

## APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 1, 2016.** Please include this application form with electronic entry.

### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Henrico County

Program Title: Virtual Operations Support Team

Program Category: Criminal Justice & Public Safety

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR CHIEF ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

Name: John A. Vithoukas

Title: County Manager

Signature: 

## **1. Short Overview of the Program**

Situational awareness during incidents and events is one of the most important factors to support response and recovery efforts before, during, and after a disaster. Integrating volunteers to support career public safety personnel in times of crisis empowers citizens by allowing them to be a part of the preparation, response, and recovery to an event or incident in Henrico County.

Formally established in August 2015, the Henrico County Virtual Operations Support Team (VOST) pairs the knowledge of trained volunteers with the career public information and intelligence agencies to assist in monitoring social media and provide information and resources to support response and recovery efforts during any incident or event in the region.

## **2. Problem/Challenge/Situation**

Social media continues to grow exponentially as a way to share information for our public. This includes the ability to correct information quickly and share data with public safety officials. With limited staffing in the Henrico's Emergency Operations Center dedicated to monitoring social media, the need to train volunteers to augment this important task was noted as a key component during in the County's preparations for participation in the 2015 UCI Road World Championships bicycle event. This challenge was addressed by offering the services of trained resources to develop a common operating picture for command staff, and information that could be shared with local, regional, state, and federal response partners.

### **3. How the Program Was Carried Out**

As a part of the active Henrico County Citizen Corps Program, the Division of Fire's Fire Corp program houses several volunteer programs that support non-operational aspects and objectives of the public safety partners in the County. This includes other programs such as the Henrico County Community Emergency Response Team (HCCERT) program and the Henrico County Amateur Radio Response Team (HCART). Under the Fire Corps program, the Henrico VOST is a leading edge program formalizing the way that social media information can be collected and shared with public safety first responders to assist the County with response and recovery efforts before, during, and after a disaster. Information collected by the Henrico VOST can help identify areas of the County that need additional assistance, as well as provide photographic information on damage or alert personnel to unmet needs in addition to the traditional notification processes. Henrico County is the first known locality in the Commonwealth of Virginia to adopt the VOST concept and formalize the program with robust training and job descriptions for citizen volunteers to help in times of crisis.

Henrico County VOST volunteers are brought into the program through the established County volunteer process. This includes taking time to vet volunteers through background checks, reference checks, and training to the baseline established by the County's Office of Emergency Management. Training for these volunteers is similar to other Citizen Corps program volunteers to include completion of basic National Incident Management System awareness and basic Incident Command System training. This adds up to 8 hours of training, completed at the volunteer's leisure before they are added to the team formally, allowing these volunteers to contribute to the situational awareness and informational awareness for a variety of responses.

While Henrico VOST members are true Henrico County volunteers, they actively and openly interact with partners from across the world. This international aspect allows different views on similar posts, for example, to be consumed by the Situation Unit Leader in the EOC. This adds a cultural lens to this information that might otherwise be missed.

#### **4. Financing and Staffing**

To date, there are no costs for this program, and staff management of the program is included as a part of the County's Deputy Coordinator of Emergency Management's oversight of the County's Citizen Corps programs. The Google Documents used are free, open source, and do not depend on a single point of programming to maintain the software. VOST volunteers donate their time to assist in times of crisis, and they undergo the same application and background check process as other Fire program volunteers. Training of the volunteers is coordinated through the Office of Emergency Management, and can be conducted online via webinar resources. Additionally, the required FEMA Independent Study coursework for this volunteer program is available at no cost and online to optimize the volunteer's time commitment to the program.

When activated, VOST members generally work four-hour shifts to monitor social and traditional media, led by the VOST Coordinator. The coordinator position is also volunteer, and vets information that is submitted for review. This schedule allows the freedom to assist when they can, and provide information at the times when citizens themselves might be posting information to various social media sites. In overnight hours, willing volunteers can help comb through data that has been submitted and see if there is still active chatter on a given topic.

There is no “typical” VOST volunteer. Members of this unique cadre range from teens to seniors, as the only required components are participating in training and being comfortable with common social media outlets. These volunteers also benefit from the ability to help from anywhere. As long as the volunteer can get an active internet connection, they can send information they see. Be it from the Henrico Emergency Operations Center or the comfort of their own living room, these volunteers are able to connect with other VOST teams from across the globe using the computer equipment they use every day. These volunteers tend to be technically savvy, so they are able to suggest sites and resources that might not be used by different generations in the EOC. For example, volunteers might be more familiar with SnapChat or Kik than EOC staff. They are able to use their own resources to help feed information on issues such as damage reports or assist in notifying the EOC of rumors in the overall community. They are able to keep the EOC aware of hot sites or trends that are virtually accessible and allow resources to better paint a picture in times of crisis.

## **5. Program Results**

To date, Henrico County VOST volunteers have activated for the 2015 Fall NASCAR race event, the 2015 UCI bicycle event, and Henrico’s response to the January 2016 Winter Weather event. With a current cadre of 28 volunteers, this team posts valuable information to assist Police with crowd safety, Fire with damage assessment efforts, and Emergency Management with situational awareness as seen from the eyes of the citizen. These efforts can be carried over to the private sector where information posted by VOST team members can identify problems at an event such as NASCAR or a local outdoor music venue that attract thousands of participants, and information can quickly be shared with event

organizers to correct a problem within the event, providing a positive customer service experience whether or not the team is acting in a disaster capacity.

The expertise of these volunteers has been requested by Virginia Department of Emergency Management leadership to assist state level responsibilities in response to Hurricane Joaquin and the January 2016 snow storm response. This resource is available to any of our local, regional, and state partners to assist as needed, and have been able to work side-by-side with teams from Colorado, Florida, and Spain during our own regional events

## **6. Brief Summary**

The Henrico County Virtual Operations Support Team program offers the opportunity to engage citizen volunteers in the County's emergency response and recovery efforts at minimal fiscal investment. This not only promotes citizen involvement and a sense of pride and duty to the community; it seeks to strengthen existing public safety response partnerships across the region. With teams available across the world, the program illustrates the PRIDE (Professionalism, Respect, Integrity, Dedication and Empathy) objectives and ownership in the Division of Fire and the Office of Emergency Management, and supports a sense of professionalism with the volunteer cadre through completion of coursework through the Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) Emergency Management Institute (EMI). The efforts of the VOST support all County agencies and provide a no-cost, high interest option for citizens to be engaged in times of crisis. This team also engages the next generation of citizen volunteers and opens new opportunities for them to be a part of the Henrico team.