



## APPLICATION FORM

All applications must include the following information. Separate applications must be submitted for each eligible program. **Deadline: June 1, 2020.** Please include this application form with 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:** County of Henrico

**Program Title:** Family-Style Meal: Cooking Up Communication Between Students and Police

**Program Category:** Community and Economic Development

### CONTACT INFORMATION

**Name:** Victoria Davis

**Title:** Public Relations Specialist

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

**Name:** Brandon Hinton

**Title:** Deputy County Manager for Administration

**Signature:** 

## **Program Overview**

Varina High School is one of Henrico County Public Schools' nine comprehensive high schools. Varina enrolls about 1,600 students; roughly 70% of the school's students are African American, and 51% of students receive free or reduced-price meals. Victoria Ferris, a teacher in culinary arts at Varina, discovered through discussions with some of her students that they had ambivalent feelings toward local police officers. The students opened up about their fears and the lack of respect some felt for officers.

The school division's Department of Family and Consumer Sciences not only teaches culinary arts but classes in relationships. Ferris decided that the best way to dispel the students' misconceptions would be to bring them together with police officers in the way she does best — through a “family-style” meal. Twelve Henrico County police officers, including the two Varina High School resource officers, came together in the kitchen for a lunch prepared by the students. Students prepared questions to ask the officers, prompting substantive conversations. By the end of the meal, the group was talking, laughing, and, most importantly, gaining an understanding of the perspectives of other participants.

## **Problem/Challenge/Situation Faced by Locality**

Many of Ferris' students have articulated a fear of police officers, owing in part to police brutality incidents reported in media coverage. As a teacher, she didn't want her students to fear the people who protect our community. Likewise, she didn't want the men and women who protect our community to be fearful of people or other citizens that looked like her students. She desired to break down walls and open up communication between two groups who would usually not have this type of interaction and opportunity. She wanted to give her students the chance to see officers in a positive light, as human beings.

“We are all members of this community,” Ferris said. “The officers are mothers, fathers, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and they deserve to have time to build relationships that are positive and not always negative.”

### **How Program Fulfilled Awards Criteria**

This innovative program enables Varina High School to address classroom and community needs in ways that involve students. While Varina culinary arts classes work hard to learn the required competencies associated with their class curriculum, Victoria Ferris also believes in teaching her students life-skills they will take with them beyond the classroom. She is intentional about her students having purposes and goals beyond high school, whether they are in the workforce, enlisted or enrolled in college. In programs like this one, students learn to give back and serve their peers and elders with professionalism and integrity. While it is easier to turn a blind eye toward tough issues, this is one way teachers can have a broader influence, and teach lessons not found in textbooks.

### **How Program Was Carried Out**

After realizing the need for this activity to help unify the community, Ferris first spoke with the two school resource officers at Varina. Officer Thompson and Officer Gentry, Varina’s school resource officers, are a big part of the community at Varina. The two were asked to invite members of the Henrico County Police Division to join the class for lunch and conversation to build relationships. They loved the idea because they have built relationships with many of the students while serving on-campus. The officers wanted their colleagues to have similar opportunities to understand students’ perspectives and be understood as well. The culinary arts teachers coordinated the logistics and set the date, time and communicated the goal of the event. The officers invited

colleagues from across the Henrico County Police Division, so students would be able to see the entire scope of what the division does.

The meal was held in the culinary arts classroom. On the day of the meal, students worked all morning to prepare a pasta dish with red sauce and garlic bread to be shared with the officers. They followed the normal lab protocol for meals. Each student was assigned specific tasks, whether prepping food, cleaning, cooking, or preparing the plates. Anticipating that there might be a lack of conversation at the event's start, the teacher had the students write questions on index cards. Students served the officers with a little apprehension but soon realized that officers were laughing, joking and complimenting them on their professionalism. After the officers were served, students got their plates and began to ask questions to the officers, and the conversation started to flow.

Some of the students' questions were:

- What are relationships like among female and male police officers?
- Do the officers receive diversity training? If so, do they get training specifically in dealing with black citizens?
- What are some fears that police officers have regarding their job?
- What advice would you give an adolescent about interacting with police in the community?

### **Financing and Staffing**

Since it is a culinary class, the students learn how to prepare various types of meals, and used those skills for the project. The cost is covered either by funds budgeted through Henrico County Public Schools or the students' annual lab fees.

## **Program Results**

As the event progressed, the students became visibly more comfortable, asking questions, answering questions, and laughing with the officers. In return, the officers seemed to enjoy answering uncomfortable questions, clearing the air about misconceptions, and getting to know the students on their campus. The officers continued to compliment the students on their professionalism and work ethic. This helped the students feel important and empowered — and possibly less fearful of officers outside of the school environment. There were Tweets about the event, and the responses were plentiful. Ferris has made various “family dinners” with other groups in the school and the local community, but the Oct. 22, 2019 dinner was one that the students and officers will not soon forget.

Another indicator of the event’s success arose recently in a request to continue the program: Henrico County Police contacted the culinary program at Varina High School to ask that the school’s students organize a similar meal at an event for police and Hispanic students at Fairfield middle school.

## **Brief Summary**

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**Family-Style Meal: Cooking Up Communication Between Students and Police**  
**Supplemental Material**



