



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2021.** 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 [Gage Harter](#).

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Albemarle County

Program Title: Targeted Support for Our Community During an Economic Downturn/Pandemic

Program Category: Community and Economic Development

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Jeff Richardson

Title: County Executive

Signature: 

VACO Achievement Awards

Targeted Support for Our Community During an Economic Downturn/Pandemic

Albemarle County, VA

Executive Summary

Early in the COVID-19 Pandemic, Albemarle County understood that this virus would not only be a public health crisis, but also deeply impact our community's well-being as businesses shuttered and community members greatly reduced their time spent away from home. As jobless claims rose and restauranters and retailers pivoted their business models, Albemarle County began to connect with community partners to understand what specific needs were cropping up in the community – where was help needed?

Our response programs were tailored to what we were seeing in the data and what we were hearing in the community.

- Individuals and households were struggling to pay their bills, so an emergency financial assistance program was created.
- Businesses needed capital to fund pivots in their business model and service delivery, so a grant program was created.
- Non-profits were not able to fundraise during the pandemic, so a grant program was created,
- Elements of the zoning ordinance and approval process were hindering business' ability to communicate with and serve customers, so streamlined reviews were created.
- Parks were being used at record numbers, so an ambassador program was created to ensure parks did not become a location where the virus could spread.
- State and local restrictions created an environment where businesses were having to enforce actions on customers, so an ambassador program was created.

Albemarle County was able to strategically pause and pivot planned expenditures to generate cost savings early in the pandemic, so that when federal relief funds arrived, the County's financial condition was such that over 50% of the funds could be put to direct service to the community to weather the largest impacts of the pandemic. At the same time, we built trust in local government as we visibly supported our community's well-being.

Brief Overview

During the COVID-19 pandemic, as jobless claims rose and restauranters and retailers pivoted their business models, Albemarle County began to connect with community partners to understand what specific needs were cropping up in the community – where was help needed?

Our response programs were tailored to what we were seeing in the data and what we were hearing in the community to create a series of programs to streamline government service delivery and use federal relief funds to directly support individuals, businesses, and non-profits facing financial hardships.

Albemarle County was able to strategically pause and pivot planned expenditures to weather the largest impacts of the pandemic and direct federal relief funds to support our community. At the same time, we built trust in local government as we visibly supported our community's well-being.

Narrative

Early in the COVID-19 Pandemic, Albemarle County understood that this virus would not only be a public health crisis, but also deeply impact our community's well-being as businesses shuttered and community members greatly reduced their time spent away from home. As jobless claims rose and restauraners and retailers pivoted their business models, Albemarle County began to connect with community partners to understand what specific needs were cropping up in the community – where was help needed?

The answers we heard back were varied. Consumer-facing businesses were struggling. Personal care services – barbers, nail salons, hair salons – were all forced to close. Restaurants, caterers, hotels, and venues faced mass event cancellations. Individuals working for all of these employers were laid off, with no notice. This cascaded into other industries, as advertising dollars and auxiliary services spending contracted. Non-profits that relied on events to drive donations were struggling to meet their own payroll at a time where their services were badly needed.

We also looked at our own internal metrics to understand “how are we doing at a community”? – were development applications and building permit applications still coming in? Were taxpayers able to make their payments? Were business license applications and renewals coming in? What was utilization of social services benefit programs? How did the volume and nature of calls for service change relative to previous years? How were our parks being utilized, now that organized sports were not operating?

Our response programs were tailored to what we were seeing in the data and what we were hearing in the community.

Issue	Response
Enrollment in benefits programs spiked. People were struggling to meet their basic needs.	Funds and a community partner were identified to facilitate a program to provide emergency financial assistance to community members to help pay for essentials – rent, mortgage, utilities, prescriptions, childcare, transportation, etc. Funds were given directly to the service provider to streamline payments. The program used a telephone hotline so that individuals seeking assistance would also receive information about other services that might be available.
Businesses were struggling with access to capital to help them adjust their business model to the pandemic restrictions.	A microloan program and grant funding program provided flexibility to local businesses to meet payroll, pay rent, and make adjustments to their business model to adapt to online and/or outside service delivery.
The building community did not slow down – but they needed us to keep reviewing applications and conducting inspections in the field.	Our Community Development Department was retrofit over a weekend to install service windows, sneeze guards, and dropboxes to allow us to continue to serve customers safely. Our IT Department also rapidly worked to expand a pilot program to accept more digital applications, allowing us to enhance our virtual services.

	Human Resources developed safety protocols for inspectors in the field to keep everyone safe on job sites.
Retailers and restaurants needed help to adjust to delivering services outside and putting up signage to communicate with customers their operating status and adjusted hours.	Community Development worked with the County Attorney’s Office to understand what administratively could be accomplished to streamline approval processes for our sign ordinance and outdoor seating areas to provide flexibility for businesses to remain in compliance with local regulations.
Our parks were being used more than ever before – despite no organized recreation or athletics programs. Reports of gatherings began to raise concerns.	The Parks Ambassadors Program was created to provide a friendly presence in the parks. The ambassadors were primarily stationed at the park entrance to greet park users as they arrived and to share the current local and federal guidelines for masking and gathering. The ambassadors also made trip around the park to observe compliance.
Under the Governor’s orders, businesses were expected to require face covering use by patrons, but businesses and their employees struggled with the tools to do so.	The COVID-19 Safety Ambassador Program was created to provide signage and fact sheets for businesses. The ambassadors visited every business in the County several times over the course of the pandemic – a friendly face to connect with owners and managers on how things were going and to observe and record compliance issues to be worked with the appropriate regulating authority at a later time.

The following are more specific details on two of the above programs, the Ambassador Program and the Lift Grant Program.

The Ambassador Program

The Ambassador Program was launched in July 2020 to support our community in navigating the changing landscape in CDC guidance and state and local restrictions put in place to reduce the spread of COVID-19. In Virginia, Executive Order guidance for customers to follow in certain businesses was to be enforced by businesses. Albemarle County heard from the business community that this put staff and onsite managers in a difficult position. At the same time, the Board of Supervisors enacted additional local restrictions that created lower gathering and capacity limits in an effort to contain the virus. Albemarle County heard from the business community that this added an additional layer of confusion for patrons. And while the local ordinance did provide law enforcement with tools for enforcement, Albemarle County determined an educational posture was preferable.

The goals of the ambassador program were twofold, to ensure businesses and their customers had awareness and understanding of the restrictions in place, and to increase visibility of the County out in the community in an approachable way.

COVID-19 Safety Ambassadors

The COVID-19 Safety Ambassador program had individuals in polo shirts with the County seal visiting businesses in the community to achieve our program goals. The Ambassadors visited every customer-facing business in the County over the course of several weeks and repeated this throughout the summer and fall of 2020. On their first visit, Ambassadors introduced themselves, gave business managers information packets that included:

- state and local restriction information
- signage that could be posted on the business door about face covering requirements
- a letter from the County Executive thanking businesses for their support,

and also served as a resource for Q&A and to share best practices (having clean and dirty pens, suggestions on physical distancing, etc.).

After several rounds of site visits and high compliance, the regional health department provided specific businesses that were receiving complaints of violations as well as business-types that were trending through the contact-tracing process. We hoped to target educational efforts to respond to areas experiencing more compliance issues.

Staffing was through a contractor and paid for using federal CARES Coronavirus Relief Fund Act funding. Our IT department created a software app for the ambassadors to input information that was centralized on the backend into a reporting dashboard.

This model was highly successful, with no criminal enforcement of local ordinances during the course of the pandemic and a high level of satisfaction from the business community, which felt well-supported by the County as we all navigated the challenges of the pandemic together.

Parks Ambassadors

Based on our metrics, we could see that park use was among the highest levels recorded, despite there being no formal athletics or recreation programs operating. As people were teleworking, students were at home, stores and restaurants were closed, and extracurricular activities and events were canceled - millions of people visited our parks. To ensure that our parks could continue to be operated safely and that gatherings did not crop up in violation of state restrictions, Albemarle County extended the concept of the COVID-19 Safety Ambassadors into our parks – hiring our temporary, seasonal recreational program staff to instead serve as a friendly presence in our parks – to greet people as they came in, to share the latest COVID-19 guidance and restrictions, and to take time to tour the park to observe any areas of concern. This program allowed us to keep our parks open during the entire COVID-19 pandemic.

The Lift Grant Program

The Lift Grants were a pair of grant programs tailored to meet the challenges key areas of our community were facing due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The program provided funding directly to businesses and non-profits. The goals of the program were:

- Use federal and state relief funds to respond to community needs
- Support local businesses to retain local jobs
- Ensure human services providers could continue to serve their clients' existing and emerging needs

- Maintain local vibrancy/quality of life

Lift Grants

The original Lift Grant was created to respond to the experiences of local businesses, smaller in size, that generally had difficulty in accessing the federal Paycheck Protection Program. Our economic development office understood from direct interactions with locally-owned businesses that access to capital would be critical to adapt to the pandemic environment – upgrades to point-of-sales systems, wifi access points, sneezeguards, curbside improvements, signage, employee PPE, as well as revenues lost and payroll expenses. The Lift Grant program was designed to be flexible to meet the varied needs of our local businesses and to assist them in weathering the fiscal storm.

Community Lift Grants

The Community Lift Grant was created following the Lift Grant program as the extent and duration of the pandemic became more understood, and in response to a gap in federal and state pandemic relief programs serving the non-profit sector. In our community, non-profits provide many critical functions and have trusted relationships with diverse populations, including many individuals who may not be comfortable seeking direct government support. At the same time, many non-profits that provided support for the business community, such as the Chamber of Commerce, and for the arts and cultural community, were also suffering as events and donations were significantly impacted by the pandemic, and these non-profits sought to pivot their support services to help artists, musicians, and independent businesses navigate a challenging time.

The program specifically targeted non-profits serving food security, shelter, financial security, childcare, arts, education, causes, health, support services, and economic development/business needs.

To ensure the continued functioning of the social safety net of our community, the Community Lift Grant was designed to meet the varied needs of our local non-profits and to assist them in weathering the fiscal storm.

Costs

In sum, the Lift Grant Program provided \$4.6 million in direct support to local businesses and non-profits. The emergency financial assistance program has disbursed \$1.2 million to service providers. The Ambassador Program cost under \$275,000 in staffing costs. All of these programs were funded using federal relief funds to ensure that our community emerged from the pandemic as strong, if not stronger than before.

Reflections

During the COVID-19 pandemic, Albemarle County sought to uphold our mission – to enhance the well-being and quality of life of all community members by understanding how the pandemic was impacting our community specifically and targeting resources to support our weakest areas. Albemarle County was able to strategically pause and pivot planned expenditures to generate cost savings early in the pandemic, so that when federal relief funds arrived, the County's financial condition was such that over 50% of the funds could be put to direct service to the community to weather the largest impacts of the pandemic. At the same time, we built trust in local government as we visibly supported our community's well-being.