



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](#).

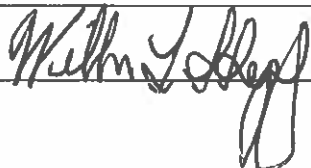
PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Grayson County
Program Title: Getting Information and Resources to People in Need
Program Category: Health & Human Services

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: William L. Shepley
Title: County Administrator
Department: Administration
Telephone: 276-773-2471 Website: www.graysonvirginia.com
Email: wshepley@graysoncountyva.gov

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: William L. Shepley
Title: County Administrator
Signature: 

Virginia Association of Counties Achievement Awards 2021 Application
Grayson County – COVID-19 Helpline and Relief Fund Project
Program Title – Getting Information and Resources to People in Need

The Challenge

Grayson County, located in Southwest Virginia in the heart of Appalachia, enjoys a population of just over 15,000. About 50% of the population are ages 50 and older, with 24% being 65 and older, many of whom live alone in fairly remote areas. Grayson is home to the two highest peaks in Virginia, White Top and Mount Rogers, several miles of the New River, hundreds of acres of national forest, and Grayson Highlands, one of Virginia's most popular State Parks. While these natural assets lend to a positive quality of life and drive entrepreneurship and tourism, this same terrain presents major challenges in communications.

An initial challenge of the 2020 pandemic was how to disseminate information to residents in a county where less than half of the residents are connected to the internet. Grayson wanted to be sure people had information about the current COVID-19 situation, including suggested protective measures and access to necessities, such as food and medical assistance.

Solution: The Helpline

Without a reasonable level of connectivity in place, Grayson responded to residents' needs during COVID-19 with the next best thing – the telephone – a device just about everyone has whether landline or mobile. Early on, in late February and March of 2020, as the pandemic became a national emergency, calls to County government offices increased dramatically and County officials saw a need to respond appropriately. Coming from a career as a firefighter in Portsmouth, Emergency Services Coordinator, Paul Hoyle, knew the value of telephone helplines in an emergency. He recognized that many residents may not be able to access basic

needs such as food or medications, while also recognizing that many financial assistance programs have long wait periods. Therefore, Grayson County created a response.

Mr. Hoyle's suggestion of a Helpline was approved by County Administrator, Bill Shepley, while Director of IT/Economic Development/GIS, Carl Caudill, researched a telecommunications program that would direct phone calls to cellphones or other devices. For residents with internet access, the County website provided a COVID-19 information page with safety guidelines and links to state and national resources. Local newspapers were helpful in getting the word out about safety measures and updates about COVID-19, and the availability of the new Helpline.

With many unique situations to respond to during the initial days of the pandemic, the County, with few employees, relied upon volunteers to staff the helpline. As County staff recognized the need for a Helpline, they each tapped into their community networks of people they knew would be willing to help in some way. The response to help others was overwhelming, and it then became clear they needed to find someone to coordinate the Helpline. County Office Manager, Linda Osborne, suggested they contact Kathy Cole who was known for her ability to engage residents in meaningful community projects through her work with Grayson LandCare, a successful nonprofit. Kathy quickly became the coordinator for the Helpline. She put together a staffing schedule, developed a training program in conjunction with Emergency Services, and procured a resource list from Social Services.

Volunteers were trained in how to log the calls and provided with a resource list to share with callers, along with training and resources of how to stay safe, for themselves and the residents they were assisting. Complex requests were passed on to County Emergency Services.

Volunteers not only helped those calling in for assistance but also helped the County strengthen the processes for sharing information.

Once Kathy Cole trained the volunteers and felt they were ready, she set up a roster with two people at a time to take calls. The software was programmable for shift schedules and would change automatically as shifts changed. One volunteer would call the next person to make sure the transfer was taking place. Sometimes the information and resources were changing daily, and they would update one other with new information and resources. Sometimes it was necessary to have printed sheets of the resource spreadsheet as things changed so rapidly there became too many tabs to see clearly on smaller devices. Volunteers experienced a few technical challenges due to cell connectivity and it was not unusual for volunteers to drive to a hotspot for internet access that was not available at home.

About 30 residents volunteered in shifts with some also stepping up to make masks, deliver groceries and simply support people as needed. There was an understanding during this time of great uncertainty and seclusion that some callers may need the reassurance of a calm voice on the other end of the phone; simply a way to connect with a neighbor knowing that someone was there to listen or share a story to lessen the anxiety or loneliness. Many of the initial calls were asking for where to find masks, hence the response of a quilting group in neighboring North Carolina came forward to fill the need.

Some residents called to ask about transportation for medical treatments or food deliveries, some callers were in quarantine and needed groceries and didn't know where else to turn, and many offered to help their community neighbors but did not know how to do so. As the Emergency Services Coordinator shared, "Ever since we established the Helpline, every

other call we've received is someone calling on behalf of a neighbor. It's truly amazing to see the level of care for one another in this county."

Many calls also came from local groups such as nonprofits and faith-based organizations, which then shared the resources among their networks. As the County shared, "While Grayson County staff put the strategies in place, our grassroots volunteers, those staffing the helpline, delivering groceries, donating money, working as emergency medical services providers or firefighters, have fueled our success."

Solution: The Relief Fund

As soon as volunteers started taking calls, it became obvious they also needed a relief fund. Kathy Cole, who was instrumental in setting up the Helpline, approached County administration to identify a way to provide an emergency funding resource for the community. As Paul Hoyle shared, "We didn't know what the needs would be for something like this, but we wanted to meet them and not put anyone off for months at a time. In the end, we decided to make an emergency relief fund." Department of Social Services Director, Kristin Shumate, shared the types of inquiries being received in her department with other county departments. The formative situation was a medical need which was did not fall within the normal resources of the County. As Emergency Services Coordinator, Paul Hoyle, shared, "It was transportation-based, and it was something that could literally be resolved with \$20." Emergency Services sought to come up with ways to respond to these seemingly small needs that, in reality, were huge to those experiencing a challenge during these most uncertain times. To meet this need, the County created the Grayson County Emergency Relief Fund. Donations supported the Fund for those who were not eligible for other types of assistance or who had an urgent need that could not be met through traditional assistance.

The County Finance Director, Leesa Gayheart, enlisted guidance from legal counsel to create a nonprofit for tax exempt donations and appropriate accountability. As the initial days of the pandemic settled, the Fund transitioned from county employees to a community board with the intent to put day to day operations in the hands of community residents rather than county government. The County Finance Director, Emergency Services Coordinator, and Director of Social Services stayed on in an advisory capacity due to their expertise of the new nonprofit and the knowledge and access to available resources to support those in need. The fund has a matrix of people to serve on the board representing businesses and nonprofit organizations.

Distributions were made as the result of recommendations from a funding board, managed by Cole and the County, with oversight of County Finance Director, Leesa Gayheart, to ensure all funding guidelines were followed. As Emergency Services Coordinator, Paul Hoyle, and Social Services Director, Kristin Shumate, were in positions of first responders and the most likely to learn of emergencies such as these, they were authorized to use prepaid debit cards up to a certain amount, per their assessment of the situation.

All of this was taking place during the initial pandemic outbreak and well before the CARES Act funding was in place. The emergency relief fund was made up entirely of donations, directly helping residents in need. Once the project was in place, the County realized there may be some funding to support it through AARP's Community Challenge Grant. The County received \$900 to operate the helpline and was one of four grants awarded in Virginia in 2020.

The relief fund is also an ongoing funding source to assist county residents with emergencies that do not fall within the scope of existing entities to provide relief. Residents may inquire about emergency relief funding, which is made possible by donations, by calling

the help line. As Kathy Cole explained, even though the fund came into being in response to the pandemic, “We eventually took COVID out of the name because, when this pandemic is over, there might still be a personal emergency or even a community-wide emergency such as a flood or a power outage.” She said she sees it, “being like the local Red Cross; being able to assist someone quickly.” And yes, Kathy is still volunteering with the project.

Where the Project is at the Moment, with Expected Completion Date (or if ongoing)

The Helpline call log documented 109 calls in 2020 and 43 calls in 2021 (with the last one in April 2021). Calls were recorded for legal purposes, documenting that the issue was acted upon, even if it was determined not be a resource issue. As the number of calls decreased, the Helpline number was directed to the Emergency Services Coordinator, and even now, volunteers are available to help those who are still not yet comfortable venturing out. Although the relief fund was originally in response to COVID-19, the fund is now an ongoing resource to assist residents with emergencies that do not fall within existing resources. The Helpline phone number and the ability to donate to the Relief Fund are still available on the County website.

How it Provides a Model that other Local Governments may learn from and Implement

1. A key piece of advice to others seeking a similar project, is that the project would not have worked if it was driven by one person. It took people coming together and figuring out how to make it work. The pandemic threw everyone together with great support of county leadership, colleagues, the Board of Supervisors, and the caring residents of Grayson County. County employees not only contributed their knowledge and resources as County employees but they pulled from their vast, collective personal networks as community residents.

2. Organizers shared that it was less than \$2,000 to establish the Helpline and Relief Fund. It does not have to be a lot of money involved; it's community involvement that's needed.
3. County staff were surprised by the number of volunteers and the things they were willing to do to help out their fellow residents.
4. Although the Helpline and Relief Fund were put in place in response to the pandemic crisis, they are still viable components that have been integrated into County operations. They serve as a direct connection and assistance to those in need and, the County will be ready if/when the next crisis comes along.

County Administrator, Bill Shepley, offered, "To everyone who made this happen, Paul, Kathy, Kristen and all the volunteers, I can't say enough about the amazing community we have here in Grayson County. One of the best things about this County is how willing everyone is to help each other."

Executive Summary

Grayson County, located in Southwest Virginia, enjoys a population of just over 15,000. About 50% of the population are ages 50 and older, with 24% being 65 and older, many of whom live alone in fairly remote areas. While the natural assets of mountainous terrain lend to a positive quality of life, this same terrain presents major challenges in communications.

An initial challenge of the 2020 pandemic was how to disseminate information to residents in a county where less than half of the residents are connected to the internet. Without a reasonable level of connectivity in place, Grayson County responded to residents' needs during COVID-19 with the next best thing – the telephone. A Helpline was put in place through a combination of county employees and community volunteers. And yes, due to connectivity issues, it was not unusual for volunteers to drive to a hotspot for internet access.

As soon as volunteers started taking calls, it became obvious they also needed a relief fund. To meet this need, the County created the Grayson County Emergency Relief Fund. Donations supported the Fund for those who were not eligible for other types of assistance or who had an urgent need that could not be met through traditional assistance.

All of this was taking place during the initial pandemic outbreak and well before the CARES Act funding was in place. The emergency relief fund was made up entirely of donations, directly helping residents in need. Although the Helpline and Relief Fund were put in place in response to the pandemic crisis, they are still viable components that have been integrated into County operations. They serve as a direct connection and assistance to those in need and, the County will be ready if/when the next crisis comes along.

Brief Overview

Grayson County, located in Southwest Virginia, has a population of just over 15,000. An initial challenge of the 2020 pandemic was how to disseminate information to residents in a county where less than half of the residents are connected to the internet. Without a reasonable level of connectivity in place, Grayson County responded to residents' needs during COVID-19 with the next best thing – the telephone. A Helpline was put in place through a combination of county employees and community volunteers.

It soon became obvious they also needed a relief fund. To meet this need, the County created the Grayson County Emergency Relief Fund. Donations supported the Fund for those who were not eligible for other types of assistance or who had an urgent need that could not be met through traditional assistance.

Although the Helpline and Relief Fund were put in place in response to the pandemic crisis, they are still viable components that have been integrated into County operations. They serve as a direct connection and assistance to those in need and, the County will be ready if/when the next crisis comes along.