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 <u>Gage Harter</u>.

PROGRAM INFORMATION	
County: Orange County	
Program Title: Facility Maintenance	e Staff Education Partnership
Program Category: Organizational	
CONTACT INFORMATION	
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2024 VACo Achievement Award Nomination

Category: Organizational Development

Nominee: Facility Maintenance Staff Education Partnership

Executive Summary:

Continuing education is a key component of the training and professional development programs of many organizations. This is certainly true in Orange County; however, we have taken an additional step by leveraging state and local partnerships to make training accessible for a wider range of staff and local vo-tech professionals.

Often, training programs are created with office workers in mind. Unfortunately, when it comes to the trade skills employed by buildings and grounds staff, logistics challenges often limit opportunities. As a result, most organizations of our size offer few additional training opportunities for these employees.

Administration addressed this problem by partnering with Germanna Community College's Center for Workforce and Community Education. Together, we crafted an innovative opportunity for our team to study in the NCCER Facility Maintenance Apprenticeship program. As a workforce development initiative, great effort has been taken to remove participation obstacles. Classes are often held at our offices with flexible time benefits, real-world experience applies towards class requirements, employees can participate without personal expense, and incentives reward class completion.

Orange County has benefited from this program by enjoying a more motivated and skilled workforce, increasing retention in a competitive labor market. Deeper skillsets have allowed us to be more selective about which jobs require an outside vendor, creating meaningful and long-term cost savings.

Main Nomination:

Our Facility Maintenance Staff Education
Partnership is an innovative approach to
building and grounds employee training. By
working directly with a local, state-run, institution
of higher learning - Germanna Community
College - we have forged new strategic, cross-



Figure 1: Buildings & Grounds Supervisor Joey Freeze participates in a class at our office.

agency partnerships and removed obstacles for our staff. Thanks to this partnership, which began in the summer of 2023, Orange County receives class instruction in the NCCER (National Center for Construction Education & Research) Facility Maintenance Apprenticeship program through Germanna's Center for Workforce and Community Education. Orange County has been able to benefit from a discount on the cost of these classes for our personnel. The resulting cost is typically \$500 per person per class. Some courses, such as the core trades class, were less expensive. With five participants, the expense usually comes to \$2,500 per class. The program is still ongoing; but considering all potential coursework this will translate to an approximate maximum expense of \$10,000 - \$12,500 total.

Assisted by the discounted class rate, Orange County can cover the expense for team members wishing to participate. Removing the expense barrier is extremely important when the program's goal is to provide advancement opportunity to entry-level employees. As we work to position ourselves as an employer of choice, having well-defined and supported pathways for education and advancement available at all levels helps Orange County remain competitive even in a market with much larger localities and

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private enterprises. It goes beyond training and becomes a workforce development initiative that prepares staff to move into roles of greater responsibility and institutional

IT GOES BEYOND TRAINING AND BECOMES A WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVE.

need. With that in mind, the program is incentivized by staff becoming eligible for a 1% raise for each course of study completed.

Seeking to create a win-win-win situation for Orange County, Germanna, and our residents, we have given local businesses the opportunity to participate alongside our staff. The trade skills learned, while extremely applicable to the work performed by our maintenance technicians, are also relevant to the work performed by many area businesses. Local vendors, such as Inspired Electrical Solutions, took advantage of the opportunity by sending several of their staff. Allowing outside participation provided businesses with a convenient class location, increased class size (and therefore viability) for Germanna, and fostered positive community connections for Orange County. We are the only locality offering this kind of partnership program in Virginia.

The motivation for this partnership occurred when leadership recognized a disparity in training opportunities across the organization. Virtual and remote education is widely available for office staff seeking to expand their skillsets or develop professionally. Similar options exist for trade-focused education, but practical skills assessment requirements (where students must physically demonstrate competency) are less easily adapted to virtual learning. For example, a student tasked with diagnosing faulty wiring cannot fully demonstrate that skill through written or online tests. That student will need access to an actual electrical system. The location obstacle is exacerbated by building and grounds staff being essential to all other functions of an organization. Preventative maintenance can be scheduled, but unpredictable work orders dictate that maintenance

personnel will not always have advance knowledge of exactly what they will address each day. Additional hours, outside of the usual workday, can be required to complete a work order without impacting the operations of other departments. As such, taking personnel to an offsite program can become problematic for both the employee and the organization.

Bringing the classroom to the student, whenever possible, has removed this obstacle. To date, most classes have occurred at our Public Works building. Building and grounds employees simply remain at the office following regular work hours, one day per week, to participate in the class. Scheduling this way creates minimal organizational impact while maximizing potential attendance. To further remove impediments, our employees are permitted to earn overtime or comp time, or flex their hours, to accommodate class schedules.

Even better, the work orders themselves can be used to provide real-world practice and help maintenance technicians meet course requirements without additional effort. Our employees maintain a log of skills demonstrated while responding to work orders. These performance sheets are required by the program to demonstrate competency. We are proud of this aspect of the partnership because it allows our staff to convert the real-

world needs of facility repair into positive learning experiences for class completion.

IT ALLOWS STAFF TO CONVERT THE REAL-WORLD NEEDS OF FACILITY REPAIR INTO POSITIVE LEARNING EXPERIENCES.

Connecting actual maintenance issues with training opportunities is not difficult. As mentioned, the classes offered during this program are directly related to the duties regularly required of our maintenance staff. In fact, several employees were able to test out of certain course requirements owing to their existing knowledge and experience. That

said, even those with strong base knowledge have considered the program worthwhile.

A focus on safety, which is repeatedly emphasized in these classes, is applicable to everyone.

Electrical training has proved especially worthwhile for most of our staff members.

Lessons learned have provided them with a stronger foundation to conduct extensive facility renovations currently taking place. As of this submission, we are closing renovation projects that have totaled 64,000 square feet, or approximately 50% of our facility space.



have totaled 64,000 square feet, or Figure 2: Empowered by knowledge gained during these classes, our Maintenance Technicians are increasingly able to handle projects in-house. Even better, they are able to log any applicable work towards completion of course requirements.

This work has been accomplished through a combination of County staff and vendors, but the additional training has made it possible to be more selective about vendor use. For example, we did not need to enlist the help of an electrician for tasks like appliance wiring in our administration building's new kitchen. This job required running wire from multiple panel boxes, using the correct gauge of wire in the right locations, and installing the right outlets for all needed appliances, including a dishwasher, refrigerator, microwave, and stove. A similar-scale electrical project recently completed at another building cost Orange County \$4,300. Hiring an outside electrician for this single job, completed by one of our maintenance technicians, could have cost the County much more than the entire expense incurred enrolling our maintenance staff in the Electrical Level 1 class. While providing professional development opportunities has been the primary goal, the savings from this job make clear how investing in our personnel has already paid financial dividends for the County.

Leadership is excited about the strategic advantages of having qualified personnel available in-house. In recent years, Orange County has shifted from a model that depended heavily on outside contractors to a staff-forward approach that is only supplemented by specialized vendors. Projects conducted during the pandemic were faced with delays due to lack of vendor availability. Even when a vendor was available, supply chain limitations often meant they were still unable to complete tasks. Obviously, having staff capable of handling most maintenance needs addresses vendor availability concerns directly. Supply challenges remain an unavoidable issue, but well-trained employees are better equipped to conduct preventative maintenance, which helps reduce the need for hard-to-find supplies. In comparison to an outside vendor, they are also in a better position to discern when those supplies are truly necessary given their vested interest in making effective use of county funds. When such purchases are necessary, we can buy those supplies directly without a contractor markup, leading to additional savings. Proper training and support helps empower our staff to make those decisions.

Investing in our staff by partnering with Germanna Community College to offer these classes has been a great success. First and foremost, we can measure this success qualitatively with the simple awareness that employees have reinforced their existing skillsets and learned new information to apply at work. Quantitatively, we can measure success by participation. All current buildings and grounds staff, except for a recent hire, are currently enrolled in the program. High participation ensures that knowledge is spread throughout the department and employees are empowered at all levels. Finally, we can measure the success financially in terms of the cost of repairs performed by staff that would have required a vendor before this training.

With classes ongoing, staff have regularly mentioned the value of attendance. Technicians have remarked that these lessons have provided them with a greater understanding of processes like safety, construction, and renovation. "Learning more about blueprints was the most interesting to me," said one of our Maintenance Technicians. "It really broke down the plans for starting construction." Even our most experienced personnel have been able to apply lessons learned to everyday operations, especially in the electrical field. "My favorite part was getting the chance to learn more about topics I see on a daily basis, and as a team, accomplish more of the county's electrical maintenance needs," said our Buildings & Grounds Manager." [The instructor] was great, and we really enjoyed the class," he added.

Buy-in for the program has been strong. While not mandatory, the removal of obstacles like location, expense, and time has created an opportunity that our staff are excited to take advantage of. Our entire six-person building and grounds team, apart from one recent hire that started well after the program began, are enrolled. This depth of participation means that no matter who responds to a work-order, they will be well-qualified to handle the situation.

Through this partnership, we have effectively made our facilities extensions of Germanna's campus. This is particularly impactful because their main campus is at the far end of Orange County for many of our population centers. Many students interested in these classes would be faced with a 30 to 45-minute drive to attend either Germanna's main campus or the nearest vo-tech location in Culpeper County. Bringing classes closer makes it easier for our staff and the other students to better themselves and the community.

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Training like this is new for our organization, and this program is still ongoing. As our maintenance technicians continue to become better equipped to handle most work

order requests without vendor support, there will continue to be long-run financial and strategic advantages. The diversity of classes included in the NCCER program covers the vast majority of service calls received by our team, empowering them to confidently answer day-to-day work



Figure 3: In addition to Public Works staff, we made this program available to local business like Inspired Electrical. Here, Orange County personnel attend class with the employees of local businesses.

orders. In fact, when focusing on work orders fulfilled since the start of the program last summer, only 6% of our nearly 400 work orders have required the involvement of an outside contractor! This translates to significant financial savings. The previously mentioned electrical job is a prime example. The extensive electrical work at our administration office would have cost thousands. As staff continue to learn, this investment in our people will continue to pay dividends in our business operations.

As this program is new and still underway, it is serving as a useful beta test for considering other professional development opportunities. Continuing to develop this partnership with Germanna Community College presents the opportunity to facilitate more advanced journeyman studies for our maintenance employees. Going one step further, many of the lessons learned from this effort could facilitate the creation of education programs for other departments specific to their needs. Many of their areas of study would be readily applicable to the services we offer, such as Computer & Information Technology, Public Service & Safety, Healthcare, Business & Hospitality, and more.