



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2022.** 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: Fairfax (Department of Public Works and Environmental Services)  
Program Title: LEO (Leadership Excellence Opportunity)  
Program Category: Organizational Development

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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

Name: RACHEL FLYNN  
Title: DCM  
Signature: [Handwritten Signature]

## **Fairfax County Department of Public Works and Environmental Services LEO (Leadership Excellence Opportunity) Program**

### Executive Summary

The Fairfax County Department of Public Works and Environmental Services (DPWES) identified a need to develop a pipeline of leaders with skills that prepares them for the strategic challenges of the future. The LEO (Leadership Excellence Opportunity) program was designed to take a small cohort of employees with leadership potential on a 9-month experiential learning journey, culminating in the delivery of a capstone project that addresses a challenge or emerging need for the Department and the County. Over 50 employees, representing multiple occupations and business lines within the department, have completed this innovative program and they continue to demonstrate leadership qualities they developed as LEO participants.

### Program Creation

In 2017, the Fairfax County Department of Public Works and Environmental Services assessed their current learning inventory to determine if the department's training catalog was aligned with their current and future strategic leadership needs. This assessment identified several areas of opportunity for improvement, including developing leaders at all levels in critical thinking and innovation capabilities. One project developed was the creation of a cohort-style leadership program specifically designed to support DPWES employees, at any level, who wanted to build their personal leadership brand and prepare themselves for more challenging leadership roles.

Development of the program began with an assessment of current training needs, which was conducted by a team of supervisors led by the DPWES Organization Development and Training (OD&T) Specialist. The team created the DPWES Learning Pathways program, which identified

key skills and capabilities for leaders at all levels in the department. From that review, various leadership development programs were created, including the Blue Collar Leadership series, Aspiring Leaders, Supervisor Development workshops, and the LEO program. LEO is designed to offer vertical development to both supervisory and non-supervisory employees who want to take a deeper dive into topics related to mindset and mindfulness, political leadership, business acumen, and innovation. The cohort-style program features a blended-learning approach of experiential learning experiences, culminating in a capstone project completed by cohort teams.

### The Application Process

LEO applicants are expected to have at least 5 years of experience working for Fairfax County and 2 years in their current position within DPWES, which is critical to the program due to the goals of knowledge sharing amongst participants. Additionally, participants must outline their goals in participating in the program, what recent learning experiences they have completed that might prepare them for LEO, and how they have exemplified at least one of the DPWES core values in their work. Applicants are also asked to provide 2 recommendations, one from someone in their supervisory chain and one from someone who knows their work product, that speak to how they exhibit DPWES values in their everyday work. The applications are reviewed by the DPWES OD&T Specialist and the DPWES HR Director and the cohort is established. The first cohort had 25 participants, with a few dropping out before the end of the 9 months. Based on feedback from that year and subsequent years, the cohort size has gradually been reduced to 15, which allows for more engagement and better retention of the participants. DPWES leaders are committed to employees fully participating in the program and they ensure the LEO participants receive support as they try new concepts in the workplace.

## Program Design

The content of the LEO program was designed by the DPWES Training and Development team to incorporate the goals of the program with best practices in adult learning. Each of the nine sessions was built around a specific learning objective and activities were either identified or created to meet that objective, ensure that participants learned through experiences as much as possible. Several of the monthly sessions are held at DPWES field facilities throughout the county, as well as other county agency offices, so that participants can experience what work looks like outside their own work environment.

The first session of the LEO program is typically an outdoor leadership education experience facilitated by the George Mason University E.D.G.E program at their Manassas campus. The E.D.G.E. team works with the LEO facilitators to design a learning agenda for the day that meets the program-specific goals of exploring small group dynamics and leadership, innovation, creative problem-solving and trust building. All activities are low to moderate impact and always follow an “opt-in” rule for participation so each member of the cohort feels supported in their risk-taking.

The outdoor experience is accompanied by a classroom session introducing the program goals, discussing participants individual goals for their LEO experience, exploring personal value systems, and building relationships. The first session also includes the Marshmallow Challenge, in which the class is divided into small groups where they compete to build a tower using uncooked spaghetti, string, tape, and a marshmallow that must go on the top of the tower. This activity provides opportunities to learn about distributed and situational leadership, communication, assumed expertise, and the power of iterative processes when problem solving.

The curriculum for the remaining sessions follows this general pathway:

- Session 2: Mindfulness and resilient teams; team problem-solving activity using the NASA Lost on the Moon exercise
- Session 3: Creativity, Curiosity, and Innovation; introducing team problem-solving tools like process mapping and The Six Thinking Hats; Humble Inquiry introduction
- Session 4: Humble Inquiry and ethno-research models; project management basics; introduction of Capstone project teams and project details.
- Session 5: Systems Thinking; Equity in public policy and One Fairfax; Decision-making in public policy, including a simulation exercise
- Session 6: Presentation Skills training – designing storyboards and defining your presentation goals; Providing feedback to teammates using the Johari Window
- Session 7: The Business of Government; Understanding Budgets; Political Leadership, featuring a chat with Deputy County Executive Rachel Flynn
- Session 8: Presentation Skills part 2 – engaging the audience, presence, telling a compelling story; appreciative intelligence in organizations
- Session 9: Presentation Day with DPWES Directors team; closing activities including a values assessment, team feedback, career management and growth planning; graduation ceremony.

In addition to the monthly class sessions, participants receive videos, articles, and similar content to help prepare or reinforce the learning goals of a session. They are also given a copy of “Humble Inquiry” by Edgar Schein, of the MIT Sloan School of Business, which introduces a new type of research methodology framed around being truly curious and building relationships through conversation.

### Capstone Projects

The key feature of the LEO program is the Capstone Project. Capstone projects allow participants to work on a team to apply the lessons learned in our monthly sessions, as well as

their own education and expertise, in researching challenges facing DPWES and presenting novel solutions. The LEO facilitator creates project teams that reflect the diversity of the department as much as possible. Each team should have at least one representative from each of the four lines of business within DPWES and participants are balanced by occupation type, grade, tenure, gender, and race as needed. Team size is ideally 4-5 participants, which allows for better distribution of workload, redundancy in case of personal conflicts, and more diverse thinking.

Project ideas are solicited from the DPWES Directors, and their teams, and are requested to meet the following criteria:

- Must be a current or emerging challenge or issue faced by your Division or the Department as a whole for which we are currently seeking a solution.
- Should be something that can be researched with recommendations within 5 months
- Cannot be something that is currently being worked on by an existing team.
- There must be a project sponsor within the division or department as a point of contact for project teams, as well as a list of potential stakeholders who could be contacted for research.
- What would be the expected benefit, outcome or value in pursuing this project.

Project proposals are submitted to the DPWES executive team for review and consideration, as well as to ensure that the projects are aligned with the current mission and direction of the department. The LEO facilitators assign approved projects to the cohort teams. Capstone projects can vary greatly in scope and topics. Examples of a few successful capstone projects completed by LEO teams include:

- Finding a use for glass as a byproduct of the new glass crushing equipment at county landfill operations, which not only led to the reuse of the product, but significantly increased the supply of recycled glass going to operation, thus removing it from the waste stream
- Determining the feasibility of creating and managing our own tree nursery for plants to be used in county projects

- Minimizing the risk of utility strikes during construction and restoration projects
- Communicating flood risk to affected communities
- Piloting a Zero Waste playbook for county facilities, developing a comprehensive approach to community engagement on projects, and exploring alternative energy and energy reduction opportunities in county Wastewater pump stations.

### Presentation Skills

The ability of our staff to communicate effectively with our community, partners, and political leaders is of utmost importance to our department. The LEO program addresses this need by partnering with a local vendor, Meghan Dotter of Portico Consulting, to develop a multi-day presentation skills training series, which includes private coaching session for each of the capstone teams as they prepare to present their findings to our Directors team. Meghan has designed a custom approach for LEO teams that emphasizes the power of narrative storytelling coupled with best practices in visual presentation design. The innovative presentations prepared by the LEO project teams have been a highlight of the program and several LEO graduates have received recognition for their improved presentation skills when presenting to the Board of Supervisors, at Conferences, or even with the community.

### Meeting Virtually

The LEO program started as an in-person program due to the highly interactive nature of the content and surrounding activities. However, in March 2020, the program was required to adapt to the challenges of meeting via a virtual platform in response to the global COVID pandemic. Fairfax County had recently adopted the MS Teams platform for County wide use but few groups were using it. The LEO program was one of the first users in the County to make full use of the features of Teams, to include establishing a Teams channel for ongoing communication, file-sharing, chat, and meetings. The LEO curriculum for the remainder of that cohort year was quickly adapted to a virtual format, presentation skills training was refocused to virtual

presentation coaching, and Cohort 2 was able to successfully complete the program and present their project work.

For the LEO cohort starting in the fall 2020, the LEO facilitator redesigned the content to make better use of the Teams platform, including more breakout room activities for interaction, virtual simulation exercises, and online assessments and surveys. The Outdoor Education experience at the GMU E.D.G.E. cancelled and replaced with a series of virtual team-building activities. Facility tours were suspended and replaced with new tour videos prepared by our outreach teams. LEO participants became adept at navigating the Teams platform and became resources throughout the Department as their peers sought to make better use of the tool.

This past year, the LEO program has evolved into a true hybrid learning environment. In-person sessions, such as the Outdoor Education experience have returned, as well as facility tours. Monthly classes sessions were fluid and could be conducted either in-person or virtually as the operating environment needs necessitated. Project teams used the Teams platform to meet virtually to discuss their work and share notes and files, but they were also able to meet in person with some key stakeholders. The project Presentation Day was held virtually, which allowed for more participants than would have been allowed to meet in person due to protocols.

### Successes

At the conclusion of cohort #4, fifty DPWES employees had successfully participated in the LEO program. Several participants have since been promoted or been asked to participate in and/or lead a variety of special project teams within the Department. More importantly, they constitute a representative body within the Department of employees who have learned to engage



our work in new and innovative ways, sharing their newfound skills with their peers, and helping DPWES take on the challenges of the future.