



## 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: Henry County  
Program Title: Blue Ridge Fire & EMS Academy  
Program Category: 10- Regional Collaboration

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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### 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: 2022.06.22 17:11:37 -04'00'

## **Executive Summary**

The Blue Ridge Fire & EMS Academy (BRFEA) was formed to meet the immediate need for vacancies within the fire and EMS services. Ironically, the class motto created by the first cohort was 'Bridging the Gap,' as that is precisely what the academy was doing, bridging a significant gap. It was created and launched with multiple jurisdictional partnerships and without a budget. The academy has proven to be a massive success through regional collaboration and still produces qualified employees. Acknowledging career academies is not new; BRFEA is the first known to have been formed in a rural region, utilizing existing resources while not taking away from the existing training available for the volunteer responders. Not only related to fire and EMS training, but the partnerships have also opened up relationships with the jurisdictions for future partnerships.

## **Blue Ridge Fire & EMS Academy**

*A Regional Collaboration of the Counties of Franklin, Henry, Patrick, Pittsylvania, and the Cities of Danville and Martinsville.*

Under the leadership of Director William "Billy" Ferguson of the Franklin County Department of Public Safety, a 'Regional Chief's 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 any issues they may be experiencing and successes in an informal atmosphere. 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 Tatum of Henry County 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 any 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
  - 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 EMTs
  - Emergency Medical Technician
- FEMA – National Incident Management System
  - IS 700
  - IS 800
  - IS 100
  - IS 200
- Other
  - AHA – BLS For the HealthCare Provider
  - Mental Health First Aid for the First Responder

Henry and Franklin County's Public Safety Departments, during the academy, 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 recruit stronger as a team, benefiting the 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 supportive 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 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. The personnel conducting the academy has 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 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. Then Henry County takes the lead on the EMS training portion of the academy, with Franklin County providing support. In addition, ancillary programs such as EVOC, Mental Health, ICS, etc., are shared among the agencies.

In addition to instructions, the combined use of facilities has been an asset. Henry County is blessed with a state-of-the-art building 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 parking lot. Franklin County has a Class A Burnbuilding, roof venting prop, and a few additional props. Combining facility resources, the academy can be exposed to various scenarios to enhance their preparation for the real world.

In addition to being able to hire nontrained 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

A few lessons that have been learned that may benefit another locality looking to implement a regional academy have been identified. First, remain focused on the finished product. 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.