



## 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](#).

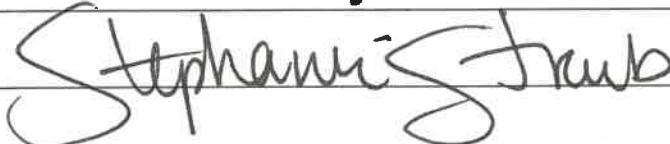
### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Orange County  
Program Title: Orange County Insight Newsletter  
Program Category: Communications

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Stephanie Straub  
Title: Assistant County Administrator  
Signature: 

## **2024 VACo Achievement Award Nomination**

### **Category: Communications**

### **Nominee: Orange County Insight Newsletter**

#### **Executive Summary:**

Residents in today's connected world have come to expect a greater level of information and transparency from their local governments. Going beyond the what, when, and where, there is a desire among engaged citizens to better understand the why and the how. The decline of reliable local news sources and the rise of social media has only increased this demand, and it has necessitated that counties answer the challenge in new and creative ways.

Orange County's approach is anchored in the monthly release of an electronic newsletter, the *Orange County Insight*. Publishing a newsletter is not a unique idea, but ours is set apart thanks to its comprehensive nature, refined presentation, strong outreach initiatives, and in the way it is utilized as the center hub in the wheel of our communication efforts. Its current format was first conceived during the pandemic; its goal was countering the anxiety and uncertainty of that time with regularity and trustworthiness. Since its first issue was released in October 2020, we have not missed a single month, and readership has continued to grow.

As both an internal and external communication device, the newsletter faces the challenge of presenting a worthwhile balance of information relevant to our employees as well as the public. Our way of addressing this challenge has converted it into a strength, by using information geared towards staff as a window into our operations, increasing transparency and even helping with recruitment and retention.

## Main Nomination:

In today's connected world, the public sector is not immune to the push for new and original content to maintain engagement. In fact, there is increasing pressure on local governments to consistently deliver relevant information directly to the resident, rather than simply making it accessible. A trend towards consolidation, in which smaller local news providers are being absorbed into regional and even national conglomerates, has only exacerbated this issue. The void created as



Figure 1: The Cover of the July 2022 "Orange County Insight" newsletter.

these resources disappear or become less locally relevant has often been filled by social media pages unconcerned with trafficking in rumors. Residents are left to sift through an overwhelming volume of content to find the nuggets of information truly useful to them.

During the pandemic, Orange County began to conceive of a polished electronic newsletter that would house details about the activities, happenings, and events driven by our departments. Aware that any newsletter produced by a county has to overcome the initial hurdle of becoming white noise, those involved set an ambitious goal and established at the onset to reject the idea of "good enough." Instead, the newsletter team has sought to blaze new trails and set new standards for what a governmental newsletter can be. The result is the [Orange County Insight](#), a new take on the traditional newsletter that more closely resembles a digital magazine. Sent to all employees by email, and to the public in a variety of ways, it maintains excellent readership measures by consistently

delivering detailed, timely information in a way that is both visually appealing and user friendly. Launched in October 2020, and published monthly mid-month, the *Orange County Insight* has maintained its initial high standards and has not missed a publication since it began.

From the start, the *Insight* was intended to serve both internal and external readers, and it has continued to excel in that regard for nearly four years. While regularly addressing two audiences could certainly have become a challenge, we believe the duality has become one of the publication's most surprising strengths. Dedicated readership inside the organization has made it an extremely useful tool for disseminating important information such as benefits changes, policy updates, and organization-wide events. This has gone a long way towards reducing the use of phrases like, "I never heard about that." Content related to the activities of other departments, even that published with an external focus, has proven useful to our staff members. First, the majority of our employees are residents themselves, and much of the information is likely to be of interest to them personally. Second, by staying informed, employee-readers are empowered to help continue to spread the word about county activities to their friends, family, and neighbors. Given that word-of-mouth remains as important as ever, a well-informed workforce is a force-multiplier for information dispersal.

**A WELL-INFORMED WORKFORCE IS A FORCE-MULTIPLIER FOR INFORMATION DISPERSAL.**

Another advantage of serving both audiences is built-in transparency. By regularly updating our taxpayers regarding employee policies, raises, benefits, cultural programs, etc., we help foster greater understanding. Even if a resident should disagree with something staff-related, they are at least better informed about its purpose and the

background leading to the decision. Furthermore, they are provided with an avenue to contact the editor, who can distribute any feedback to the appropriate department. We are proud to report that the overwhelming majority of the feedback received so far has been positive. In the same spirit, presenting information about items like our culture work and the County Cup has helped recruitment efforts. Bridging the gap between internal and external readers, boilerplate is included in some articles that directs readers to open positions. To illustrate, an interested job seeker may read about revised employee benefits packages that reduce the premiums for plans including dependents. Intrigued and hoping to find better benefits for their family, the job seeker notices the language directing them to our website's job listings link (open positions are also published in each issue). In a few short steps facilitated by the newsletter, they have transitioned from an external reader to a new job applicant.

The newsletter also serves to connect residents to Orange County staff through regular features like our personnel profile and special highlights like a focus on staff pets in the [July 2022 issue in honor of "All American Pet Photo Day."](#) Helping to humanize the organization through such features makes it more clear to residents that Orange County is not a faceless organization that just sends them tax bills, but rather a dedicated team composed of their friends and neighbors.

Crafting the newsletter relies on tried-and-true software applications utilized in creative ways. Many are surprised to learn that the base design platform for the *Insight* is Microsoft Publisher. Originally, this was simply due to the software's availability across the organization at no additional cost. Over time, the newsletter team has become very comfortable with its use; by using some of the lesser-known features, they are able to achieve results that rival more expensive applications. Canva was adopted along the way

and has helped staff create professional graphics and flyers for the newsletter without adding much expense. Canva's library of graphics and photographs has proven quite useful and allows editors to create freely with the knowledge that they are not infringing upon any copyright concerns. During the design phase, hyperlinks and alt text are included to make the publication more accessible and useful. Once created, the newsletter is reviewed by administrators and published to FlippingBook. This service allows the presentation of the issue as a flippable digital magazine, complete with paper shuffling sound effects. Upon turning each page, hyperlinks are highlighted in flashing blue sections, making it clear to readers that interactive content is available. Subscriptions are facilitated through Mailchimp. The clean presentation of emails sent through that service matches the crisp aesthetic of the *Insight* itself. Signup forms are available within the publication, on the website at [www.orangecountyva.gov/newsletter](http://www.orangecountyva.gov/newsletter), and through QR codes regularly included with flyers and promotional materials. Altogether, annual expenses related to creating and publishing the newsletter (not counting staff time) amount to just over \$1,500. Considering that a single quarter-page newspaper ad recently cost Orange County \$250 without any analytics to measure effectiveness, the expense is certainly worthwhile.

Content sourcing is the primary responsibility of our Communications Specialist, who actively engages with each department, and regularly attends activities, to find inspiration for articles and graphics that help deliver details about recent happenings and upcoming events. Although significant leg-work is required, it is a labor of love and the result is a staff-driven publication that is strongly relevant to our residents. In a journalistic fashion, pursuing content often organically creates new leads. The *Insight's* format welcomes cross-referencing and assists readers in gaining a better understanding of the



whole picture. For example, a recent article in the June 2024 edition highlighted our [Fire & EMS Department's training trip](#) to a surgical laboratory in Northern Virginia. Focused on demonstrating the way that department consistently seeks out new ways to innovate and improve, it presented the opportunity to link to previous articles related to their [Best Small County VACo award-winning Whole Blood Project](#), [their drone program](#), and their (also VACo award-winning) [Education and Workforce Partnership Initiative](#). Utilizing the Orange County Insight's magazine-style layout, coupled with electronic capabilities like hyperlinking, allowed readers of that article to learn a great deal of background information that drew upon years' worth of content creation. Even better, these access points were presented in a very natural way that encouraged topic exploration. It's important to note that this article was not exceptional in that regard. Rather, it is very common for our newsletter team to sprinkle additional interest points from prior issues when useful to the reader.

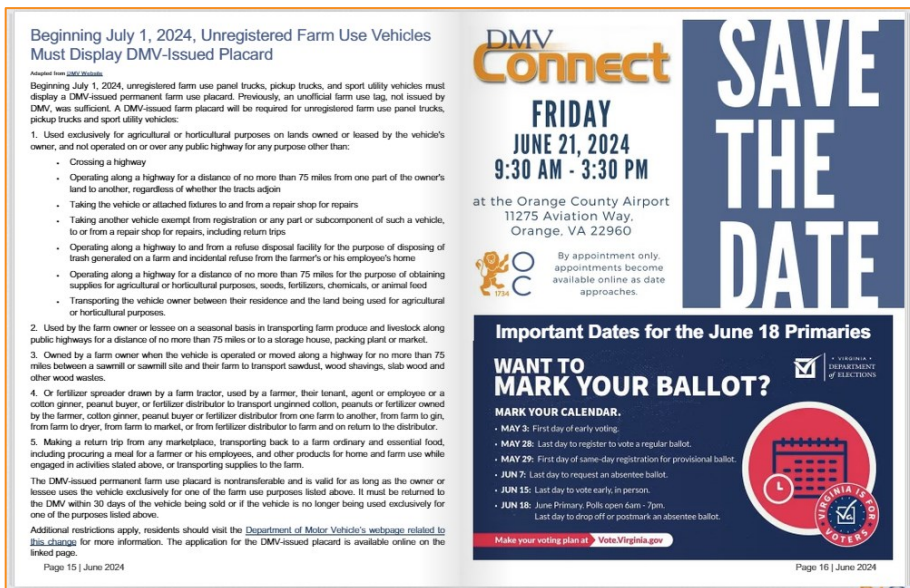


Figure 2: Effective presentation allows us to naturally connect the dots between related items through clever use of page space.

Another recent example that was especially actionable for our readers alerted residents of the upcoming [July 1 requirement that farm use vehicles display a DMV-issued placard](#).

Primarily, content comes from within our organization, but pertinent items from regional and state governmental partners are welcome, especially when there is a valuable

connection to something available to our residents. By sourcing the information from the DMV website (with a link, of course) that described the conditions requiring the new placard, and placing it alongside a graphic advertising DMV Connect's visit to the Orange County Airport - happening just a few short days after the newsletter's release – we were able to inform our residents of something they needed to know and immediately provide them with a practical, local, and timely solution for addressing the issue. Furthermore, the graphic was hyperlinked directly to DMV's appointments page, which made scheduling the service especially convenient for readers.

The DMV example helps illustrate another important reason for the *Insight's* success: it is focused on its mission. The stated purpose of the Orange County Insight is to keep employees, residents, businesses, and visitors to Orange County connected with their local government. With strong readership and a growing reputation, it is not surprising that the newsletter team must be diligent about content inclusion considerations and avoiding mission creep. Partly resulting from the void created by an increasingly less locally-focused newspaper, businesses have requested to advertise in the publication, and individuals have sought inclusion for items that are off-message. Common reader feedback includes requests for items like a "sports section." However, even though the newsletter does provide a great deal of pertinent local information, it is not intended to replace the functions of a newspaper. Setting proper boundaries to maintain that distinction required discussion and thoughtful consideration. With that in mind, inclusion of items beyond the activities of our own departments typically requires one of the following:

**IT IS FOCUSED ON ITS MISSION.**



- The information is connected to an activity in which one or more of our departments are a primary partner. An example might be a fun run held in partnership with a local civic group.
  - In this spirit, an events page is hosted with information provided by our Tourism Department. Even if that department is not a primary organizer, the Upcoming Community Events page allows for inclusion of special events since attracting visitors and encouraging event attendance is a primary function of that department. A disclaimer on the page helps clarify that events listed there are not necessarily hosted, sponsored, or endorsed by Orange County.
- The information is connected to a regional or state-level governmental initiative open to Orange County residents. An example would be an article highlighting the availability of a grant program for septic system repairs hosted by our soil & water conservation district. The above DMV example would fall under this category.
- The information is part of a nationally recognized non-profit or governmental campaign that is of broad interest and relevant to Orange County residents. An example would be National Hurricane Preparedness Week.

Another less obvious benefit is the way the newsletter has helped coordinate and streamline the communications efforts across our organization. The simple act of following the breadcrumbs of content helps connect staff with other employees pursuing similar goals, as well as revealing opportunities to partner with outside organizations. Without the newsletter, these potential connections might remain unnoticed. For example, an [article in the February 2022 issue focused on Captain Maples](#), a member of the famed

Tuskegee Airmen who hailed from Orange County, revealed connections between our Tourism Department, Communications Department, the Town of Orange, and others. Going further, it opened a new door to partner with the Orange County African American Historical Society who helped cross promote the newsletter by [posting the article as a guest blog on their website](#).

As the center hub of our communications efforts, it also helps arrange seemingly disparate data points in a logical way. *Insight* editors can help coordinate the most effective way to disseminate information across other platforms like social media, radio, our website, and newspaper ads, by anchoring the process in the publication schedule of the newsletter. Staff regularly look back at prior issues for reminders about pertinent seasonal information. Lessons learned from those issues inform the scheduling of other outreach efforts. For example, an article about winter safety from a prior issue released in January could be linked to a new “get ready for winter” graphic posted on social media in November as a way for readers to “learn more” without having to create entirely new content. On the other hand, it can prompt the realization that we need to create new content. Using a similar example, a winter safety article from a previous year might mention the need to avoid using generators in garages. Realizing that a photograph would be useful to explain the need to space the generator 20 feet away and to aim the exhaust away from doors and windows, Communications Department staff can then reach out to Fire & EMS to coordinate such a picture in the weeks leading up to its publication.

Success is easily measured with this project and provides constant motivation to improve each issue. The most obvious measurement is the number of times an issue is read. Early issues were read between 250 and 350 times before the next publication, a timeframe of around 30 days. Driven by its clean presentation and useful information, that

number has steadily increased. The most recent issue has been read more than 1,200 times in less than ten days! Another important metric is the open rate among external subscribers. Measuring the number of subscribed individuals who chose to open an email about an issue, our rate far exceeds industry standards. The average performance for the *Insight* is a 63.8% open rate against a peer performance rate of 40.8%. Again, the newsletter team decided early on to never settle for good enough, and recent dedicated efforts to increase readership have paid off. One new approach built upon an already renewed interest in subscriptions by including an insert with our real estate tax bills. Confirmation of the effectiveness of these efforts can be seen in the impressive open rates of the four most recent issues. They are: March 2024 – 68.9%, April 2024 – 68.9%, May 2024 – 72.6%, and June 2024 – 75.9%.

Reaching beyond just Orange County, we are proud to report that our publication has become an example that has inspired neighboring localities to begin their own similar initiatives. Louisa County based their newsletter, *The Informed Citizen*, on ours. Before they began, they consulted with our Communications Department regarding best practices to utilize and pitfalls to avoid. They graciously acknowledged the influence and support when their first issue was published.



Figure 3: Neighboring Louisa County gave a shoutout to the *Insight* for inspiration and assistance preparing their excellent newsletter, "The Informed Citizen." – Screenshot From County of Louisa LinkedIn page.

While celebrating the success of the Orange County Insight, staff continue to maintain that same pursuit of excellence from which the publication was founded. We look forward to continuing to increase readership, seeking out new ways to relate the activities of our departments, and refining the presentation of this useful communication tool for our residents, employees, businesses, and visitors.