



GENERAL OVERVIEW

The VACO Achievement Awards is a free competitive awards program open to local government members of the association. This annual competition recognizes local government programs that exemplify innovation, that can be replicated in other localities, and that partner and collaborate with local governments, private enterprises, or state and federal governments. We encourage all County departments to apply! **Entry deadline is July 1, 2024.**

ELIGIBILITY

All local government members of the Virginia Association of Counties may participate. There is no limit to the number of applications a County may submit.

All applications must comply with the following standards:

1. The program must have become operational before January 1, 2024, and remains operational.
2. Local government officials and/or staff must have played a significant role in developing and implementing the program, with only limited assistance from outside experts and/or consultants.
3. All steps in the application must be completed.
4. Awards will be given to departments or units, not individuals.
5. Programs that have received a previous VACO Achievement Award are ineligible.
6. The program must meet one or more of the criteria outlined below and must be signed by the county administrator or deputy/assistant county administrator, or department director.

CRITERIA FOR SELECTION

The nominated program must meet one or more of the following criteria:

1. Offer an innovative solution to a problem, situation or delivery of services.
2. Promote intergovernmental cooperation and/or cooperation with local, state and federal entities and/or a private enterprise in addressing a problem or situation.
3. Provide a model that other local governments may learn from or implement in their own localities.
4. Programs may be based on programs from another public or private entity but must represent innovative approaches or customization by the local government.

MORE INFORMATION

[Visit the VACO website](#) to view past Achievement Awards winners.

Contact Gage Harter, VACO Director of Communications, at 804.343.2502 or gharter@vaco.org.

Additional application forms are also available at www.vaco.org.



PROGRAM CATEGORIES

(Program categories are used as a guide and are not considered in judging)

1. Communications
2. Community & Economic Development
3. Criminal Justice & Public Safety
4. Customer Service
5. Environmental
6. Health & Human Services
7. Information Technology
8. Organizational Development
9. Parks & Recreation
10. Regional Collaboration
11. Transportation

RULES OF ENTRY

1. All entries must be submitted in electronic format ~ PDF or WORD document. Email the electronic entry to gharter@vaco.org. **Please include application form (Page 3).**
2. Entries must be typed and double-spaced. **Limit entries to 12 pages.** State the problem, challenge or situation faced by the locality and how the program fulfilled the awards criteria (innovation, partnering or collaboration and a model for other localities). Tell how the program was carried out, including financing and staffing, and the program's results.
3. Include an executive summary of the program (no more than one page double-spaced) that can be used as a quick reference guide for judges and that can be used for press releases, brochures, etc.

JUDGING

Entries will be judged by a three-member panel selected for its expertise in County government. One entry will be selected as "Best Achievement" and will be honored as the top program for the given year. Best Small County and Best Large County programs will also be recognized.

AWARD PRESENTATION

The VACO Team will attend Board of Supervisors meetings to present award plaques. The top three winning programs also will be recognized at VACO's Annual Conference held on November 10-12, 2024. Winners will receive a special ribbon to be worn on their nametags, and will be recognized on the VACO website and in a news release sent to statewide media.

DEADLINE

All entries must be dated no later than July 1, 2024, and emailed to Gage Harter at gharter@vaco.org.

If you do not receive an email confirming receipt of your entry within 3 days of submission, please contact [Gage Harter](#).



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: _____

Executive Summary

Loudoun County Economic Development's signature program, Launch Loudoun, is a dynamic initiative aimed at empowering entrepreneurs, fostering innovation, and driving economic growth within the county. The primary goal of the program is to provide comprehensive support and resources to companies in all stages of development, helping them navigate the challenges of starting and scaling a business while also positioning Loudoun County as a hub for entrepreneurship and innovation.

To accomplish this goal, Launch Loudoun offers a wide range of programs, services, and resources tailored to the needs of small businesses owners. These include mentorship and coaching, access to capital and funding opportunities, networking events, educational workshops, and incubator space. By providing a holistic ecosystem of support, Launch Loudoun aims to accelerate the growth and success of startups, ultimately contributing to job creation, investment attraction, and economic diversification within the county.

Launch Loudoun leverages strategic partnerships with local businesses, academic institutions, investors, and community partners to expand its reach and impact. By collaborating with key stakeholders, the program taps into additional expertise, resources, and networks to better serve the needs of entrepreneurs.

Overall, Launch Loudoun is dedicated to fostering a vibrant and inclusive entrepreneurial ecosystem in Loudoun County, where startups can Start, Scale, and Soar. Through its comprehensive approach to supporting early-stage companies and its emphasis on collaboration and partnership, Launch Loudoun plays a vital role in driving economic development and fostering a culture of innovation within the community.

Problem, challenge or situation faced by the locality

All small businesses require aptitude and support around essential topics such as finance and marketing to thrive. Whether a business is creating cutting edge technology, baking pastries, or providing consulting services, it cannot thrive if it cannot effectively bring in enough revenue to pay bills, or has a great concept that no one knows exists. While information is universal, the experience in accessing and engaging support for those topic areas varies greatly, particularly for minority-owned businesses. This disparity is not unique to Loudoun, but with the rapid rate of growth of Loudoun's population, and the ongoing impacts created by the COVID-19 pandemic for all small businesses, Loudoun has a greater opportunity to serve its small businesses and uniquely address the needs of its minority-owned businesses.

"We created Launch Loudoun as a coordinated program of tools and services designed to support entrepreneurs and our small businesses," said Buddy Rizer, Loudoun Economic Development Executive Director. "Each business is unique, and their needs vary, so it is our mission to provide personal experiences relevant to each situation. This program will help ensure that entrepreneurs have the resources and support they need to achieve long-term #LoudounPossible success."

Since its inception in May 2023, Launch Loudoun, has had a significant impact on furthering economic development within the community. One tangible outcome is the expansion of DED's small business team, with the addition of two new positions focused on small and minority-owned businesses. This growth demonstrates the program's success in scaling resources to meet the increasing demand for support services among entrepreneurs and small businesses.

In one year, Launch Loudoun has directly assisted 94 small businesses, providing them with valuable resources, guidance, and support to navigate challenges and drive growth. These businesses span

various industries and stages of development, from startups to established enterprises, contributing to job creation, innovation, and economic diversification within the county.

Additionally, the program's signature events, such as the Small Business Summit and Innovation Challenge, counseling hours, and work sessions have attracted over 1,600 attendees, fostering networking opportunities, knowledge sharing, and collaboration among entrepreneurs, investors, and stakeholders. This engagement not only enhances the visibility and reputation of Loudoun County as a hub for entrepreneurship but also facilitates the exchange of ideas and best practices, driving ongoing innovation and economic vitality.

Launch Loudoun's impact extends beyond quantitative metrics to include intangible outcomes such as increased community engagement, collaboration, and entrepreneurial spirit. By nurturing a supportive ecosystem for startups and small businesses, the program fosters a culture of innovation and resilience within the community, positioning Loudoun County as a dynamic and strategic destination for entrepreneurs and investors alike.

Standing up a new signature program is never a seamless process. Launch Loudoun faced several obstacles typical of initiating a new initiative. Key challenges included establishing the program framework, securing funding, and hiring the right staff to drive the initiative.

One primary barrier was the extensive planning and approval process required to start a new program. This included obtaining buy-in from various stakeholders and navigating processes to secure necessary funding. To overcome these hurdles, Loudoun DED engaged in thorough planning and frequent communication with local government officials, ensuring transparency and alignment with broader economic development goals while also leveraging existing relationships with community partners to garner support and streamline approvals.

Hiring staff for the initiative posed another significant challenge. Identifying and recruiting individuals with the right mix of expertise in small business development, economic policy, and community outreach was critical but time-consuming. To address this, Loudoun DED implemented a rigorous recruitment process to attract top talent. The hiring team prioritized individuals with a deep understanding of the local business landscape and a commitment to community development.

Establishing operational infrastructure for the new program was also demanding. This involved setting up office space, acquiring technology and resources, and developing program guidelines and materials. These issues were tackled by creating detailed project plans and timelines, allowing for efficient resource allocation and task management.

Through strategic planning, stakeholder engagement, and a robust recruitment process, we successfully launched Launch Loudoun, providing crucial support to small businesses and fostering local economic growth.

Loudoun County Economic Development's signature program, Launch Loudoun, stands out as a deserving candidate for an award due to its exemplary contributions to fostering entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic growth within the community. This project embodies the core values of creativity, collaboration, and inclusivity, making it a model for economic development initiatives nationwide.

Launch Loudoun's innovative approach to supporting startups and entrepreneurs, particularly during challenging times such as the COVID-19 pandemic, sets it apart from traditional economic development programs. The program's proactive response to the pandemic, including the expansion of resources and support services for small and minority-owned businesses, demonstrates its adaptability and resilience in the face of adversity.

The program's emphasis on collaboration and partnership with key stakeholders, including the Board of Supervisors, community organizations, and business associations, underscores its commitment to driving positive change and fostering a more inclusive and vibrant entrepreneurial ecosystem.

Launch Loudoun's measurable impact on job creation, investment attraction, and business growth provides tangible evidence of its effectiveness in furthering economic development objectives. The program's success stories and testimonials from entrepreneurs serve as powerful testimonials to its value and impact within the community.

Overall, Launch Loudoun's innovative approach, collaborative spirit, and measurable impact make it a worthy recipient of recognition and commendation through an award. By empowering startups and entrepreneurs and driving economic growth and resilience, Launch Loudoun embodies the best practices and principles of effective economic development initiatives.

Innovation

Launch Loudoun demonstrates creativity and innovation in its proactive response to the challenges faced by small and minority-owned businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic. Recognizing the underrepresentation of these businesses in grant and financial aid applications, the Department explored the possibility of establishing a dedicated team to focus on supporting this demographic. Loudoun's forward-thinking Board of Supervisors approved funding for the expansion the Department to better serve small and minority-owned businesses, recognizing the importance of addressing systemic barriers and promoting equity in economic development initiatives.

This initiative represents a departure from traditional economic development programs, which often have a one-size-fits-all approach. Launch Loudoun's emphasis on inclusivity and equity reflects a deep understanding of the unique needs and challenges faced by small and minority-owned businesses in

Loudoun, particularly in times of crisis. By prioritizing support for these businesses, and providing tailored events and programming, Launch Loudoun demonstrates a commitment to fostering a more inclusive, resilient, and diverse economic ecosystem.

Partnering

The participants in Loudoun County Economic Development's signature program, Launch Loudoun, encompass a diverse range of stakeholders working collaboratively to support entrepreneurship and drive economic growth within the county. At the core of the project is the Loudoun Department of Economic Development which plays an integral role in shaping the strategic direction of Launch Loudoun, providing resources, and overseeing program implementation.

Community partners, including the Small Business Development Center (SBDC) and Chamber of Commerce, also play crucial roles in the project. The SBDC offers valuable support and resources to entrepreneurs, such as business counseling, training, and access to capital, while the Chamber of Commerce provides networking opportunities, advocacy, and business development services. The Loudoun Economic Development Authority provides funding for specific events within the program and offers community guidance for both Loudoun Economic Development and participants. These partnerships enhance the reach and impact of Launch Loudoun by leveraging the expertise and resources of these organizations to better serve the needs of entrepreneurs.

Business partners serve as content matter experts, offering insights, mentorship, and guidance to participants in the Launch Loudoun through Lunch and Learns, classes, and seminars. These business partners contribute their knowledge and experience to help business owners navigate challenges, refine business models, and accelerate growth.

The success of Launch Loudoun relies on the active participation and collaboration of all stakeholders involved, each bringing unique perspectives, expertise, and resources to advance the goals of the program and drive diverse economic development in Loudoun County.

Model for others

This project can and should be adapted for use in other communities. Fostering an inclusive and collaborative small business community is key to any local economic development efforts. The program's foundational components—comprehensive business training, personalized mentorship, and financial support—are universally applicable. These elements address common challenges faced by small businesses, such as access to capital, business planning, and market development. By adjusting the curriculum to reflect local industries and market conditions, other communities can implement a similar framework to support their small businesses.

The use of community partnerships and stakeholder engagement in Launch Loudoun can be emulated in different settings. Building strong relationships with local government, financial institutions, business associations, and successful entrepreneurs is crucial for any small business support program. These collaborations can provide essential resources, expertise, and networking opportunities, enhancing the program's effectiveness.