

## Prince George County Submittal

### 2013 VACo Achievement Award – Communications Category

#### ***GOVERNMENT TRANSPARENCY AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH***

In today's world of technology, access to information must be clear, concise and readily available, 24 hours a day/7 days a week. Citizens want information about their government at their fingertips and gone are the days of government working behind closed doors. The County of Prince George heard the call for government transparency and the need for information loud and clear. Providing the residents of Prince George County with a Comprehensive Community Outreach Program became a top priority. County leaders knew their residents were holding local government accountable for news, information and access.

In August 2012, *Sunshine Review*, a national nonprofit, pro-transparency organization, released their annual grades for Virginia Counties and Cities. Prince George County scored a 'B-'. County Administration was determined to raise that score in six months or less. Staff spent many hours studying the County's web site versus *Sunshine's* criteria for "A+" ratings to compare notes, gather ideas and identify areas in need of improvement.

During this time, the County's Information Technology Director was tasked with improving the aesthetics of the County's web site. A larger server was brought online to handle more information and increase the speed at which information could be accessed. It was decided that the web site would get a total make-over with improved graphics, new GIS and property data access, direct links to financial information, and the addition of Facebook and Twitter accounts. The County Administrator has made a point to be available online and on

various days and has regularly opened the Facebook account to take questions from residents. During the web site renovation, the County's Police Department implemented two emergency notification systems: *Nixle*, for quick emergency information, and *CodeRed*, for reverse call notifications. The Parks and Recreation Department also introduced *Rained Out*, for automatic game cancelation notifications.

In order to address the issue of transparency, all departments were charged with updating employee contact information, forms, links, resource sites and documentation. The goal was to have all public information available not only for walk-in residents, but for those searching from the comfort of their home or while mobile. The efforts of the administration and staff paid off in four months when a request was made for *Sunshine Review* to re-rate Prince George County. On December 14, 2012, the following release was sent to the County Administrator: "*Sunshine Review* applauds Prince George County for improving their transparency score from a 'B-' to an 'A+.' By enhancing the website and increasing access to information, Prince George County is proactively championing government openness and transparency." Not only had Prince George County Government been able to increase the transparency score, but residents of Prince George were now able to find information on the following with ease and clarity:

- |                                       |                                    |
|---------------------------------------|------------------------------------|
| Budget – current and past             | Contracts – current bids and RFP's |
| Administrative & Department officials | Public Records                     |
| Elected officials                     | Ordinances and County Code         |
| Meetings – with minutes and agendas   | Taxes                              |
| Audits                                | Permits and applications           |

The next step of the process was to inform the public that the web site had been updated and that County government was indeed “open” for business. A press release was sent to local media inviting the residents to visit the improved web site and detailing the new *Sunshine Review* grade. Daily headlines are posted on the Administrator’s page, as well as Facebook, pictures are taken during county events and uploaded to both sites, all Press Releases and announcements sent to the media are placed on the web site, and local organizations are invited to submit upcoming event information for publication on the Facebook page and the County’s web site. Administration also holds monthly lunch meetings with the local press to answer questions and give updates.

The Finance Department of Prince George County has implemented a Fraud Hotline. The anonymous fraud hotline was been created to encourage County employees and County citizens to report situations where fraudulent behavior, waste or abuse may have occurred in the local government. Each call will be handled with the utmost respect. If any allegation is proved accurate, the situation will be remedied accordingly. Prince George County citizens are holding their government accountable for funds, equipment and public resources. Though the possibility of fraud, waste or abuse can exist in any organization, County leaders are holding themselves and their employees to a higher standard. The integrity of those serving the public must be a top priority to retain the trust and confidence of the citizens served.

In an on-going effort to better serve the public, each department began publishing a newsletter that is sent to contacts, associates, and vendors. Copies of each department’s newsletter is also made available to the public on the County Administrator’s web page. This insures even more information gets to our residents. While local media has always been an

excellent venue for distributing information, each newsletter is specific to each department. Residents and organizations can now have detailed information, links, and schedules of events pertinent to their interest or business. County government has continued to publish a semi-annual newsletter that is mailed to every parcel owner, accessible on the web site, and made available in the lobby of the Administration building for anyone to read.

Prince George County departments also began recording and publishing press release videos for the web site, Facebook and YouTube. These informational videos have included traffic alerts, community event notifications, and public safety warnings. The Prince George Animal Services and Adoption Center has even featured several dogs ready for adoption on YouTube. The center has had a 100% success rate in finding these loving companions a permanent home. These pets and the information shared via video may not otherwise have reached the citizens of Prince George County.

While the County has been recognized nationally for its efforts in transparency, it is the congratulations and acknowledgements from the Prince George citizens that give the staff the most pride. In a recent unofficial postcard survey, the County's web site and Facebook page were highly ranked by local residents. In keeping with that trend, Prince George County has entered the technology super-highway and plans to keep moving in the right direction.