

STAFFORD *Virginia*



2010 VACo Achievement Awards

Stafford County
Citizens Academy

2010 VACo Achievement Awards
 Deadline: June 1, 2010
Application Form



All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. Deadline: June 1, 2010.


Program Information

Locality Stafford County
 Program Title Stafford County Citizens Academy
 Program Category Communications
 Population Category 5 - 100,000+

Contact Information

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Signature of county administrator or chief administrative officer

Name Anthony Romanello
 Title County Administrator
 Signature* 

*Entries without this signature will not be accepted.

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Virginia Association of Counties



2010 Achievement Awards

ATTN: 2010 Achievement Awards Program
 Virginia Association of Counties
 1207 East Main Street, Suite 300
 Richmond, Va. 23219-3627
 address service requested

Call for Entries

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

Summary

In an effort to engage more citizens in the decision making process of their local government, Stafford's Public Information Office organized the County's first-ever Citizens Academy in July 2009. The academy is a series of classes that are taught by Stafford Government employees for citizens interested in learning how their local government operates. The course is offered twice a year, in the summer and the winter. It runs once a week for four weeks, from 6:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. at the Stafford Administration Center. Topics cover the Board of Supervisors, various County departments and programs, the County budget, and history and tourism. A tour of Stafford's public safety center is also included in the academy. The academy is offered free of charge.

Stafford County Citizens Academy

Introduction

In an effort to engage more citizens in the decision making process of their local government, Stafford's Public Information Office organized the County's first-ever Citizens Academy in July 2009. The academy is a series of classes that are taught by Stafford Government employees for citizens interested in learning how their local government operates. The course is offered twice a year, in the summer and the winter. It runs once a week for four weeks, from 6:00 p.m. – 9:00 p.m. at the Stafford Administration Center. Topics cover the Board of Supervisors, various County departments and programs, the County budget, and history and tourism. A tour of Stafford's public safety center is also included in the academy.

Interest in the first academy in July 2009 was so overwhelming that a waiting list was developed. Prospective students were eager to fill seats if individuals who had signed up could not make the class. The students who were not able to make it into the summer session were registered for the next session in February 2010.

Problem

While staff in Stafford's Public Information Office used all the usual communication tools to educate citizens about the local government – an official Web site, tours to school and community groups, press releases, media coverage and community meetings – there was no general education program that would introduce interested individuals to local government or its

employees. They had expressed an 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 was some misinformation 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 oversees the Citizens Assistance and Volunteer Services Office, saw its already small budget decrease even more. To compound the challenge, one staff person was out of the office on extended leave due to an illness in her family. The public information administrator took on the majority of her responsibilities and enlisted the help of the Citizens Assistance staff to fulfill her administrative tasks. This reduced staff, coupled with a budget that took severe hits during the County's budgeting process, meant few resources could be allotted to any additional programs.

Despite these challenges, the PIO staff, knowing that citizens needed communication to continue flowing from the county government during difficult economic times, decided to devise 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.

Solution

In early spring, 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 provided a tour of the public safety building. Realizing that many people faced their own personal financial challenges during this economic downturn, staff decided to offer the academy free of charge.

On June 9, 2009, staff announced that the registration was open for the first Stafford County Citizens Academy. By June 29th, 25 individuals had signed up, the maximum that was being accepted for the course. The first academy took place once a week on Wednesday evenings for five weeks. Classes, which were taught by constitutional officers, department directors and/or their designees, 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 spending about 10 – 15 minutes on their department. A tour of the County's new public safety building, which opened in 2008, was also given to students, with one hour devoted to the Sheriff's Office and one hour devoted to 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 help students and instructors.

At the end of the five-week academy, students were asked to complete an evaluation of all the classes. Afterward, a "graduation" was held. The county administrator, Ms. Riddle and Mr.

Shover handed out certificates of completion, and cake and punch were offered to students as they celebrated the end of the inaugural Stafford County Citizens Academy.

Other than the extra hours staff gave to teach the classes, there were no additional funds spent for the academy. Supplies were minimal because staff took what they already had in stock such as folders and provided them to students. A “gift bag” of items that staff already had on hand was given to each student at their graduation.

Success

According to the surveys completed by the students, the first academy was a success. Many said that the chance to meet the staff from different departments and learn about the daily operations of the government were the most interesting part of the academy. They were also very impressed with the instructors. Others enjoyed the tour of the public safety building. One evaluator suggested that the academy be offered more frequently on a quarterly basis. Another student said he would like all citizens to attend, and another said that she planned to attend again a couple of years.

In addition to the compliments, the evaluations also suggested ways to improve the academy. Some students suggested basic “housekeeping” improvements such as providing pens and pads, moving the class to later in the evening to accommodate commuters and shortening some sessions. Other students suggested tweaking the content a little. Some suggestions included more emphasis on the current state of the county to include its demographics and a class on the county’s future of the county which might include major projects coming down the pipeline.

The PIO 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 students. 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 2012. Knowing that there were already students on a waiting list, the next Citizens Academy was scheduled for February 2010.

Shortly after opening up the registration in January, the class roster was filled. This session, too, was a resounding 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 sign up.

Not only was the academy successful for its 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.

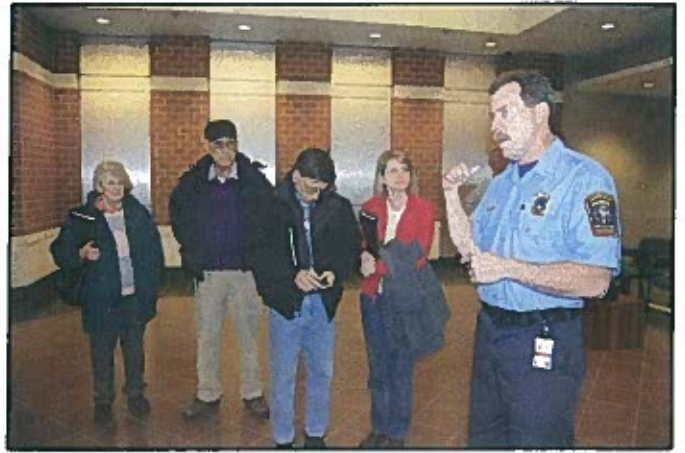
The next Stafford County Citizens Academy is scheduled for July 2010.

Most citizen academies that exist are law-enforcement related. However, Stafford's academy was unique in that it focused more on general government operations and processes, and any other locality could easily duplicate the County's efforts. 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 are all that is needed.

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!