



## 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: Franklin County, Virginia  
Program Title: Blue Ridge Fire & EMS Academy  
Program Category: 3 Public Safety

### CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: William "Billy" Ferguson  
Title: Director of Public Safety  
Department: Public Safety  
Telephone: 540-483-3091 Website: www.fcpublicsafety.com  
Email: william.ferguson@franklincountyva.gov

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

Name: Christopher Whitlow  
Title: County Administrator  
Signature: *Christopher L. Whitlow*

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### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Henry County, Virginia  
Program Title: Blue Ridge Fire & EMS Academy  
Program Category: 3-Public Safety

### CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Matt Tatum  
Title: Director of Public Safety  
Department: Public Safety  
Telephone: 276-634-4665 Website: \_\_\_\_\_  
Email: mtatum@henrycountyva.gov

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

Name: Dale Wagoner  
Title: County Administrator  
Signature: John D. Wagoner Digitally signed by John D. Wagoner  
Date: 2022.06.29 11:30:24 -04'00'



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### PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Patrick County

Program Title: Blue Ridge Fire & EMS Academy

Program Category: 3 Public Safety

### CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Scottie Cassell

Title: Director of Emergency Management

Department: Public Safety

Telephone: 267-692-7731

Website: \_\_\_\_\_

Email: scassell@co.patrick.va.us

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

Name: Geri Hazelwood

Title: County Administrator

Signature: *Geri Hazelwood*

## **THE CHALLENGE**

Like many jurisdictions nationally Franklin County and Henry County both faced numerous challenges in recruitment and retention of fire and emergency medical service (EMS) providers. This is a trend that is experienced in most, if not all, localities across Virginia and the nation.

Both jurisdictions operate combination fire/EMS systems, meaning that first responders are a combination of volunteer and career (Paid) providers. Historically, when career positions were available there would be a pool of applicants from the volunteer sector that would make application to become a career provider. This worked wonderful for everyone as the volunteers were already trained and "Road Ready." In the last few years staff from both counties had noticed a "downtrend" in the number of trained volunteer applicants to fill the needed career positions.

## **SOLUTION, FINANCING, STAFFING, LOGISTICS**

Under the leadership of Director William "Billy" Ferguson of the Franklin County Department of Public Safety, a "Regional Chiefs Group" was created. The intent of this group was for the Chiefs from the Counties of Franklin, Henry, Patrick, Pittsylvania, and the Cities of Danville and Martinsville to meet quarterly. During these meetings, the Chiefs would share in an informal atmosphere any issues they may be experiencing along with any successes. Early during these discussions, the need for a career recruit academy was identified due to the applications of already trained responders becoming less and less. Of the jurisdictions involved, the City of Danville was the only jurisdiction that conducted a career recruit academy; the remaining jurisdictions relied on hiring already trained personnel. Even with Danville having a recruit academy, their hiring

numbers were not always able to support an entire academy; thus, a regional approach would work for all area jurisdictions.

As the details for such an academy were being developed, COVID struck. Though attention was diverted due to response during the pandemic, the pandemic also contributed to even more significant personnel loss, further demanding the academy. During the regular Regional Chief's Meeting in September of 2021, Director Matt Tatum of Henry County Department of Public Safety indicated their staffing was under such a strain that they could not delay the project any longer and decided to launch the first academy on November 1, 2021. Director Ferguson agreed his need dictated participation and was ready to participate. The remaining group members agreed that the need indeed existed; however, they were not in a position to join the inaugural academy.

The Training Divisions of Henry County Department of Public Safety and Franklin County Department of Public Safety immediately began developing a schedule as the administration began recruiting and hiring recruits for the academy. The partnership called for each agency to cover all specific cost related to their recruits, and the instruction staffing would be shared proportionately between the jurisdictions participating. This model allows the partner jurisdictions to join in the future on an as-needed basis.

On November 1, 2021, the first 12 recruits (five representing Henry County and seven representing Franklin County) began the first-ever "Blue Ridge Fire and EMS Academy." The recruits went through a rigorous program consisting of didactic and practical courses, accumulating the following certifications;

- Virginia Department of Fire Programs
  - Emergency Vehicle Operations Course (EVOC) Class 1

- EVOC Class 2
- EVOC Class 3
- Firefighter I
- HAZ-MAT Operations
- Basic Pump Operator
- Rural Water Supply
- Mayday Firefighter Down
- National Registry of Emergency Medical Technicians
  - Emergency Medical Technician-Basic
- FEMA – National Incident Management System
  - IS 700
  - IS 800
  - IS 100
  - IS 200
- Other
  - Basic Life Support For the HealthCare Provider
  - Mental Health First Aid for the First Responder

During the academy, Henry and Franklin County's Public Safety Departments developed stronger relationships at all levels of their organizations. In addition, hurdles during the Academy had to be overcome, such as the entire Academy developing COVID and coordinating an Academy during a pandemic. These challenges made the Academy staff and recruits stronger as a team, benefiting both South Central Virginia communities.

On May 2, 2022, the “Blue Ridge Fire and EMS Academy” began its second academy with three Counties participating; Franklin, Henry, and Patrick. The other jurisdictions indicate they still do not have the vacancies within their organization; however, they remain fully committed to the Academy and intend to join the partnership once they have the demand. The seed has been planted, and the program is growing; without the dedicated leadership of all the Departments, this idea would have never materialized.

Realizing fire and EMS academies, even regionally-based academies, are not a new concept, the “Blue Ridge Fire and EMS Academy” does present some uniqueness. As with many other rural jurisdictions, instructional staffing was immediately identified as challenging. Historically, the affected jurisdictions' fire and EMS training focused on volunteers. The career academy has been implemented without adding additional staff, and the existing training for the volunteers has continued without any reductions or delays. With the combining of resources regionally into this project no additional monies have been required from the participating localities thus allowing those localities to remain within their budgets. The personnel conducting the academy have been able to maintain their current workload while launching the career academy, which would have been impossible without each jurisdiction's partnership.

The counties of Franklin and Henry, the primary jurisdictions of the academy, have had a long history of providing quality training for their first responders. Even with their history, while Henry County has a more developed EMS training program, Franklin County has a more developed firefighter training program. Realizing this, Franklin County has agreed to take the lead on the firefighter training, with Henry County serving in a support role. Henry County then takes the lead on the EMS training portion of the academy, with Franklin County providing support. In addition,

ancillary programs such as Emergency Vehicle Operations Course (EVOC), Mental Health, Incident Command Systems (ICS), etc., are shared among the agencies.

In addition to instructions, the combined use of facilities have been an asset. Henry County is blessed with a state-of-the-art training facility with multiple classrooms, all of which offer an array of technology for didactic education. Henry County also has a Class “B” Burnbuilding, confined space props, repelling tower, car fire simulator, and a large paved parking lot. Franklin County has a Class “A” Burnbuilding, roof venting prop, entanglement maze and a few additional props. By combining facility resources, the recruits have been exposed to various scenarios to enhance their preparation for serving as fire/EMS responders in their respective communities.

In addition to being able to hire untrained responders and train them, other lessons have been noted from the regional model. These include, but are not limited to:

- Recruits have a higher than average success rate on certification testing;
- Recruits have a diversity of certifications as an entry-level employee;
- Shared responsibility through multiple jurisdictions lessens the burden for each jurisdiction;
- Recruits establish relationships with other agencies which they may very well reconnect with on a scene in the future, even though they are different jurisdictions;
- Departments have experienced the opportunity to better diversify their work force to better reflect their communities;
- Recruits also undergo physical exercise and nutritional training, due to a fitness instructor on staff, thus allowing for a healthier workforce;



The “Blue Ridge Fire and EMS Academy” has proven to be very beneficial for the member localities. Staff has recently been contacted by other localities in Virginia wishing to look at our process.

### **THE RESULTS**

A few lessons that have been learned that may benefit other localities looking to implement a regional academy have been identified. First, remain focused on the finished product. Yes, there are challenges, but they will prove worth it once the finished product is developed. Budget; Although these localities could launch the academy, even without a budget, that was a challenge. Have a plan and budget to allow for academy uniforms, gear, and instructional assistants. Finally, though most of us have great relationships with our neighbors, having formal MOUs in place will help keep your legal teams happy.

Although, the “Blue Ridge Fire and EMS Academy” has proven to be a great success thus far, with all the graduates remaining employed by their respective jurisdictions, leadership continues to seek ways to improve. Currently an “Advanced Emergency Medical Technician” program is under consideration to being added to the academy at a future date, thus creating a pathway for the creation of much needed “Advanced Life Support” providers.

## **Executive Summary---Blue Ridge Fire and EMS Academy**

### **Problem:**

Franklin County, Henry County, Pittsylvania County, Patrick County, and the City of Martinsville have historically relied on volunteers to provide fire/EMS to their respective localities. Over the last several decades these jurisdictions, like many others, have supplemented their volunteers with career staff. One obstacle that developed were the lack of volunteers to fill career positions.

### **Solution:**

In an effort to overcome the above challenge the jurisdictions worked together to form the “Blue Ridge Fire and EMS Academy.” This concept allowed for sharing of facilities, instructors, and other logistical assets.

### **Cost/Budget:**

Due to the ability to share all components of the academy very little, if any additional cost were incurred by the localities, that could not be absorbed in their normal fiscal year training budgets. The total approximate cost to conduct the academy was \$20,000.00. This was absorbed by the participating localities within the normal training budgets.

### **Impact:**

Participating localities have seen a tremendous impact since the initiation of the “Blue Ridge Fire and EMS Academy. To date everyone who completed the academy did successfully graduate and are remain employed with their respective locality. It should also be noted that these graduates are some of our best performing employees to date. We have also been contacted by

other localities within the region (Amherst, Bedford, and Campbell), who has expressed interest in possible development of a similar academy within their counties. Both localities have seen a tremendous return-on-investment into this academy, by the success of these recruits in the service being delivered to our respective communities.



**BLUE RIDGE FIRE AND EMS ACADEMY #001**

