



Virginia Municipal League Announces Winners of the 2019 Innovation Awards in Local Government

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Richmond – 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. VML received more than 50 entries, from which judges selected one winner in each of six categories. One of the category winners will be chosen by VML president and Roanoke council member Anita James Price to receive the President’s Award.

This year’s category winners are:

Category: ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY

Winner: City of Fredericksburg

In 2016 the Fredericksburg City Council’s 20-year vision for their city included language to expand sustainability efforts and prevent littering – both of which affect the long-term quality of life for residents of the Rappahannock River community. Several initiatives begun since January 2018 have already resulted in significant improvements. Even better, these initiatives take a common-sense approach that motivates Fredericksburg’s citizens to be part of the solution. For starters, the city’s Parks and Recreation Department initiated a “Clean as you Go” program along the riverbank walking paths. As part of the program, the department set up several stations where hikers can obtain bags and trash grabbers to collect litter during their outings and deposit the full bags at the end of their walk. To discourage littering, a new policy requires that those caught littering be given a bag to pick up trash for an hour instead of being arrested.

Another new policy seeks to reduce the graffiti commonly found on rocks and surfaces near the river. Violators are now required to pay the \$1,000 cost for one gallon of the environmentally friendly cleaner that must be used in proximity to the river.

The city also partnered with several organizations to install cigarette butt collectors in city-owned parks so that the butts can be recycled into compost and park benches. Finally, new brochures distributed by Public Works encourage city residents to begin composting to reduce organic waste sent to the landfill.

That’s a lot of smart initiatives to improve Fredericksburg’s natural environment in just two years!

Category: COMMUNICATIONS

Winner: City of Richmond

Many people think of their municipality's animal control shelter as "the pound" – a jail for dogs and cats. In fact, animal control shelters are places where lots of great animals are cared for by compassionate staff until they find a new home. For a homeless pet, however, a shelter is a stressful environment full of unfamiliar sounds, smells and people. As a result, visitors don't get to see the animals at their best. The staff of the Richmond Animal Care and Control (RACC) wanted to find a way to give the animals in their care a break from the shelter. They also wanted a way to educate the public about what RACC does to help animals. The solution: Casual Friday – a program that places dogs in area business each Friday to interact with the employees and customers.

Since the program began in September 2018, businesses ranging from small stores to corporations to the Senate of Virginia have participated in a Casual Friday. Everybody wins on Casual Fridays – the adoptable animals get a break from the shelter, the businesses get a furry friend for the day and the RACC shows the community that they are a place that goes above and beyond to help animals. In fact, many of the pets that have been part of a Casual Friday have been adopted by an employee of a participating organization or by friends or family who see their picture on social media.

It turns out that animal ambassadors are a great way to communicate RACC's mission!

Category: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Winner: Town of Warsaw

Many small towns grapple with the high commercial vacancy rates in their downtown. But the town council and staff of Warsaw decided to do something about it. With a vacancy rate well over 50 percent their community risked becoming a residential area with little to no businesses. To turn the tide, the town council implemented several policies including reduced water and sewer hookup rates, beautification grants and successfully applying for a DHCD Downtown Revitalization Grant.

While these were great steps, the town quickly realized it wasn't enough to "jump start" the local economy to the extent needed to begin revitalizing their downtown. So, the council shifted into high gear by budgeting for and passing a resolution authorizing the Warsaw Economic Incentive Grant to provide 2 forms of financial assistance to new or relocating small businesses.

The results have been tangible – and delicious – with the town's first ice cream shop, a gourmet popcorn shop, a fine jeweler and a custom granite provider all opening shops downtown in the past year alone. Without the decisive positive actions of the town, none of these businesses – or the ones sure to follow – would have been able to open.

A big win for a small town!

Category: PUBLIC SAFETY

Winner: James City County

Currently, more than 24 percent of the residents of James City County are over 65 years old. This population, which is the fastest growing segment in the locality, puts strains the county's Fire/EMS department through an increase in mobility emergency calls (i.e. instances in which an individual has fallen or is unable to perform an essential task due to mobility issues). In FY2018 James City County's Fire/EMS personnel responded to over 3,500 mobility related calls (roughly 16 percent of the total calls). In many of these instances the individual needed help but did not have an actual emergency. However, the Fire/EMS teams knew that eventually these individuals would experience a real medical emergency if they did not receive assistance to meet their needs. So, James City County created the CONECT (Community Outreach Network Educate Care Thrive) Program which allows Fire/EMS personnel to refer at-risk seniors directly to the Department of Social Services (DSS) so that residents can be connected to appropriate services.

Previously, Fire/EMS personnel who responded to a call from an elderly resident in need of additional services, or whom they suspected was a victim of abuse or neglect, would report this to the hospitals who would then contact DSS. Now, thanks to CONECT these reports are sent directly to DSS staff. Even if these individuals do not take advantage of the DSS services, at least now they know that they are available.

Since the program began in March 2018, over 300 referrals have been made, with an average of 20 referrals per month from Fire/EMS and the Police Department. Amazingly, over 70 percent of those referred were previously unknown to DSS.

A great way to make life better for the elderly residents of James City County and those who care for them!

Category: WORKING WITH YOUTH

Winner: Danville

Four years ago, the City of Danville adopted a new credo, "Danville: Reimagine That." The motto captures the spirit of the city's progress and sends a clear message to those within and outside the community that the city will adapt to changes and challenges by reimagining the established ways of doing things to see if there's a better path to success.

One of the clearest examples of the city's new credo in action is Project Imagine – a program which acknowledges that young people mired in gang activity or being lured to join gangs often can't imagine a different way to live their lives. Robert David, who was hired as the city's gang violence prevention and youth services coordinator, knows this truth well, having worked with youths for most of his career. Implemented through a partnership with the Virginia Workforce Center and the Virginia Department of Juvenile Justice, the nine-week training and employment program designed by David gives youths with gang connections a future off the streets by providing them with paid work experience as well as mentoring while on the job. Not only do the participants learn valuable skills, they learn the satisfaction of getting paid to do a job that benefits the community. Most importantly, they come to appreciate that the pride that comes with these things can be stronger than any gang membership.

Since October 2018, two groups have completed the program. The first group was assigned jobs within the Public Works and the Parks and Recreation departments. The Danville Redevelopment and Housing Authority provided jobs for the second group.

A community can help its young people be their best by involving them in meaningful work for the community!

Category: COMMUNITY HEALTH

Winner: Falls Church

Since 1973, the City of Falls Church had owned a parcel of land with a house donated by the Miller family which was used as a group home for adults with disabilities. In recent years, however, the “Miller House” has stood vacant and fallen into disrepair. An inspection by city staff concluded that it needed to be demolished. But just because the original group home was unfit for habitation did not mean that there wasn’t a need in the community for such a place. In fact, many parents of adult children with disabilities had contacted city staff with the concern that they were getting too old to properly care for their children.

Lacking funds to establish a new group home on the site, the city awarded Community Havens, Inc., the property affiliate of CRi (a non-profit organization providing quality services to help empower individuals with disabilities and mental health needs) with the deed to the property for \$1.00 with a restrictive covenant on the use of the land to design, construct and deliver services for the operation of a group home. Many community partners worked together to make the new “Miller House” group home a reality. Today, the Miller House is home to five young adults with disabilities, three of whom have never lived outside of their family’s homes.

This is a fantastic example of how a city can meet the specific needs of a segment of its residents using existing resources.

VML congratulates each of these local governments for demonstrating innovation in service to its citizens.

The awards will be presented on October 8 at the 2019 VML Annual Conference in Roanoke. VML President Anita James Price, council member of Roanoke, will present the awards. Additionally, the President’s Award winner – which will be selected by Price from the winners in each category – will be announced.

For more information about the Innovation Awards, visit www.vml.org/education/innovation-awards/.