

Locality: Stafford County, Virginia
Population: (5) 100,001+
Department: Stafford County Public Information Office
Program Title: Stafford County Citizens Academy
Category: Communications

Summary

In an effort to inform and engage more citizens in the decision making process of their local government, Stafford's Public Information Office launched the Citizens Academy, a series of classes taught by Stafford County employees to citizens interested in learning how their local government operates.

The Citizens Academy is a free interactive program designed to familiarize the general public with the roles, services and operations that comprise of the Stafford County government. The program focuses on educating residents, business owners and interested individuals who work in Stafford on how the daily operations of their county government contribute to building a better community. The curriculum covers diverse topics of training such as the Board of Supervisors, the County's budget process, tourism and public safety. The three hour course is offered twice a year and runs once a week for four weeks.

Problem

While staff in the Public Information Office used various communication tools to educate citizens about their local government – an official website, roadshows to school and community groups, press releases, media coverage, community meetings and social media – there still wasn't a general education program that introduced citizens to its local government or its employees. Citizens had expressed interest over the years for such a program through phone calls, visits to the government center and in discussions at community meetings. It was also evident from comments citizens made during various public meetings that there were some misconceptions about the County and that many citizens wanted to know more about how the County spent taxpayer dollars. Staff had wanted to offer a citizen education program, but had been limited by a small staff and a decreasing budget over the years.

As the County's economic situation worsened in 2009, the Public Information Office staff, which manages the Citizens Assistance and Volunteer Services Office, saw its already small budget decrease even more. This meant fewer resources could be allotted to any additional programs.

Solution

Despite these challenges, the Public Information Office staff devised a way to teach citizens about the daily operations of the County government. In addition to providing an introduction to the County's government operations, the goal was to give citizens the knowledge and resources that would help them make informed decisions about their community.

In the spring of 2009, the public information administrator enlisted the help of the Citizens Assistance and Volunteer Services staff to create an outline of classes for the academy. They started with an introduction to the leadership of the County, which included the Board of Supervisors and County Administration. The second class was a departmental overview with directors and constitutional officers giving brief descriptions of their departments. The third session focused on the County's budget process. The fourth class focused on tourism in Stafford and the fifth class honed in on public safety and included a tour of the public safety building. Realizing that many people faced their own personal financial challenges during the economic downturn, staff decided to offer the academy free of charge.

Implementation and Cost

On June 9, 2009, staff opened registration for the first Stafford County Citizens Academy. By June 29th, 25 students had registered, the maximum that was being accepted for the course. Classes included sessions on the Board of Supervisors, the County's budget, history and tourism. A departmental overview, taught by department directors, was also provided, with each director providing a 15-minute presentation on their department. A tour of the County's new public safety building, which opened in 2008, was also given to students, with a one-hour overview of the Sheriff's Office and a one-hour overview of the Fire and Rescue Department. A member of the Public Information Office staff and/or a member of the Citizens Assistance and Volunteer Services office were present during each class to assist students and instructors. At the end of the five-week academy, students participated in a graduation where

they each received a certificate of completion presented by the county administrator and a gift bag of Stafford County memorabilia.

Coordination among staff, a willingness to devote extra time to teaching classes after regular business hours and a sincere interest in helping citizens understand government processes and operations were all that was needed to make this a success.

Results

According to the surveys completed by the students, the first academy was a success. Students were most interested in meeting staff from different departments and learning about the daily operations of the government. They were also very impressed with the instructors and others enjoyed the tour of the public safety building. One student suggested the academy be offered more frequently on a quarterly basis and another said she planned to attend again.

In addition to the compliments, the evaluations also suggested ways to improve the academy. Some students suggested moving the class to later in the evening to accommodate commuters as well as shortening some sessions. Other suggestions included more emphasis on the current state of the county to include its demographics and a class on the future of the county which could include upcoming major projects.

The Public Information Office staff used the evaluations to make some revisions for the next class. They shortened the academy from five weeks to four weeks to keep things moving quickly and to lessen the time commitment from participants. They also deleted the full departmental overview and focused instead on those departments that might be more visible to citizens on a daily basis such as the landfill, human services and the courts. They kept the public safety building tour because all of the students from the first class enjoyed that immensely. The last class focused on Stafford's past and future. Individual sessions on that last night were on Stafford's tourism efforts, redevelopment plans, public works, parks and recreation (which will be working on new parks projects that were approved by Stafford voters in the 2008 Parks and Recreation Bond Referendum) and a new 5.3 billion gallon water reservoir that is scheduled to be operational in 2013.

Success

One student, a teacher in a neighboring locality, had just moved to Stafford and said that after the academy, he felt welcomed in the community. Two other students, a husband and wife who lived in a retirement community in Stafford, wrote an article for their community's newsletter about the academy, discussing their experience and encouraging their neighbors to attend.

Not only has the academy been successful for students, but staff has enjoyed teaching the classes. Many instructors said it gave them a good opportunity to learn what other departments were doing. Others enjoyed meeting employees they might not see during the normal course of the day. Many, if not all, also enjoyed discussing the class topics with the citizens they serve.

Most citizen academies that exist are law-enforcement related. However, Stafford's Citizens Academy is unique because it provides its citizens with a realistic and a clearer understanding of how their county government works; promotes open lines of communication between citizens and County staff; and provides information on how citizens can easily utilize the services offered by their county government.

To date, Stafford County has held three sessions of the Citizen Academy and the next one is scheduled for July 2011. Staff has already begun planning the Citizens Academy Roadshow to take the program into our local communities.

Stafford County Citizens Academy



The graduating class of the first Stafford County Citizens Academy (July 2009)



Students are given a tour of Stafford public safety building by Fire and Rescue staff (February 2010).



Sheriff's Office Sgt. Lee Peters explains how his motorcycle is custom fitted for him.



One student tries the bike on for size!

Recognizing the Best in County Government Programs!



2011 Achievement Awards

ATTN: 2011 Achievement Awards Program
Virginia Association of Counties
1207 East Main Street, Suite 300
Richmond, Va. 23219-3627

Call for Entries



2011 VACo Achievement Awards

Deadline: June 1, 2011

Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. Deadline: June 1, 2011.

Program Information

Locality Stafford County
Program Title Citizens Academy
Program Category Communications
Population Category (5) 100,001+

Contact Information

Name Cathy Riddle
Title Public Information Administrator
Department Department of County Administration
Complete Mailing Address 1300 Courthouse Road
Stafford, VA 22555
Telephone # 540-658-4894 Fax # 540-658-7643
E-mail criddle@co.stafford.va.us

Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name Anthony Romanello
Title County Administrator
Signature* 

*Entries without this signature will not be accepted.