



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: Arlington
Program Title: Unmasking Our Creative Potential during Pandemic
Program Category: Parks & Recreation

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Lynne Porfiri
Title: Chief of Staff
Department: County Manager's Office
Telephone: 703 228-0599 Website: _____
Email: lporfiri@arlingtonva.us

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Mark J. Schwartz
Title: County Manager
Signature: 

Unmasking Our Creative Potential in Arlington County During the Pandemic

Executive Summary

In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Arlington County's Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) had to close its 12 community centers and two nature centers and with it, hundreds of programs serving thousands of County residents. This prompted DPR to reimagine how we could creatively fill the gaps in service the pandemic was causing.

Recognizing our value to the community, DPR staff rapidly transitioned to bringing our services to where our residents could obtain them, such as delivering meals to where seniors lived and offering *free* programs, both virtually and in our parks. It took exceptional creativity, innovation, and planning to make this shift in less than a month. This swift response minimized service disruptions in park usage, senior nutrition and recreational, fitness and nature programs for people of all ages and abilities. To date, these combined programs have served more than 17,400 participants.

These efforts have resulted in an overwhelming public response, as indicated by participation data and feedback. Given that social isolation has been deemed a public health crisis, DPR's innovative programs and service delivery have connected our community with friends, peers and staff alike. In addition, the programs keep residents mentally and physically well. DPR has also engaged new participants during the pandemic. This global crisis has provided staff a unique opportunity to unmask their latent reserves of ingenuity, creativity and innovation.

Program Introduction: The Problem and the Response

Nestled between the United States capital, Maryland and the northern regions of Virginia, Arlington County is uniquely positioned to enjoy the benefits of both urban and suburban living. With only 26 square miles of land directly across the Potomac River from Washington, DC, Arlington County has become more urban through an explosion in population density. Arlington's Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR) has been on the cutting-edge of innovations in programming to meet the needs and nuances of this changing population. Guided by our vision, that Arlington is *a happy and healthy place to live, learn, work and play*, we operate 12 community centers, four 55+ program locations, two nature centers and 149 parks, with 99% of our 233,464 residents residing within a 10-minute walk to a park. Our mission is to promote wellness and vitality through dynamic programs and attractive public spaces. Throughout the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, we have stayed true to vision and mission

The Problem

In March 2020, in response to the global COVID-19 pandemic, DPR, along with many other park and recreation organizations across the country, closed its community, nature and senior centers, and with it, the hundreds of programs that served thousands of County and regional residents. This brought about a shift in thinking regarding how DPR could continue to serve our participants. And when it comes to serving the Arlington community, regardless of the challenge faced, Arlington' never asks "if" we can serve, but instead we ask "how" we can serve. In DPR, we immediately turned to Arlington's guiding equity questions to shape our response.



The Response

DPR staff immediately kicked into high gear to bring their creative innovations to life and offer a safety net for the community. What makes Arlington County's programs unique? We employed several *service principles* resulting in a multi-pronged approach to service during the pandemic.

Arlington County DPR's Service Principles

- *Capitalize on existing relationships. We know our community. Our staff has a long-standing reputation of trust and providing excellent service.*
 - *Meet people where they are. We launched a robust outdoor-based program model and an entirely new virtual program model to provide more equitable access to everyone.*
 - *Give people what they need. In addition to recreational opportunities, we addressed quality of life issues such as social isolation, access to services, equity, food insecurity, and mental wellness.*
 - *Be creative and have fun. Our leadership has given creative license to staff to engage the community. The County Manager has even officially recognized DPR's staff for their creativity and innovation during the pandemic through the prestigious "County Manager's Excellence Award".*
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With the above service principles in mind, DPR began delivering virtual programs, outdoor programs and meals to our community using our existing resources differently to support these efforts. Even more, staff did this with reduced numbers, after almost all temporary staff were let go due to budget constraints caused by the pandemic.

Virtual Programs

DPR staff learned new skills to produce virtual programs, becoming writers, producers, videographers, film editors and more. This resulted in both professional development opportunities for staff and high-quality virtual program options – both pre-recorded and live – for the community. These new programs allowed for increased class sizes, time and pace flexibility, and eliminated cost barriers, such as transportation, as well as competition for physical space. We discovered new participants with the virtual program offerings; those who previously could not or preferred not to come in person to a program, could happily participate virtually. We have received such positive feedback from the

community, that DPR's virtual programming component is here to stay, even when we've left the COVID-19 pandemic far behind us.

Outdoor Programs

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted just how valuable our outdoor spaces are. When we could not be indoors together, our parks enabled people to connect with nature, family and friends. While many employees across Arlington were working remotely, DPR's Parks and Natural Resources staff continued to come to work every day to keep our park system clean and our amenities safe and useable to ensure a good environment for people to enjoy.

DPR launched our free outdoor *Programs in the Park* in July 2020 for all ages and abilities. Some programs DPR traditionally held indoors, such as seated exercise, art classes and teen game room were placed outdoors in parks and open spaces, while other programs, such as intergenerational Latin dancing, outdoor skate and preschool playdates were entirely new creations to support *Programs in the Park*. All were strategically placed in parks where the community had easy access whether they were driving, walking, biking or taking public transportation.

To be successful, DPR needed to create a nimble and far-reaching marketing plan to inform the community about these new programs, as well as to instill trust that they could be implemented safely.

First, the department created the *Programs in the Park* brand, which was used in signage, eNews and social media. The department integrated its various eNews lists to create a super-list of possible participants. The combined listserv started with about 50,000 subscribers but grew to 53,000 as new participants signed up. Pre-COVID, the department sent out a community eNews every other week.

During COVID, two eNews were sent weekly: a Tuesday eNews focused primarily on virtual programs in the coming week, while the Thursday eNews promoted *Programs in the Park*. These programs were also promoted through Facebook, Instagram and Twitter. The department's website calendar was also

adjusted to better illustrate virtual and in-person programs. Web users can not only sort by audience (such as tot, teen, or senior) but also by format (virtual and in-person).

A key obstacle that needed to be overcome was safety. DPR not only developed safety protocols but also communicated them to the community so they knew outdoor programming was as safe as possible. All programs required pre-registration and attendance was taken to support Contact Tracing for COVID-19, if needed. Programs had an additional staff person who monitored safety protocols to ensure compliance. Locations had separate entrances and exits, and participants were spaced six to 10 feet apart. Upon entering, people were asked a series of screening questions and signage reminded people to wear masks, social distance, and more. The department communicated these safety procedures on its website, and with registration information, receipts, and digital reminders. And when the weather turned colder, we didn't stop! We launched our first-ever "Polar Sports" program offering sports activities that would normally either be indoors or during a warmer time of year, such as flag football and 3 vs 3 basketball – outdoors in our fields and open spaces.

Meals for the Community

When our community centers closed, DPR staff immediately pivoted to provide home-delivered meals and grocery distribution for seniors who typically rely on our in-person congregate meal program (*60+ Social Café*). Not only did this provide a vital service, this was also an opportunity for our employees to make a personal connection with our participants, ensuring they are doing well, and in some cases, helping to pull them from social isolation. We also provided activity kits to seniors, individuals with disabilities residing

"From my experience and from talking with fellow participants, I know how much the 55+ program has helped maintain the feeling of community during this terrible, largely isolated period. Every Zoom program and class is an opportunity to see old and new friends and reassure them that we're all in this together. Safe, in-person programming is also a great way to keep the community alive."

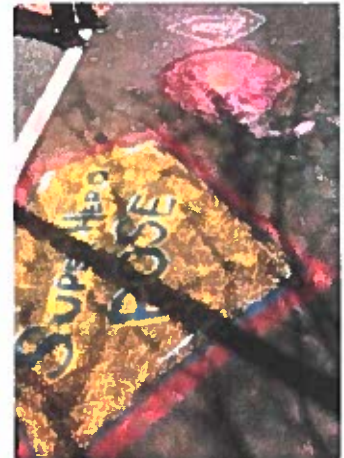
55+ Program Participant

in group homes, children and families. And our community centers, while not open to the public in the traditional sense, have truly been used to serve our community, by supporting testing sites, vaccination clinics, and other related healthcare activities.

Taking the Response Further

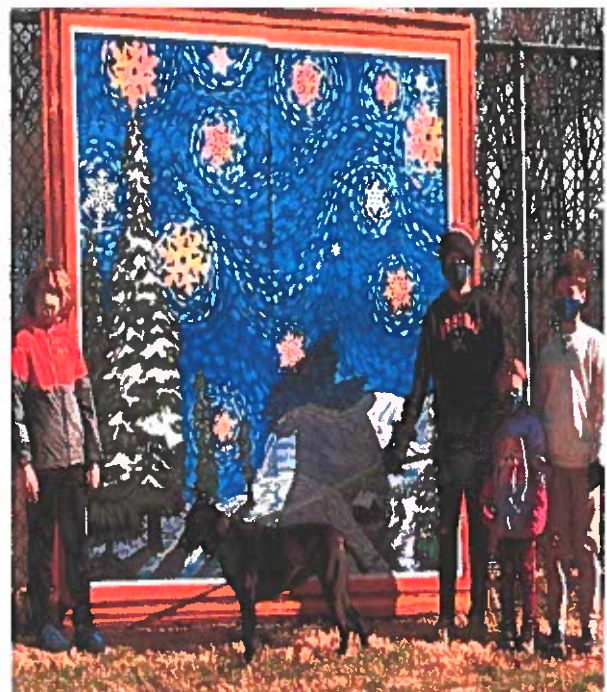


Arlington County offered several complements to our Programs in the Park including the “Super Squad”, a pop-up, two-person “Dynamic Duo” that creates fun and challenging sensory chalk obstacle courses as another way to engage our community.



*Since August 2020, the **Super Squad** has left their mark 147 times at 71 parks with playgrounds, 15 neighborhoods, three schools and two senior residential living facilities.*

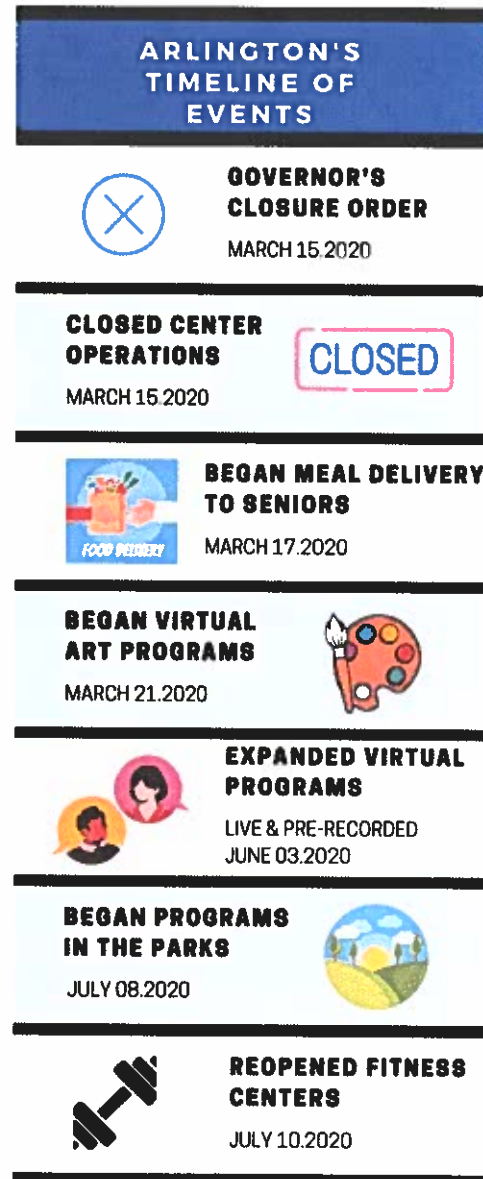
In December 2020, we also offered our community an outdoor interactive art installation, The Art of Snowflakes. These interactive panels of community art featuring three 8-foot winter-themed murals were enjoyed by many of our trail visitors who stopped to take selfies. To further engage the community, Instagram posts with the hashtag #ArtofSnowflakes were directed to the program webpage to share with all community members.



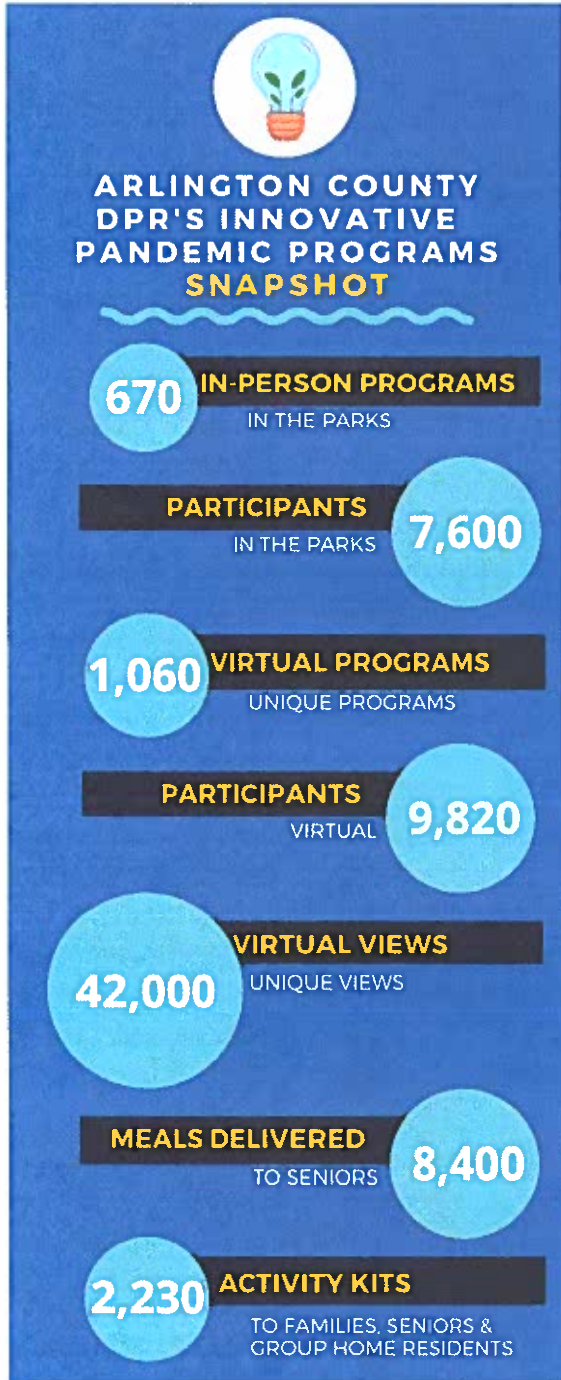
Responding Quickly

One of DPR's hallmarks is making quick yet thoughtful decisions to best serve our participants, as depicted on the following page. All of this was accomplished under the guidance of DPR's newly created Comeback Committee, which addressed and put into place all the safety protocols necessary for the programs to function.

- Recognizing the critical value that our programs provide to the community, DPR staff designed and implemented both in-person *Programs in the Park* and *Virtual Programs* beginning at the end of March, some within just a few days, after the global crisis was announced.
- This undertaking required exceptional creativity, innovation, and planning to make this shift complete in under a month.
- Our rapid action minimized service disruptions in all areas such as parks usage, senior meal deliveries and recreational, fitness, art and nature programs for people of all ages and abilities.
- Providing all these programs did not come without hard work and dedication. There was no stone left unturned and many improvement areas unearthed.



The Results



Over the last year, the impact from DPR's efforts has truly been astounding. We have **served more than 17,000 participants** through our virtual and in-person programs and provided thousands of meals and activity kits.

"I picked up the table runner kit a couple weeks ago and it was the most fun experience for the family! I can't wait to do more. I hope there's some more ornament boxes since we ended up on the waitlist. We did manage to snag a box for the paint and sip – and the kids are already excited about that! I just wanted to reach out and let you know how great these kits are and I hope many families are taking advantage of them."

"Love, Love, Love all the different, unique & creative Arlington Art Classes you've provided for everyone! Please continue to help us all though these difficult days using ART for our outlets! "

"There's a physical connection with our drums that we can't have with friends and family right now."

"Please continue to provide these programs in a virtual format. They certainly have provided me with a new and creative way to use my time in this pandemic environment."

The Lasting Impacts

Arlington prides itself on providing cutting-edge, timely programs and services. Our motto in DPR has become we serve *“Everyone, Everywhere, Every Day”*. In fact, Arlington’s County Manager recognized DPR’s efforts during the pandemic with the prestigious County Manager’s Excellence Award.

By offering recreation programs, both general and tailored to meet the needs of specific audiences, in both virtual and in-person formats, DPR reached thousands in our community during an unprecedented and difficult time. For much of the last year, our focus has been on providing these programs for free to encourage broad participation.

DPR’s menu of virtual and in-person programs has helped our community stay connected with friends, peers and services, along with increasing socialization and vital opportunities to remain mentally and physically active. We have assisted with nurturing our community’s minds, bodies and souls, creating a healthier community during a very unhealthy time.

“Thank you so much for organizing these excellent programs! They have been such oasis during the pandemic. As museums finally begin to open, these programs also are invaluable in inspiring visits. They are easy ways to access content and provoke interest in areas not considered before. So, I hope even after museums open that you will consider offering such programs from time to time.”

“[Our] social isolation was greatly reduced by the rich offering of outside and virtual programs of interest to older adults. During the pandemic, we rarely saw friends, and our visits to our children and grandchildren were ruled out for everyone’s safety. But the 55+ program kept us “grounded and surrounded” by a community of interesting and engaged seniors through on-line or outside events. We have found rich social connections and mental stimulation. For us and many other participants we know, social isolation was a thing of theory, not of our daily lives.”

The Details

Virtual Programs

Program Type	Program Examples (Live and Pre-recorded)
Rec @ Home	Arts & crafts Story time
Young Children	Games Virtual trips Home organization
Lifestyle Presentations	Musical performances Virtual travel Technology usage
Adults 55+	Avoiding COVID-19 scams Public transit and ride service use "Glamping" Estate planning, wills and trust Racial justice Coffee Meet Ups
Social Groups	History discussions Yarn & needle crafting
All ages and abilities	Sudoku & study of works Genealogy discussions Book & movie clubs Music classes & groups Teen Talent Shows Yoga & Meditation
Fitness & Wellness	Walking Foot and knee exercises Tabata Cooking & Nutrition Disease management Teen Workouts Bootcamp
55+ Live Talk Show	Entertainment, demonstrations, seminars, including our popular 'Front Yard Interview' featuring familiar folks and the '55+ Forecast' which shares exciting upcoming programs.
Adults 55+	
Arts & Crafts	Adapted Arts Painting Sculpture / Hand-building Family Art and Teen Art Clubs
All ages and abilities	Nature-based arts, crafts & games Virtual field trips Animals and Insects
Nature	Conservation & Interpretation Historical exploration Story-time & Campfires Gardening
All ages and abilities	



Art with Mr. Jim

If you could create your own bug, what would it look like? Mine would be purple and fuzzy with glittery wings! Create your own symmetrical insect from scratch with Mr. Jim and then leave a picture in the comments.

<https://parks.arlingtonva.us/rec-at-home-calendar/>

Preschool Storytime



"My kids look forward to Rec @ Home every day and it's made these difficult days so much brighter for

In-person Programs in the Park

Program Type	Program Examples
Arts & Crafts	Plein Air painting Paint n Sip Outdoor needle craft Tie Dye
All ages and abilities	Paper folding
Rec on Wheels Children and Families	Free summer evening recreation in local parks
Games & Sports	Cornhole Teen, Family & Adult Kickball Soccer Disc Golf
All ages and abilities	Bocce Frisbee Outdoor Game Room Grand Slam T-ball Tennis
Fitness & Wellness	Yoga & Stretching Walking groups Bike trips (teen and adults) Tai Chi
All ages and abilities	Seated strength exercises Fitness workouts for Teens & Adult Fitness workouts for Adults Muscle Conditioning
Lifestyle	Dog obedience classes Dance: Line, Ballet, Hip Hop, Jazz
All ages and abilities	Music instruction
Nature	Adapted nature hikes Campfires & Storytime Fort walking tours & Nature hikes
All ages and abilities	Critter exploration Park “pop ups” – meet the nature center staff Birding
Social	Preschool Playdates Drumming Circle
All ages and abilities	Acoustic Hour in the park Teen Skate Night



“The creativity of the activities kept my son engaged and when he was finished, he asked for more.”



Conclusion

Social isolation, worsened by the pandemic, is a public health crisis that cannot be underestimated. Our programs have provided a place for our community to experience a sense of normalcy during a time where nothing seems to be “normal”. Arlington’s Department of Parks and Recreation has received an overwhelming response from the public and has kept individuals physically fit and mentally well.

The greatest benefit has been maintaining and enhancing social connections. These programs have brought people together that may not have met nor interacted before the pandemic and provided critical connections and support through this tough time. Our programs have touched people in ways we never imagined.

One 77-year old participant attends a variety of 55+ virtual programs via phone. She does not have a computer nor a car. According to her, the virtual programs help her combat crippling isolation. She says, “I am happy to hear other people, even if I can’t see them”.

DPR is committed to continuing virtual and outdoor programs into the foreseeable future and will continue to seek creative ways to provide our services. Virtual platforms will sustain programs and activities during inclement weather and other situations that would have previously required program cancellations. A dedicated team has been formed to plan and evaluate virtual programs and assess related trainings and technology enhancements for successful implementation. DPR’s leadership continues to encourage staff to deliver programming through flexible work options.

Throughout the pandemic, DPR maintained relationships with key stakeholders, including participants, volunteers, contractors, advisory groups, and community partners, creating a continuity of service that highlights the strength of the underlying infrastructure supporting work and community efforts.

Everyone, everywhere, every day in Arlington, whether in person or virtual, has a better day due to the thoughtful and innovative efforts of the Department of Parks and Recreation.