



Virginia Municipal League Announces Winners of the 2025 Innovation Awards in Local Government

For Immediate Release: September 18, 2025

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The Virginia Municipal League (VML) is pleased to announce the winners of its annual awards for excellence in local government. The statewide competition recognizes innovative problem-solving, excellence in management, citizen participation, and improved services to citizens.

Of this year's Innovation Awards, VML Executive Director Michelle Gowdy says: "It's inspiring to see the wide range of projects and initiatives in the submissions. Virginia's local governments have a lot to be proud of. In fact, there were almost double the number of entries compared to last year. Thanks to everyone who entered and congratulations to the winners!"

One of the category winners will also receive the **President's Award for Innovation**. This additional award will be announced at the Awards Banquet on Sunday, Oct. 12 at the Hotel Roanoke during the 2025 VML Annual Conference.

The winners of the 2025 Innovation Awards are:

- **COMMUNICATIONS: City of Alexandria** – Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Communications
- **COMMUNITY HEALTH: City of Danville** – Danville Outdoors
- **ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: Town of Hillsville** – Community Business Launch
- **ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY: Town of Strasburg** – Town Run Riparian Native Plant Buffer
- **PUBLIC SAFETY: City of Norfolk** – Community 1ST
- **RISK MANAGEMENT: City of Roanoke** – Safety Awareness Event
- **WORKING WITH YOUTH: City of Chesapeake** – 10th Annual CE3 Engine Camp

Category: COMMUNICATIONS

Winner: City of Alexandria

Entry: Fiscal Year 2026 Budget Communications

Facing a potential FY26 budget shortfall from anticipated federal funding decreases, the City of Alexandria felt it had to make clear connections between budget decisions, daily life, and long-term



goals. The city also wanted to strengthen the public's trust by making the budget process more transparent, accessible, and easy to understand. So, for FY26, the budget communications needed to strike a careful balance between encouraging community participation while acknowledging potential tax impacts and fiscal constraints.

To meet this challenge, the city created a centralized online Budget Hub featuring key resources and real-time updates throughout the FY26 budget season. The city also implemented a multi-channel communications strategy across several platforms including an online forum that received over 100 questions. To keep costs down, the city leveraged existing events like farmers markets to host pop-ups and held a "Budget Bonanza" where residents engaged directly with city departments to learn how budget decisions impact services.

Throughout the budget process the city ensured transparency by sharing timely updates on tax rate decisions and council deliberations. To ensure equitable access, the city distributed translated materials and conducted bilingual outreach for public meetings and printed communications. To increase reach and engagement, the city produced short-form video content featuring city leaders. Social media posts included clear calls to action and accessible language, contributing to a 93% increase in engagement over FY25. When appropriate, the messaging incorporated a conversational tone to simplify complex issues, while maintaining sensitivity around tough topics like federal funding reductions, property tax impacts, employee compensation, and competing priorities.

By maximizing internal capacity and using no-cost platforms creatively, the city achieved high-impact results with minimal spending, demonstrating a scalable, resource-conscious model that other localities can replicate to enhance civic engagement and budget transparency.

[Watch one of the fiscal year 2026 budget videos here >](#)

Category: COMMUNITY HEALTH

Winner: City of Danville

Entry: Danville Outdoors

Danville Outdoors unites city departments and community organizations – including Danville Parks and Recreation, Danville Public Works, Dan River Basin Association, Danville Science Center, Virginia Cooperative Extension, Virginia Master Naturalists, and local garden and school groups – into a coordinated, citywide hub.

Working together, the organizations that comprise Danville Outdoors provide hands-on programs,



community events, and environmental education that engage residents of all ages and backgrounds, while breaking down barriers to equitable access. This turns every park, trail, and green space into a classroom for learning, exploration, and connection

Consider just a few examples:

- The Ballou Park Reforestation Project restored over 100 trees, engaged over 250 participants in hands-on learning.
- Danville Outdoors pairs adventure-based programs with environmental education in non-traditional spaces like neighborhood parks and redevelopment sites to extend its impact without major investments.
- Signature events like Ladybug Release Day engage the community in biodiversity awareness at minimal cost.

It should come as no surprise that in 2025 Danville became the first city in Virginia to earn the Nature Everywhere Community designation, joining more than 80 organizations nationwide recognized for advancing access to nature.

[Watch a news story about the program here >](#)

Category: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Winner: Town of Hillsville

Entry: Community Business Launch

Like many rural towns, Hillsville faces the challenge of vacant downtown storefronts and limited resources for entrepreneurs seeking to grow or establish businesses. Through the Community Business Launch, funded by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development, the town created a competitive process that combined business training with grant opportunities. Each week, 35–40 participants came together for free workshops, networking, and homework assignments designed to build stronger businesses. The workshops – hosted by business leaders, the Small Business Development Center, and regional partners at little or no cost – focused on essential topics such as marketing, financial planning, and customer service.

Throughout the program, town employees played a central role in encouraging and supporting participants. By working closely with entrepreneurs, staff members built personal connections and helped citizens feel more confident in their local government and its staff as approachable partners



rather than distant administrators.

At the conclusion of the program, \$47,500 in grant funds were awarded to five businesses located within the Main Street Zone. This resulted in the expansion of three existing businesses and the filling of two previously vacant storefronts. Beyond the financial awards, the program built a stronger entrepreneurial network and inspired community pride by showcasing Hillsville as a supportive community for small business growth.

The Community Business Launch also created a long-term ripple effect as dozens of participants gained business training that may lead to future ventures. Entrepreneurs are now more connected, the local economy has been stimulated, and Hillsville has taken a meaningful step toward ensuring that its historic Main Street remains active.

[See a promotional video featuring one of the winning businesses here >](#)

Category: ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Winner: Town of Strasburg

Entry: Town Run Riparian Native Plant Buffer

Town Run is a tributary of the North Fork of the Shenandoah River that runs through Strasburg. The high-visibility stretch of Town Run beside Town Hall and Strasburg Square was a problem because it contributed stormwater runoff and lacked ecological function. That all changed when Strasburg's Town Run Riparian Native Plant Buffer project transformed that portion of Town Run from a manicured, non-native lawn into a diverse native riparian ecosystem.

Recognizing the urgent need to improve local water quality, reduce maintenance costs, and enhance biodiversity, the Town Council contributed initial funding for the design phase, and the project secured Virginia Trees for Clean Water and Virginia Conservation Assistance Program grant funds to cover plants and materials. Public Works crews handled site preparation, ensuring in-house resources were used efficiently.

The town then partnered with Seven Bends Nursery, the Smithsonian Conservation Biology Institute, the Lord Fairfax Soil and Water Conservation District, and local volunteers who designed and implemented a resilient planting plan featuring over 25 native species that stabilize streambanks, filter pollutants, and suppress invasive plants.

This project makes Strasburg a greener, healthier, and more sustainable place to live and creates an educational resource with signage, community workshops, and volunteer planting events. Beyond beautification, this initiative directly supports Chesapeake Bay restoration goals by improving the



health of headwater streams critical to regional water quality.

[Check out a drone's eye view of the completed project here >](#)

Category: PUBLIC SAFETY

Winner: City of Norfolk

Entry: Community 1ST

Launched in January 2024, the City of Norfolk's Community 1ST initiative approaches public safety as a shared civic responsibility to address persistent gun violence, mistrust of public safety institutions, and the broader drivers of violence – poverty, disconnection, and trauma. To accomplish its goals, Community 1ST embeds trained credible messengers – residents with lived experience – into high-risk neighborhoods to detect conflict, de-escalate violence, and prevent retaliation. Unlike traditional policing, the messengers operate as trusted non-enforcement figures, building relationships that open pathways to prevention. This fosters a sense of collective ownership over public spaces and daily life.

Simultaneously, the city partnered with organizations like Reck League to deliver job readiness, mentorship, and literacy-based engagement. To institutionalize these efforts, Norfolk created a dedicated Department of Military and Community Affairs to oversee Community Violence Intervention and align resources across departments. To ensure sustainability, Norfolk also hired a Community Investment Strategist and developed a public Police Incident Report dashboard through the Norfolk Open Data portal. This tool provides neighborhood-level mapping, trend analysis, and time-of-day data, improving coordination, transparency, and resource alignment.

Within 18 months, Community 1ST helped drive a 40% reduction in homicides, 7% fewer non-fatal shootings, a 54% citywide drop in shootings into occupied dwellings, and the complete elimination of such incidents in the Young Terrace public housing community located near downtown. What began as a pilot is now a scalable, citywide model redefining safety through prevention, partnership, and empowerment.

[Watch a video overview of the project here >](#)

Category: RISK MANAGEMENT

Winner: City of Roanoke

Entry: Safety Awareness Event



What does it take to make an annual safety awareness event not just informative, but something employees ask to do again? In Roanoke, the answer is the Safety Awareness Event!

The Safety Awareness Event was created by the Office of Risk Management to address a pressing need: despite conducting monthly safety meetings, incident reviews, and topic-specific trainings Roanoke city employees were experiencing an increase in preventable accidents. The problem wasn't merely lost productivity: people were getting hurt.

For the Safety Awareness Event, employees from Emergency Management, Public Works, the Police Department, the Sheriff's Department, Fire/EMS, General Services, Libraries, and Social Services volunteered their time to lead hands-on demonstrations and training sessions, which reduced the need for external trainers. The city also partnered with local vendors to provide equipment displays and materials at no additional cost.

The event was held at the city-owned Berglund Center where 750 city employees were given a Safety-First drawstring bag containing a Roanoke-branded Safety-First T-shirt. The attendees then circulated among informational tables and displays. Offerings included a Biodynamics Slip Simulator, a slippery walkway that safely challenged everyone's balance. Employees also got to use a fire extinguisher to put out a real fire (managed by Roanoke Fire and EMS) and learned proper entry and exit techniques for tall vehicles like garbage trucks. Finally, a generous cookout meant that nobody went home hungry.

Feedback from the event was unanimous: employees loved it! Even better, workplace injuries have dropped. Fewer injuries mean fewer disruptions, reduced employee shortages, and reduced financial strain on city resources due to workers' compensation or downtime.

[View a video highlighting all the offerings of the event here >](#)

Category: WORKING WITH YOUTH

Winner: City of Chesapeake

Entry: 10th Annual CE3 Engine Camp

The City of Chesapeake believes that a hands-on learning environment can positively influence young people and give them the confidence they need to succeed. In that spirit, every August for the past decade the city's Division of Community Programs' Community Services has offered The C3 Engine Camp which stands for "Character, Competence and Capability." The program began when a local pastor, Durant Krieder, approached Chesapeake's Community Service Coordinator Michael Porter with a desire to provide life skills for youth. Pastor Durant also recruited several men from the community



with backgrounds in the subjects covered by the program.

Today, the CE3 Engine Camp is a free program that focuses on at-risk youth in the community ages 12-17. Participants spend two and a half days learning basic car upkeep maintenance and small engine repair skills that they can take back to their homes and neighborhoods. Community members can also bring small engines like weed eaters and lawnmowers to the camp to be repaired free of charge.

All young people in the community are encouraged to sign up for the program through social media and word of mouth outreach. Referrals can also come from schools, courts, and Human Services. Using hands-on practice, mentorship opportunities, and real-world projects, the participants are encouraged to connect theory with practice. The curriculum emphasizes problem-solving and teamwork, crucial competencies in today's workforce.

Feedback from participants underscores the positive impact of the program. For example, some participants were truant from school when they started the program but through mentorship and learning, they have committed to going back so that they can pursue a trade or higher learning opportunities.

Through continued support and community engagement, the C3 Engine Camp remains committed to empowering youth, helping them cultivate the skills necessary for future success.

[Check out a video promoting the program here >](#)