

Recognizing the Best in County Government Programs!



# 2014 Achievement Awards



## 2014 VACo Achievement Awards

Deadline: June 2, 2014

### Application Form

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. Deadline: June 2, 2014.


#### Program Information

Locality County of Henrico, Virginia  
Program Title Preparing for the Future: Promotional Process  
Feedback Program  
Program Category Organizational Development

#### Contact Information

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#### Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name John A. Vithoulkas  
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Signature 

## Call for Entries

## **Preparing for the Future: Promotional Process Feedback Program**

### **1. Short Overview of the Program**

The County of Henrico Division of Fire has undergone significant change in the last couple of years, including new leadership in three of the four top level positions in the Division. A main goal of the new administration is openly sharing information for Division personnel to increase collaboration, support development and improve efficiency throughout the organization. To support this goal, the Division of Fire and the Henrico County Department of Human Resources developed a two-phase promotional process feedback program to provide ultimate transparency and to better prepare fire personnel in pursuit of promotion to higher ranks. The two departments co-hosted a series of group information sessions designed to provide information and answer questions about the overall promotional process. The sessions also provided information regarding best-practices in the behavioral interview setting. Finally, the sessions were an excellent forum to share the vision and expectations of the Division of Fire. Division of Fire members who attended one of the group information sessions were then eligible to schedule an individual appointment to meet with the Assistant Director of Human Resources and an Assistant Fire Chief. Each individual session included a review of the member's performance on the written exam and assessment center along with specific feedback on the individual's performance in the interview process.

## **2. Problem/Challenge**

The Henrico County Division of Fire is a 548-member, metro-sized fire department located in Central Virginia. The Division of Fire responds to over 40,000 calls for service each year and provides services that address a wide spectrum of risk including structural and wild land fire suppression, emergency medical services, hazardous materials response, technical rescue services, and public fire education and fire prevention. The Division of Fire has undergone significant change in the last couple of years as well. Given the tremendous responsibility delegated to each fire officer in high-risk environments and the need to successfully implement a significant culture change, it is essential that the Division of Fire select the best possible candidates for promotion to and within the officer ranks. The Division of Fire currently utilizes a multi-step, validated promotional process. The Department of Human Resources ensures that the process is carried out according to Division of Fire and County policy and provides significant input and oversight. Over the years, some members of the Division of Fire have been frustrated by not having greater access to specific feedback regarding their performance in the promotional process. The challenge was to identify a feasible way with limited resources to provide actionable and meaningful feedback to interested participants while maintaining the integrity of the process and the privacy of individual members. Using an innovative approach, the Division of Fire and the Department of Human Resources collaborated to provide this feedback, an approach that can be used by any local government organization experiencing similar challenges.

### **3. Description of the Program (How the Program was carried out)**

In October, 2012, following the retirement of the incumbent chief and two of his assistant chiefs, the County of Henrico appointed a new Fire Chief. Soon after the new chief was promoted, a competitive process was conducted to fill two (2) assistant fire chief positions and two incumbent officers were promoted. Once these promotions were effective, the new fire administration developed a clear vision for the Division and began to implement and communicate that vision. One key component of that vision was a commitment to transparent information-sharing throughout the Division, which addressed a major concern identified from information gathered from Division personnel during the transition in chiefs. Another key element of the vision was a focus on the development of Division personnel.

From January, 2013 through October, 2013 the Division of Fire promoted forty-five members to and within the officer corps. This represented fully one-third of all of the officers in the department. While achieving promotion meant success for these forty-five individuals, there were many more members of the Division of Fire who were not successful in achieving their professional goal of advancement to higher rank. The majority of these members were dedicated professionals who will continue to serve the Division and make a significant impact. Leadership from the Division of Fire and the Department of Human Resources understood that these members deserved feedback on their performance in the promotional process and that this feedback would serve as the basis for their future development and in many cases future success in the promotional process.

In the fall of 2013, the Assistant Director of Human Resources, the Assistant Chief of Professional Services, and the Division of Fire Personnel Officer developed a two-phase promotional process feedback program. Phase I of the feedback program was held on three consecutive weekdays (November 18, 19 and 20, 2013) to allow for member participation around the twenty-four hour firefighter shift schedule. The Phase I sessions each began with an overview by the Assistant Director of Human Resources of each phase of the promotional process including qualifications, the written test, the assessment center, and the interview. The Assistant Fire Chief then

provided general guidance on preparation for the promotional process along with a description of the due diligence process utilized by the current Fire Chief when making his final selections for promotion. The sessions also provided information regarding best-practices in the behavioral interview setting. During these sessions, information was intermittently dispersed about the Division's vision and about the expectations of the new administration. Many questions were posed and answered in a very interactive, safe environment. A total of thirty-three (33) Division of Fire members voluntarily attended one of these sessions.

Phase II of the promotional process feedback program consisted of individual sessions for interested members who had attended a Phase I session. These sessions included one-on-one time with the candidate and the Assistant Director of Human Resources. In addition, if the candidate requested it, an Assistant Fire Chief also attended the session. We had a total of thirty (30) requests for individual feedback.

During these sessions, specific feedback was given to the candidates based on their performance in the process. Guidance and optimal strategy on the written test, assessment center, and the panel interview was shared and any questions or concerns were addressed. Feedback was focused on specific, job-related behaviors and addressed challenges specific to the individual in the session. In addition, Division culture and expectations were again shared with the utilization of specific examples related to the feedback participant.

Resources are very tight in County Government so this initiative had to respond to the economic downturn. By providing group and individual feedback sessions, we reduce the time spent combating inaccurate information and addressing issues that sometimes results from those inaccuracies. This initiative also responded to the economic downturn from a cultural standpoint. It provided a free and efficient forum to share information on the vision of the Division of Fire to a large number of people. In addition, the individual feedback sessions allowed Division personnel to ask questions and obtain information on the culture of the organization, which will optimally serve the Division in the future.

#### **4. Financing and Staffing**

- There was no cost to the organization for this initiative other than basic staff time for the facilitators and office supplies. All facilitators (two (2) presenters and one (1) administrative support staff) were current County of Henrico employees. Fire Personnel attended these sessions voluntarily on their own time so no overtime costs were incurred.
- The total cost of this initiative was \$0.

## **5. Program Results**

The Promotional Process Feedback Program was well received by Division of Fire personnel. We received very positive feedback from members who attended these sessions. Specifically, a number of attendees noted that the process provided them with actionable information on how to improve their chances of future success in the promotional process. One attendee sent an email to the Assistant Director of Human Resources and the Assistant Fire Chief saying, "The conversation was very informative and insightful. I have already begun to integrate components of our conversation into current and future endeavors."

The Promotional Process Feedback Program provided aspiring officers a clearer pathway for success through a process of transparent dissemination of relevant information while maintaining the integrity of the promotional process. This program serves as an excellent example of just one of the many ways in which Henrico County is committed to employee development and information sharing. In addition, the Promotional Process Feedback Program is a striking example of an excellent partnership between two government agencies, neither of which would be successful without the full support of their counterpart.

The Promotional Process Feedback Program addressed a significant need in the County of Henrico Division of Fire. During times of change, it is imperative that information is shared. When new leadership is in place, it is vital to the organization that the vision and expectations of the organization are shared. This program provided a forum to share and explain that vision and support the culture of the division going forward. With development of personnel also a key component of the new culture, the feedback sessions assisted employees with preparing themselves for future leadership roles in the Division.

This program is also highly adaptable for other localities at little or no cost. The model of group feedback and individual feedback sessions presented collaboratively by the Division of Fire and the Department of Human Resources can be easily replicated in other organizations, and is an inexpensive and powerful way of getting tremendous learning and cultural value out of minimal time and financial investment.