Virginia Association of Counties
ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS

SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2024.** Please include this submission form with the electronic entry. If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact Gage Harter.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: _____

Program Title: _____

Program Category: _____

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: _____

Title: _____

Department: _____

Telephone: _____ **Website:** _____

Email: _____

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: _____

Title: _____

Signature: _____

Redefining Digital Services for Chesterfield

Executive Summary

The Chesterfield.gov modernization initiative transformed Chesterfield's government website into a user-friendly, accessible and efficient digital platform. This project addressed key challenges such as outdated design, ineffective navigation, lagging mobile optimization and accessibility issues. By adopting a mobile-first design approach and conducting a comprehensive content audit, the project significantly improved the website's usability and search functionality.

Collaboration was central to the initiative's success. Internally, a Community of Practice was established, involving over 200 departmental contributors who participated in regular training to ensure consistent, high-quality content. Externally, partnerships with vendors enabled the implementation of advanced solutions, such as a custom site search with AI-generated responses and the development of interactive, mobile-friendly online forms.

The modernization project enhanced user experience and accessibility, making it easier for residents to find information and complete transactions online. Our innovative "Analytics Wrapped" initiative helped departments make data-driven content decisions, contributing to the website's ongoing improvement. Overall, the Chesterfield.gov Modernization successfully improved digital services for the community and provides a valuable example for other localities looking to modernize their digital presence.

Problem, Challenge or Situation Faced by Chesterfield

Chesterfield faced significant challenges with its previous government website, which was outdated and struggled to meet the needs of a diverse and growing community. The primary issues included an outdated design and cluttered navigation structure, causing users to make multiple clicks to find their desired information. This complexity led to user frustration and reduced engagement. The site had accumulated a vast amount of outdated, irrelevant or redundant content, which further complicated navigation and diminished the user experience. Additionally, the homepage lacked clear ownership, leading to rarely updated hero images and key content, which significantly missed the opportunity to effectively capture and convert users.

Despite a mobile-responsive design implemented in 2018, the website was not fully optimized for mobile devices, resulting in poor user experiences, particularly given the significant increase in mobile traffic during the COVID-19 pandemic (which has remained above 50%). Users often found themselves clicking through numerous links to find the information they needed, highlighting the necessity for a mobile-first web experience that could handle the increased digital demand and align with modern expectations.

Accessibility was another critical issue, making it difficult for individuals with disabilities or those needing translation services to effectively use the site. Over 18,000 PDFs on the site compounded these accessibility issues, creating a backlog of ADA and quality assurance problems such as broken links, missing alt text and inconsistent headers. These issues not only hindered effective engagement with county services but also highlighted a significant area where improvement was needed to ensure inclusivity and equal access for all community members.

The existing search engine was limited to content within the website, making it difficult for users to find relevant information across various county-managed systems. This often led to unsuccessful searches

and a disjointed user experience. Users commonly attempted to search the site for content that resided in other systems, often with no success, and it was difficult to blame them for not knowing which system to start in to find the content they were looking for. The search functionality's limitations underscored the need for a more integrated and efficient search solution that could provide comprehensive and relevant results.

Decentralized notification systems led to inefficient use of county funds and a disjointed user experience. Various departments maintained separate Constant Contact accounts alongside the website's built-in notification systems, resulting in the county paying multiple times for overlapping subscriber services. This arrangement not only complicated the subscription process but also led to inconsistent management of notifications. The fragmented approach to notifications underscored the need for a unified system that could streamline communication and improve efficiency.

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted and exacerbated these issues. With a surge in digital interactions due to social distancing measures, the inadequacies of the old website became even more apparent. The pandemic underscored the necessity for an online presence that was not only modern and user-friendly but also capable of handling increased digital demand and providing seamless access to information and services.

In response to these challenges, Chesterfield County's eGovernment Services team launched a comprehensive initiative to audit, refresh and redesign the content of Chesterfield.gov. This project aimed to create a modern, efficient and user-centric digital platform. We engaged directly with the community through citizens' academies and public events, gathering valuable feedback that informed the design and functionality of the new site. By utilizing analytics to gain insights into user behavior, we were able to make data-driven decisions that enhanced the website's performance and user experience.

This approach allowed us to identify areas for improvement and ensure that the redesign effectively addressed the needs and preferences of our community.

The modernization initiative for Chesterfield.gov was driven by the urgent need to address the significant limitations of the old website, including poor navigation and SEO, content overload, inadequate accessibility, ineffective search functionality, backlogged ADA and QA issues, inefficient mobile optimization and departmental inconsistencies. These challenges highlighted the necessity for a comprehensive overhaul to create a digital platform that meets the evolving needs of our community. The project aimed to transform Chesterfield.gov into a robust, user-centric site that enhances user experience, accessibility and efficiency.

Innovation, Collaboration and Model for Other Localities

The modernization initiative for Chesterfield.gov exemplified innovation, partnership and a model for other localities through a multifaceted approach that addressed significant limitations and enhanced user experience, accessibility and efficiency. This comprehensive overhaul was a collaborative effort that involved extensive community engagement, data-driven decision-making and the integration of advanced and emerging technologies.

Innovation was at the heart of the Chesterfield.gov modernization project. The initiative adopted a mobile-first design approach to cater to the increasing use of mobile devices. This design strategy minimized unnecessary clicking, making key functions and calls to action easily accessible on smaller screens. Resource hubs like the "Payments and Permits" page were designed to function like mobile apps, enhancing usability with larger buttons suitable for finger-based interaction. This approach significantly improved the mobile user experience, aligning the website with modern expectations and digital demand.

A comprehensive content audit was another innovative aspect of the project. The audit reduced the sitemap from over 4,000 pages to just over 400, significantly boosting SEO and navigability. This reduction led to a drop in the average number of clicks per session from 5-7 to 2-3, while actual overall page views increased, indicating higher engagement and user conversions. The streamlined content also enhanced search engine indexing, improving the website's visibility and accessibility.

The successful reduction of ADA compliance issues was a significant achievement. The new site launch resolved over 300,000 ADA compliance issues overnight, a milestone that underscores Chesterfield's commitment to accessibility. This immediate improvement ensured that the website is usable by all residents, including those with disabilities, and set a new standard for maintaining high levels of accessibility compliance.

Partnership and collaboration were crucial to the success of the modernization initiative. Internally, a Community of Practice was established, involving over 200 departmental contributors who participated in ADA Compliance and AP Style courses. These initiatives were part of a broader effort to enhance staff skills and ensure consistent, accessible content across the website. Externally, the project involved partnerships with vendors like Cludo for site search, Cognito Forms for interactive forms and Granicus' GovDelivery for centralized notifications. This collaborative approach ensured the successful implementation of innovative solutions tailored to the county's specific needs.

The integration of a custom site search developed with Cludo was a groundbreaking feature. APIs were leveraged to feed content from various county information systems into the new unified site search, including agendas, municipal codes and Parks and Recreation activities. This integration enabled a generative AI response to search queries, offering a new universe of metrics and insights into user interactions with the site. The advanced search functionality provided a more controlled and efficient

way to rank and display content, transforming the user search experience into an omni-channel search across our platforms.

The collaboration with Cognito Forms facilitated the development of over 100 interactive and mobile-friendly online forms. Since launching, these forms have processed over 120,000 submissions, each one representing a person who did not have to pick up a phone or stand in line at a lobby, freeing up other county resources. These forms use conditional logic to create more efficient user experiences, and notification routing ensures that data is moved directly to the appropriate data owners, enhancing convenience and accessibility.

Chesterfield's approach to website modernization serves as a model for other localities. The project demonstrated the value of engaging directly with the community through citizens' academies and public events, as well as leveraging analytics for data-driven decision-making. The establishment of a robust content management and monitoring system, along with regular ADA Compliance and AP Style courses, ensured the ongoing quality and consistency of the website.

The project's success in integrating various county information systems into the site search, enhancing notification systems and developing interactive forms demonstrated the potential for other local governments to implement similar solutions. Chesterfield's innovative approach and collaborative efforts provide a replicable model that other local governments can learn from and implement in their own localities. The project's success in enhancing user experience, accessibility and efficiency underscores its value as a benchmark for modernizing government websites and improving public service delivery.

How the Program was Carried Out

The Chesterfield.gov modernization initiative was carried out through a well-coordinated approach across the organization, involving project planning, strategic investments and dedicated staffing. This

comprehensive effort was aimed at transforming the county's digital platform into a more user-friendly, accessible and efficient resource for the community.

The project was undertaken with a budget of approximately $200,000. This budget covered various aspects of the modernization initiative, including updating the website design, procuring a new site search solution and implementing a notification management system.

All web content was built and fully migrated from the old site to the new one in-house. This approach allowed us to ensure that the new site met our standards for consistency and adhered to the outcomes of the content audit. The in-house development and management of the project allowed us to maintain control over the quality and consistency of the content and design. Our team handled the entire content migration process, working diligently to align the content with the new design and navigation structure.

For interactive web forms, we utilized the Cognito Forms platform, except for forms requiring physical signatures, which were handled using Adobe Sign. Our team developed all the forms in-house, collaborating directly with various departments to meet their specific needs. These forms were integrated into PowerAutomate, enabling live data transfers into accessible spreadsheets on SharePoint. This system allowed staff to access real-time data without waiting for exports, significantly improving efficiency and data accessibility.

The new site search functionality was developed using Cludo. We created all the necessary APIs to integrate third-party systems, ensuring comprehensive search results that included not only website content but also content from other systems like agendas and minutes, municipal code and Parks and Recreation activities. This integration enhanced the search experience by providing users with more relevant and extensive search results. Plans are in place to expand these integrations to include

additional systems, such as our Planning Department's Active Development and Zoning Case data and our HR department's job openings feed.

To centralize and improve our newsletter and notification services, we implemented Granicus' GovDelivery system. This replaced the various Constant Contact accounts previously used, providing a unified platform for all our communication needs. GovDelivery enabled us to manage and distribute newsletters and notifications more efficiently, ensuring that our community received timely and relevant information.

The project team consisted of members from our eGovernment Services department, including web developers, content strategists and accessibility experts. We established a Community of Practice with over 200 departmental contributors who regularly participated in ADA Compliance and AP Style courses. These courses, offered every six weeks through the county's learning management system, were part of a broader effort to enhance staff skills and ensure consistent, accessible content across the website. This initiative was instrumental in maintaining the quality and consistency of the website, as contributors were equipped with the necessary skills and knowledge to uphold high standards of accessibility and content quality.

The new website has significantly improved user experience, accessibility and overall functionality for our users. Our "Analytics Wrapped" initiative, modeled after Spotify's year-end music summary, presented website data back to departments in an engaging format, aiding in better content decisions. This initiative helps to foster a growing data-driven culture within the county, contributing to the ongoing improvement of the website.

In summary, the Chesterfield.gov modernization project allowed us to deliver a modern, efficient and user-friendly website that significantly enhances the digital experience for our community. The project

was completed within budget, demonstrating our commitment to fiscal responsibility while achieving our goals of improved navigation, accessibility, mobile optimization, search functionality and user satisfaction. The positive feedback from users, increased engagement metrics and recognition from industry awards underscore the success of the project and our commitment to continuously improving the website to meet the evolving needs of our community.