



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: County of Henrico
Program Title: Outreach Call Center
Program Category: Customer Service

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

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Title: Deputy County Manager for Administration
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Program Overview

The Outreach Call Center was formed to serve Senior residents in Henrico County, Virginia in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The call center was created by the county's Advocate for the Aging in partnership with the Public Library, and was designed to provide scheduled outreach phone calls to Senior residents to reduce social isolation and connect people with services during the pandemic. The call center was implemented quickly after the initial pandemic shutdown and operated for nearly four months, providing dozens of older adults with over 1300 friendly phone calls to check in and connect people with resources. Library staff with existing customer service expertise were reassigned to provide these calls while library buildings were closed. The call centers provided a compassionate public service and reallocated county resources efficiently at a critical time.

Problem/Challenge/Situation Faced by Locality

Henrico County has over 52,000 residents over the age of 65. More than 8,000 of those live in long-term care communities. The COVID-19 pandemic is especially dangerous for older adults. In addition to COVID-19, older adults are typically more predisposed to social isolation, which can also be harmful to health. The pandemic presented an unprecedented public health issue for the library, which needed to close its doors temporarily to help prevent community spread. Many trained customer service staff transitioned to telework as library traffic reduced. Henrico County's Outreach Call Center provided an opportunity for older adults to reach out to a trusted source with their questions and concerns, or to socially connect and have a friendly conversation. The call center reassigned experienced library employees with advanced customer service skills to work toward reducing social isolation for the County's most vulnerable Seniors.

How Program Fulfilled Awards Criteria

The Outreach Call Center in Henrico County was an innovative service providing critical social connection and resources to at-risk older adults at the outset of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition to facing an increased risk for severe complications from COVID-19, older adults, and particularly those living in poverty, are at greater risk for social isolation, which can shorten length of life with an impact akin to smoking or obesity. The Outreach Call Center addressed these twin health crises at a crucial time. The program was implemented quickly in response to a dire community need. Silos between departments were broken down, as staff from Libraries, the Office of the Advocate for the Aging, Information Technology, Public Relations, Social Services, and other agencies advised and supported the call center. Customer service specialists from the Library were able to repurpose their skills in service of Henrico's older adults while many in-person library services were on hold due to the pandemic. This model could be replicated across the country as municipalities continue to respond to the pandemic, and in response to future natural disasters. The program also demonstrates that library workers have a diverse skill set that can support work in other areas of public service in times of need. Finally, the Outreach Call Center addresses issues of equity and inclusion that have long faced Seniors, and that have been exacerbated by the pandemic. The program is as innovative as it is altruistic. It is exemplary of the compassion and creativity essential to public service work.

How Program Was Carried Out

The COVID-19 pandemic reached Henrico County in mid-March 2020. Public libraries were closed on March 16, and most of the staff transitioned to telework. Many library staff positions necessitate in-person and on-site interactions, and the library sought opportunities for related telework. At the same time, Henrico County's Advocate for the Aging, whose work concerns outreach to and increasing quality of life for Seniors in Henrico, was faced with the challenge of

delivering services to and connecting with an at-risk population as they were encouraged to isolate themselves. The Advocate for the Aging was inspired to create a dedicated call center to serve Henrico Seniors. The County organized call centers to answer questions related to the pandemic and connect people with resources. Library staff, with ample customer service experience and availability to telework, were reassigned to work these call centers. What came to be known as the Outreach Call Center was to be coordinated between the library's Public Service Administrator and the Advocate for the Aging and would provide phone check-ins for Seniors in Henrico who were at risk of isolation. The call center would function as a support line, and serve as a check-in service for Seniors in coordination with the Department of Social Services, the Advocate for the Aging office, Henrico Police, the Department of Information Technology, and Libraries. The program allowed Senior residents to have regular social interactions, obtain reliable information and assistance connecting with resources, and to receive wellness checks if there had been a prolonged period of time with no contact. Call center staff were equipped to answer questions about trash pickup, tax payments, mask requests, and other important parts of daily life.

Conversations about the initiative began shortly after the shutdown, and planning began in earnest at the beginning of April with a launch date of April 13, 2020. The call center would need dedicated equipment and dedicated staff to operate, and promotion or outreach in order to recruit at-risk Seniors to participate. The County's Information Technology department outfitted the team with an online telephone call tracker for each staff person to track calls in real time. The online call tracker was automated to show each staff person who they were to call during their scheduled shift. Cell phones were distributed to staff members with access to the Outreach Call Center phone line.

Participants were recruited by the Advocate for the Aging. They had the choice to be called every day, every other day, or once a week. Relatives of Seniors could also sign their family members up for the service. A promotional campaign was carried out with assistance from the County's department of Public Relations and Media Services.

The call center was primarily outbound, meaning calls were made by Library staff to Seniors. Notes were kept and shared about enrollees as needed within the group, stored in a secure and confidential way on internal, government access-only networks. This information was used only in service of the call recipients; for example, notes could be kept to remind the next staff member to follow up on a previous request for services. Staff also kept records of emergency contacts for the resident, as well as call logs, the number of times someone had been reached, and whether or not staff encountered difficulty in reaching a person.

To prepare HCPL staff for the impending calls, a Resource Guide was created with COVID-19 specific information and procedures for serious situations by the Advocate for the Aging and Henrico Department of Social Services. Throughout the process, call center staff built upon the Resource Guide. A Microsoft Teams group was created to share resources, inform other staff members of changing situations with participants, and provide an opportunity for connection. The Resource Guide included information about: telehealth, COVID-19 testing sites, grocery delivery resources, places to obtain masks, access to community volunteers coordinated by the Advocate for the Aging, prescription delivery services, updates on county facilities and services, emergency funding for rent or utilities, and important hotline numbers for domestic violence, hunger, depression and suicide, adult protective services, and others.

Financing and Staffing

The Outreach Call Center was staffed by reassigned Library employees who had transitioned to telework while library buildings were closed to the public, with no additional personnel cost to the Library or County. The call tracking application was created in-house by the county's Department of Information Technology. Thirteen cell phones were purchased for staff members using CARES Act funds. The phones cost \$291.49 each, for a total of \$3,789.37.

The pandemic constricted economic activity in Henrico County and across the nation. Spending reductions were made across the board where possible, but there remained a need to do more with less to respond to the pandemic and meet emerging and urgent community needs. The Outreach Call Center reassigned library staff into new roles that drew on existing staff expertise. Instead of embracing a scarcity mindset in a time of crisis, Henrico's Advocate for the Aging and Public Library reimagined the roles of the abundance of skilled customer staff newly available to do remote work after the closure of library buildings and other public-facing institutions.

Program Results

The Outreach Call Center provided 38 participants with regular phone check-ins. Staff engaged these older adults during more than 1300 friendly conversations. The call center operated with library staff from April 13 through July 3, and the Advocate for the Aging transitioned the line to be staffed by volunteers as county facilities like Libraries began to reopen to the public. Participants ranged in age from 56 to 92 years old, with an average age of 74. In addition to alleviating loneliness and its deleterious health effects, staff connected Seniors to vital county and community resources, helping people get medication, food, and wellness checks.

One participant at risk of hunger was connected to a local church group to begin receiving regular donations of groceries. This program participant sent an email to thank the Advocate for the Aging for the help the Outreach Call Center provided for her. She wrote, "Today came a blessing to me, the Grace Community Church, purchased and delivered much needed items (water food staples etc.), as I am healing from an arm injury and dealing with this Pandemic, I appreciate the Senior Call center for checking on me daily and securing immediate community support for me."

In a feature aired on the local NBC news station, an 86-year-old program participant who resides in a Senior living facility shared their thoughts about the Outreach Call Center. "It's real comforting to know that someone else cares about you other than your family...We talk about everything. We talk about 10 or 12 minutes about our children, our grands, how our day is going, what you have done. Your family automatically cares but for someone else to care - that's very comforting."

Brief Summary

The Outreach Call Center was conceived through a partnership between Henrico County Public Library and Henrico County's Advocate for the Aging in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The call center was designed to serve older adult residents of Henrico County and provide scheduled outreach phone calls to those who may be experiencing isolation or who may need assistance connecting with resources. Implemented quickly after the pandemic reached Central Virginia, the call center operated for nearly four months, and provided dozens of older adults with upwards of 1300 phone check-ins. The initiative leveraged the existing customer service expertise of Library staff by reassigning them to provide outreach calls after library buildings were temporarily closed. The call centers made efficient use of county resources and emergency funding, and had a real impact on older adults in the Henrico community who were experiencing hardship by providing compassionate and effective service.

Outreach Call Center Supplemental Material

[Outreach Call Center for Older Residents](#)



Above: Promotional video about the Outreach Call Center.

Below: A participant sent photos of the food she received after receiving assistance through the call center.



Local media coverage of the program: <https://www.nbc12.com/2020/04/23/its-very-comforting-henrico-launches-senior-outreach-call-center-during-covid-pandemic/?fbclid=IwAR3SPXcqTOubXZx6VIm03dAIWfZ6ckvKmCx-SZbRtsmpMhp0n2QZS-z1UPg>