state expansion leader
2. Strategically engage by identifying goal audiences and leaning on partnerships
3. Consider Train-the-Trainer event format and trainer backgrounds
4. Create a regional communication plan
5. Consider data use in Virginia



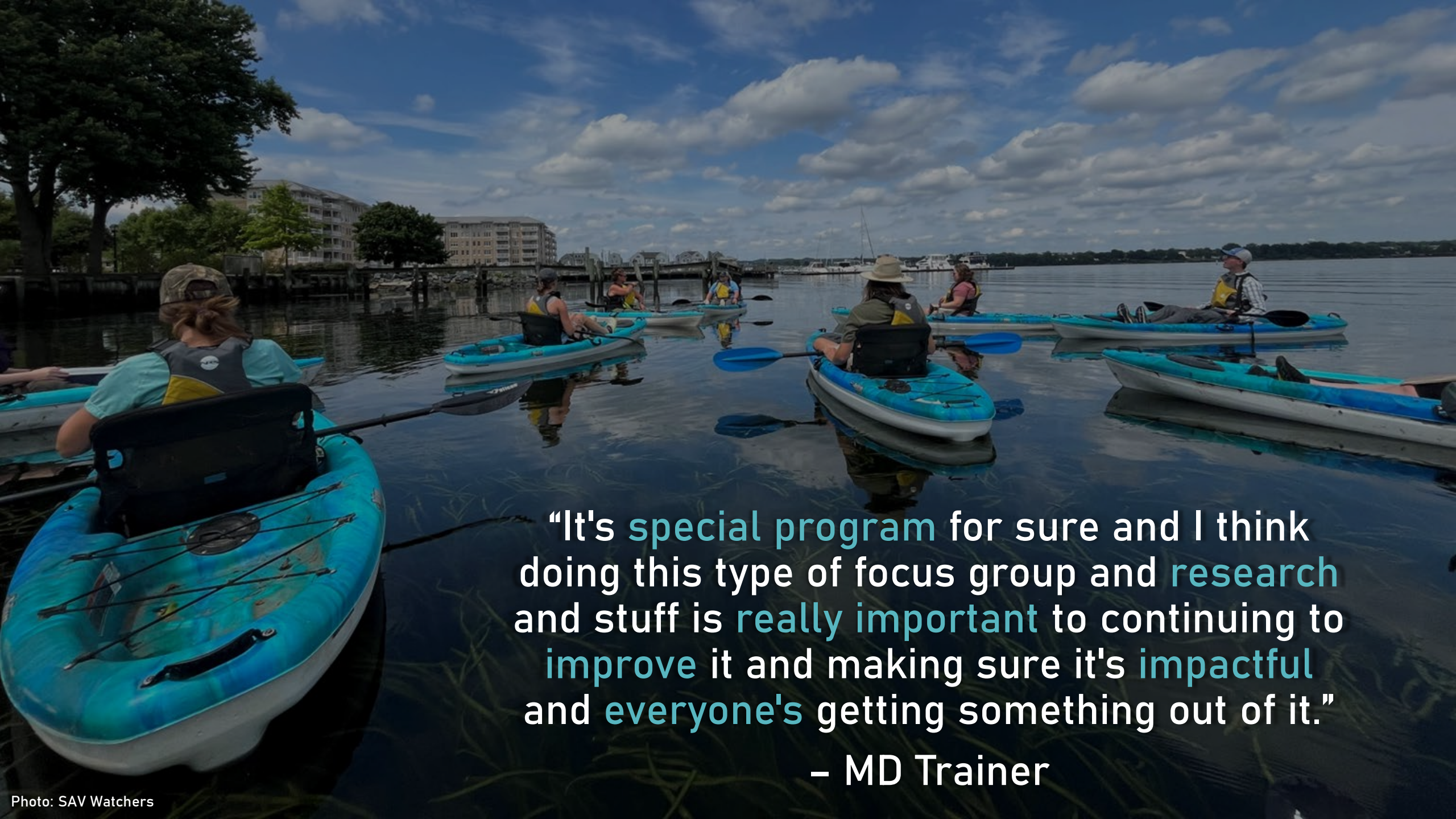
# Conclusion

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- Valuable program for stewardship building & filling data gaps in SAV
- Opportunity in VA to expand
- Volunteer monitoring should not be overlooked
- Mixed methods research produces deeper understanding
- General evaluation framework created







“It's special program for sure and I think doing this type of focus group and research and stuff is really important to continuing to improve it and making sure it's impactful and everyone's getting something out of it.”

– MD Trainer



# Thank you! Questions?

## Special thanks to...

### Advisory team:

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### Additional acknowledgements

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Kaitlin Scowen  
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Valerie Johnson  
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Adriane Michaelis

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Read my capstone report!



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Photo: Zoe Brumbaugh