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: **Louisa County**

Program Title: **Louisa's Unified, Collaborative Community Communications**

Program Category: **Communications**

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: **Cindy King**

Title: **Community Engagement Manager**

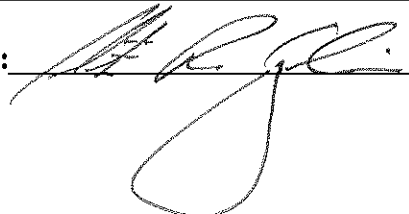Department: **Administration**

Telephone: **540-894-6517**   Website: **louisacounty.gov**

Email: **cking@louisacounty.gov**

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: **Christian Goodwin**

Title: **County Administrator**

Signature:

Executive Summary

Directions: 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.

Imagine you are waiting in the lobby of a Parks and Recreation building as your son takes his karate class. You look up to the information screen and see the content changing from details on the summer reading program at the library to a picture of your lost dog with a number for the animal shelter. Relieved you now know where to find your pet, you continue to watch and notice an alert is scrolling along the bottom of the screen notifying you of a road closure near your neighborhood. Armed with the knowledge that you should take an alternate path home, your son's class ends, and you grab a copy of the county newsletter as you make your way to the car. This scenario is now realistic in Louisa County. The considerable restructuring of our public facing communications in 2023 caters to how the citizens interact with the county, in-person and online.

Staff developed its new communications process in the summer of 2023 with the goals of 1.) providing more unified information and 2.) reaching more citizens despite the challenges associated with limited area access to broadband and a limited promotional budget. Staff thoughtfully crafted new ways to leverage its existing web-based design software, streaming platform for meetings, and older TVs recently retired from Parks, Recreation & Tourism and dispatch. Employing these elements already on-hand, the new efficient and remarkably inexpensive approach begins with a monthly newsletter that offers a compilation of updates from across county departments and government partners. The process then extends to include meeting videos, social media and in-building displays.

Ultimately, the approach: 1) streamlined staff efforts; 2) enabled seamless collaboration with outside entities; 3) vastly enhanced information available to our citizens; and 4) dramatically increased transparency and awareness. The results have been significant – engagement has increased and the public has been complimentary of the effort.

Challenge Faced

Directions: 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).

Due to several factors (including but not limited to varying access to broadband internet), awareness is a challenge in Louisa County. Over the past two years, our Communications team has created several explainer videos, a yearly guide to government (an expanded Community Report) and implemented new website tools. While our social media following continued to grow in 2023, the county's primary social accounts still only accounted for around five percent of the county's population, and with a limited promotional budget, our team relied on organic engagement. Understanding that we needed to reach our citizens in new, highly cost-effective ways, we streamlined an approach to timely communications and in the following sections, we will explain how the approach reflects innovation, partnering and collaboration, as well as creates a model for other localities.

Collaboration

Directions: Programs may be based on programs from another public or private entity but must represent innovative approaches or customization by the local government.

The Orange County Insight newsletter, winner of a 2022 VACo Achievement Award, caught our attention through a LinkedIn post. Our team scheduled a call with Orange County's Communications team, and Orange County staff walked us through its process of laying out the issues in Microsoft Publisher. The team at Orange County revealed that preparing the newsletter helped plan for social posts for the upcoming month and the team also explained a focus of its publication is featured full-length articles. We appreciated the thoughtful advice from Orange County, and we took that to heart when developing an approach to revamping our own newsletter, *The Informed Citizen*.

As most organizations now utilize Canva, we chose to build our monthly newsletter each month in Canva so other organizations' designs can be easily added to our layout. Rather than collecting text and images from our partners to use as source material for articles and layouts, we instead offer partners the option

to share complete layouts while reserving the ability to make minor adjustments as needed. When a

partner organization shares a design in Canva, we are able to simply open the design and copy and paste

the design into our Canva design file for the newsletter. This is our preferred way to receive contributions

as the text remains intact so when the PDF newsletter is created, the text is accessible to PDF readers

and also so that the text is retrievable through our website's search. We can convert contributed PDFs to

Canva designs as well, but prefer Canva designs when possible to preserve the integrity of the design

from the contributing partner. This approach also allows for easy incorporation of flyers created in the

county Canva account for departments like Parks, Recreation & Tourism, the Animal Shelter, Community

Development, etc. This compilation-style approach not only leads to a more complete package of

information for Louisa County residents, but also facilitates a fast approval process as the collected

information is typically pre-approved by the contributing party upon receipt. As we will discuss,

assembling *The Informed Citizen* newsletter with partner updates is the jumping off point for our

streamlined communication process each month.

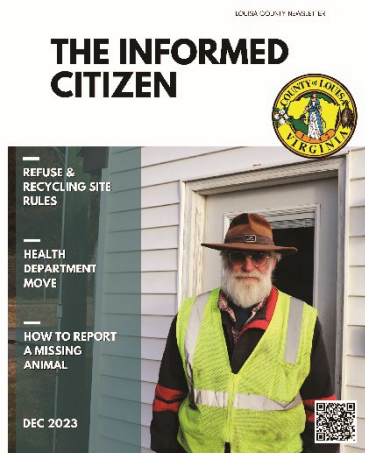## Partnering

Directions: Promote intergovernmental cooperation and/or cooperation with local, state and federal entities and/or a private enterprise in addressing a problem or situation.

The Informed Citizen Newsletter

We invite partner organizations to contribute information to our newsletter and once they agree, they are added to our Louisa County Newsletter Contributors group. This group receives an email with a calendar invite at the beginning of each month letting them know when submissions are due and reminding them of accepted file formats to include Canva sharing information. The reminder also includes information on our fonts and artwork size limitations. Toward the end of each month, the group gets a draft-watermarked PDF to review and provide corrections if needed.

On the first business day of the month, we publish *The Informed Citizen* newsletter on our website, send an email and text to subscribers with a link to the new issue, and post about the issue on social media. Hard copies are printed in-house and distributed in the County Office Building and other county facilities, as well as select partner locations.
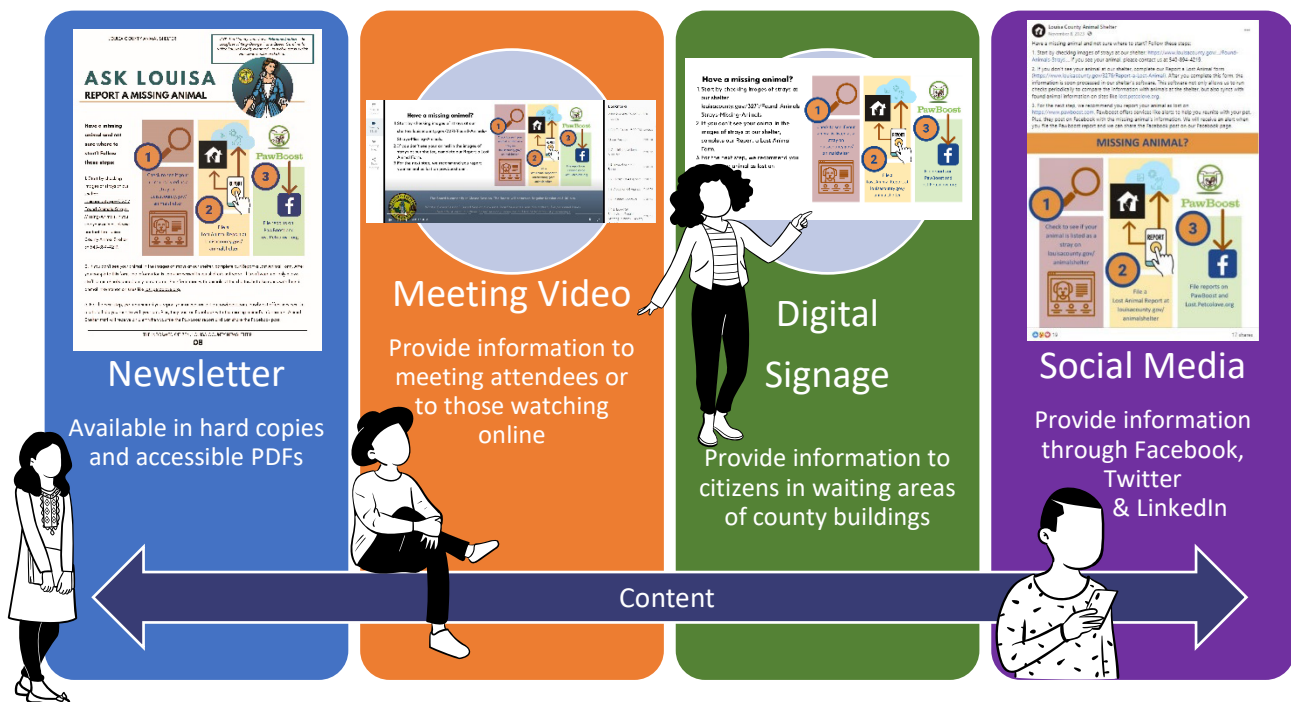
The Informed Citizen now serves as a great example that we're stronger when we work together. While some information from various county offices, departments and partner organizations may be available through disparate sources (a series of social media accounts and newsletters), this revamped Louisa County newsletter creates more of a one-stop-shop of information and updates for citizens. Partner contributions are labelled with a purple "Partner Update" bar to distinguish between their updates and those that originate from the county.

Innovation

Directions: Offer an innovative solution to a problem, situation or delivery of services.

A few duplicated and slightly edited designs later, the newsletter information is displayed for Board of Supervisors meeting attendees while the Board is in closed session, for citizens in lobby areas of County buildings through the new digital signage system, and for citizens on social media. Reformatting the information for the various platforms allows us to distribute a variety of messages in the places our citizens interact with us.

Newsletter — Available in hard copies and accessible PDFs

Meeting Video — Provide information to meeting attendees or to those watching online

Digital Signage — Provide information to citizens in waiting areas of county buildings

Social Media — Provide information through Facebook, Twitter & LinkedIn

Content

The Meeting Videos

Variations of newsletter designs are exported as video files and are used for meeting videos. Updated before each Board of Supervisors meeting using Canva, the meeting video file is played on the large screens in the public meeting room as well as through the online recording while the Board is in closed session. The video file for this purpose also includes information on the public comment process, public hearing details, decision guides (such as the Comprehensive Plan, the Board's Strategic Initiatives,

Budget, Public Input, Vision, Core Values), and citizen FAQs. Explainer videos with subtitles and without sound are also added in periodically to the rotation of information. A blue bar appears along the bottom of the entire video with text that explains what closed session is for those new to meetings. Offering information on common inquiries and timely topics prior to a Board meeting helps proactively answer questions as well as takes the opportunity to educate attendees/viewers on programs they may have been unaware of otherwise. This process was first implemented in October 2023.
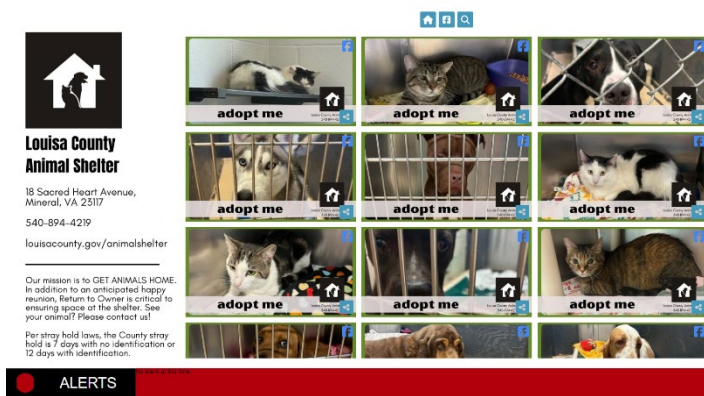

Digital Signage

When we update the video file for Board meetings, we also update the video file for our new digital signage in County buildings. Digital signage was first installed in the County Office Building in 2023, in places known to have the highest foot traffic. The cost for new equipment was incredibly low as the IT team had existing TVs on hand that had previously been used in the communications center by dispatch, and the Parks, Recreation & Tourism department also had TVs available from a room that had recently transitioned from a teen center to an exercise room. The IT

department found a no-cost solution to manage the content and set up a local server to accommodate the free solution.

Information can be pushed out to the digital signage remotely from one location – allowing for quick updates and saving staff time traveling to the various locations. Additionally, the layouts for the digital signage include an alert bar along the bottom. This alert bar seamlessly pulls from the RSS feed on our website, which in turn integrates messaging from our mass alert system, CivicReady. The alert bar is set to update every 10 minutes, and for example, if the landfill closes early, that message will scroll across the bottom of the screen and then disappear when the alert is set to expire.

Other dynamic content for the digital signage includes social media feeds from Parks, Recreation & Tourism as well as the Animal Shelter. The Parks, Recreation & Tourism feed promotes upcoming activities and celebrates recent events, while the Animal Shelter feed promotes adoptable animals and shows images of strays in hopes their owners will see their images and retrieve them.

To date, there are multiple digital signage displays installed across the County Office Building, Office of Elections, Betty Queen Center (Parks, Recreation & Tourism) and Human Services. The Animal Shelter and Health Department are slated for future installations. Locations for the screens were carefully chosen. For example, while children's activities are occurring in the Great Room at our Betty Queen Center, we know parents often sit in the lobby for the duration of a class. A screen was installed in the lobby to catch attention of the waiting parents. In Human Services and the Office of Elections, screens

were installed in the sitting areas. In the County Office Building, the screens were installed where lines

sometimes form and by the front desk where people sometimes wait.

Social Media

The Informed Citizen newsletter information – whether generated by

Louisa County government for the newsletter or collected from a

partner organization – transitions well to social media. Infographics or

pictures become the focus through social media image uploads, and

text from the newsletter is used for the accompanying text.

How the Program Was Carried Out

The IT department found the digital signage content management solution that is zero-cost when

utilizing a local server (Xibo) and formatted Beelink devices to run the content on the digital signage

screens. The General Services department installed the TVs to act as the digital signage, utilizing five

existing TV screens on-hand. The Communications team manages content to include creating the

newsletter, meeting videos and digital signage information.

Finance and Staffing

This is an extremely low-cost program that is being maximized across several platforms for the most

exposure. We were already utilizing Canva for other purposes and will continue to do so. The only

unique cost associated with the newsletter is staff time, and it should be noted the efficient process uses

minimal staff time. There is no additional cost associated with meeting videos and social posts other

than a small amount of staff time (less than 30 minutes per video/post).

The digital signage solution has a low upfront cost (approximately $165 for equipment if utilizing an existing TV, $389 for installs with new TVs). Our Community Development department receives about 150 visits a month. With an install that required a new TV, the cost per visitor to see the information near the Community Development service window in the first year is roughly $0.22 per person (this would only be $0.01 per person for a similar installation utilizing an existing TV), then zero dollars after the first year.

Our staffing is minimal - the IT department consists of three people, the Communications team consists of one person, and three members of General Services installed the TVs.

Model

Directions: Provide a model that other local governments may learn from or implement in their own localities.

Process information is largely described above. Equipment/software information is provided below for reference.

Content Creation/Compilation/Resizing	Canva
Digital Signage Content Management Solution	Xibo
Digital Signage Equipment to Receive/Display Content	Beelink Mini S12 Mini PC
Live Streaming Software for Meetings (Compatible with CivicClerk)	OBS

Results & Current Status
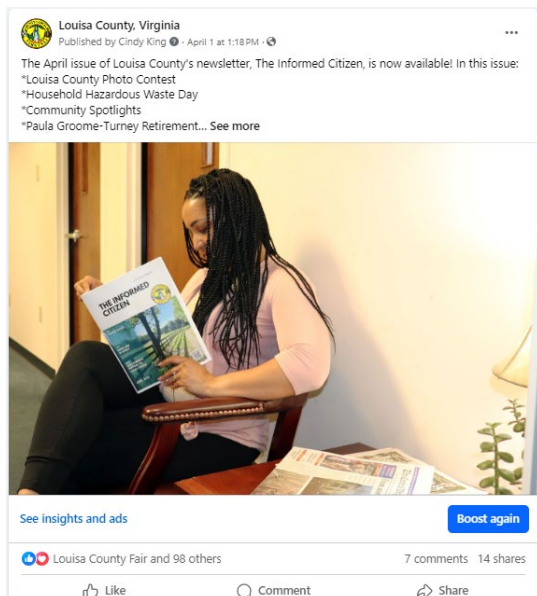
The number of *The Informed Citizen* newsletter contributors grows each month as local organizations see the value in being included alongside other updates. Since the first issue of the enhanced newsletter last year, the list of contributors has grown approximately 50% to over 40 offices, departments and organizations.

In 2024, we began boosting the Facebook post each month that announces a new issue of the newsletter with a modest $20 budget, and we've seen excellent results in expanding the reach. For example, our last boosted post had a reach of nearly 5,200 and nearly 1,400 people engaged with the post. Previously, we were only seeing similar posts receiving an average of five to six likes and five or less shares.

Digital signage screens will be installed at the Animal Shelter and in the Louisa County Health Department next, and each of these installations represent high-foot traffic locations and good opportunities to reach citizens with a variety of local government-related information.