

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: Montgomery County

Program Title: XComms Team

Program Category: Communications

CONTACT INFORMATION

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Title: Public Information Director

Department: Public Information

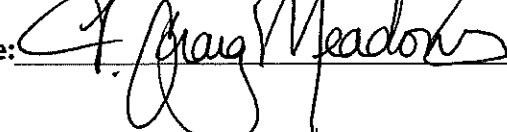
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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: F. Craig Meadows

Title: County Administrator

Signature: 

VACo Achievement Awards | Communications | XComms Team

Brief Overview:

In an effort to better capture both internal and external news and stories throughout the organization, the Montgomery County Public Information Office identified communication partners in the various County departments, as well as Constitutional Offices and affiliated agencies to assist with their efforts. The various department, office and agency representatives meet monthly with the Public Information Office Team to share potential story ideas and news items, as well as learn of upcoming news and stories planned by the Public Information Office. This allows all entities to support the extensive communication needs of Montgomery County, both internally and externally, by sharing news and stories through the various communication vehicles to which the group has access.

The result has been an active and engaged Extended Communicators Group (or XComms Team as we like to call the group) that is responsible for nearly 60 stories and news items either completed or currently in process, as well as new processes to enhance internal communication and overall efficiency within the County.

The Challenge:

Montgomery County is home to more than 100,000 citizens and employs approximately 500 full and part-time individuals who work at 11 facilities. Reaching both citizens and employees with a variety of messages is imperative. Montgomery County employs four individuals in the Public Information Office who are ultimately responsible for creating and distributing information both internally and externally using a variety of communication vehicles to include print and digital media. The team of four Public Information Office (PIO) employees manage the County's website, intranet, TV Channels, social media, all digital media (video and audio), strategic messaging and the brand. While each PIO Team member works diligently to collect, create and distribute timely and relevant messaging both internally and externally, learning about and gathering details regarding the stories and news items from the various departments, Constitutional Offices, and affiliated agencies presents a challenge, resulting in missing great story opportunities that would benefit both internal and external audiences.

As a result, the Public Information Office Team asked the County's department directors, Constitutional Officers and Agency Heads to allow a "front lines" staff member from their respective entities to meet with the Public Information Office Team on a monthly basis to share ideas and upcoming news opportunities.

The Solution:

The Montgomery County Public Information Office (PIO) Team – a team of four individuals – is responsible for creating and distributing content to both the more than 100,000 citizens and approximately 500 full and part-time employees. The team accomplishes this by using a variety of print and digital communication vehicles and adhering to an established brand.

In an effort to increase communication both internally and externally, the PIO team identified "front lines" individuals in County departments, Constitutional Offices, and affiliated agencies to meet on a monthly basis to assist with communication initiatives. The extended communicators – or XComms Team – meets with the PIO Team monthly and not only shares information and ideas, but also helps promote County news and information using the communication vehicles to which they have access.

The representatives from the various departments, offices, and affiliated agencies are employees who handle much of the day-to-day tasks within their respective entities, providing them with valuable insider information regarding their respective entities.

Upon inventorying the various communication vehicles, the PIO Team realized there were 54 social media platform accounts on five social media platforms that were being used by 27 Montgomery County entities to communicate to citizens. Not only did this provide an increased reach for the PIO team, but also provided an opportunity to educate the XComms Team on the importance of following the County's establish brand when developing messages and distributing content. In addition, it allowed for a discussion about how best to use social media and how, when and by whom the various kinds of information should be posted.

The PIO team creates a meeting agenda in advance of the monthly XComms Team, which includes a time for each representative to provide an update on any potential news items or story ideas. This helps to loop the entire XComms Team in on what is happening throughout the County. It also provides the PIO Team the opportunity to learn of potential news stories and decipher whether they are internal only or should be shared both internally and externally, as well as how best to share the information – either by print or digital means to reach the desired audience.

Program Cost:

Since hiring more employees to join the PIO Team is not a realistic option, the PIO Team decided to try a “many hands make less work” approach through the creation of the XComms Group. Mining for content by developing an extended team of existing employees from other areas throughout the County. In turn, this led to more collaboration among the various offices, departments, and agencies, as well as increased internal communications and new processes.

There is no budget needed for this initiative. The initiative simply requires approximately an hour of time from the department, office, and agency representatives. The Public Information Office Team also allows for the representatives to meet remotely if they are unable to travel to the meeting location.

The Results:

Since the XComms Team began meeting in the Summer of 2021, numerous stories and news items have been created that otherwise may have passed by without much notice. Of the nearly 60 stories, 18 landed on the County's intranet (Huckleberry Daily); 27 stories and news items were shared across the various social media platforms; 26 stories are in progress; nearly 20 unique items were shared with the group. In addition, two new processes were created: a new text-based communication process and enhanced security by helping all employees upload pictures to the County's email client, which populates an internal phone directory. This is a prime example of how the group of front-line staff members realized and issue, identified a viable solution, and had the capacity to implement the solution. The XComms Group has proven to be a group of extended communicators for the County's Public Information Office Team. The content produced as a direct result of the group has truly enhanced both communication and collaboration.

The group was initially developed so the PIO Team could gather information from others; however, it has evolved to also be a way to share information by collaborating with representatives from the various entities using all communication vehicles available.

XComms Group's Internal Impact:

The XComms Group promotes intergovernmental cooperation and collaboration, addressing internal and external communication needs and gaps. While several of the newly captured stories have met the objectives of creating and distributing timely and relevant messaging both internally and externally, a few stand out. "Data Protected? Check!" is one story that was news to the majority of employees. The story outlines how the County's Information Technology Department is assisted by the Sheriff's Office in physically destroying hard drives at their training center firing range. Approximately every five years, deputies shoot the hard drives and the destroyed remains and then recycled. This helps deputies with target practice and in turn assists with the destruction of hard drives.

One of the departments represented in the XComms Group is Finance and Purchasing. At first, the employee was uncertain of the contribution they could add to the XComms Group. Although, from one of the earliest meetings, the group discovered the advantage this employee had by seeing the various purchase orders requested by County staff. Several stories have resulted; however, one in particular was the need for a livestock trailer by the Montgomery County Animal Control Department. It was news to the XComms Group just how often the Animal Control Officers had to respond to calls regarding wayward livestock. As a result, the XComms Group realized it would be news to others just how often the Animal Control Officers had to transport pigs or cows or other large animals. Hence, a story was discovered, created and distributed.

Another example of relevant and timely communication came in the form of a notification when the County's network experienced an outage and email was temporarily unavailable. The XComms Group had previously provided their cell phone numbers in preparation for events such as this when alternative methods of communication were necessary. As a result, a text message was provided to the XComms Group, allowing the extended communicators to help spread the word about the outage "Paul Revere" style in an effort to communicate the issue when it happened, as well as when it was resolved. This led to employees learning about the issue almost immediately and prevented the County's Information Technology (IT) staff from being inundated with inquiries and reports from employees regarding the network outage, allowing IT staff to focus on fixing the issue instead of fielding calls.

Samples of content created:



DATA PROTECTED? CHECK!

Data taken! Network hacked! Identity stolen! We hear about it all the time.

It is always good practice to delete data from electronics when recycling or donating them. But is that really enough? Does deleting data guarantee it cannot be accessed by others?

In 2019 a researcher purchased 85 refurbished, donated, and used devices including computers, cell phones, removable media, and hard drives. He found only two had been properly erased and was able to easily retrieve social security numbers, credit card information, and birth dates.



Data on old or broken hardware used by county departments opens the door to information theft just like your own personal technology can. So how does the county ensure confidential information is not taken? Eric Pannell, Information Security Specialist for the county says, “The county uses utilities that overwrite any data on disks multiple times to make recovery of the data virtually impossible. For any drives that are not easily wiped by utilities, we physically destroy the drives to ensure no data can be accessed.”

Physical destruction can take place in many ways. Sergeant Sean Rayne has been destroying hard drives for the Montgomery County Sheriff’s Office for many years. “When I first did this 15 years ago, I was asked to cut the hard drives with a plasma torch,” Rayne said. He suggested just shooting the drives to destroy the disks that store the data. And that is the method used since then. Rayne said he does this every 4 or 5 years.

On a recent January afternoon, Pannell and Rayne met at the Denhill Law Enforcement Training Center firing range and took turns shooting approximately 140 hard drives that had previously been used by county departments.

After the drives had been destroyed, they were inspected to make sure the drives were inoperable. The destroyed drives were then taken to a local scrap metal recycler. That way the metals can go on to be used to

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manufacture new products. If you have any questions about data security in the county, contact Eric Pannell in the IT Department.





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When Animal Control Officers receive a call for “animals at large,” it’s not always a dog who has escaped its yard. Sometimes, it’s three very big piggies on a golf course or livestock loose in downtown Christiansburg—two notable incidents that occurred in 2019.

While these events may seem like rare occurrences to the average person, Chief Ray Helmick says Animal Control has seen growing numbers of these types of calls, which can be attributed to an increase in agricultural animals and livestock in the area. He’s noticed seeing more potbelly pigs, goats, and cows than previously.

The problem: How do you get a cow into an SUV? Until recently, Animal Control officers were only able to hold an animal up to the size of a Great Dane dog (or a goat or turkey) in the backs of their vehicles, Ford Explorers. Squeezing a cow into a vehicle would be dangerous, not to mention ridiculously impossible!



In the past, Animal Control would have enlisted the help of a resident with a trailer to wrangle livestock, which was the case with the cows in Christiansburg. However, if that person were unavailable, they would have to request permission from nearby landowners to contain an animal on their property temporarily. Or, worse yet, they would have to wait to contain an animal, and that could lead to public safety issues.

Animal Control’s recent purchase of a new livestock trailer has changed the game. Officers can now secure larger animals without relying on the generosity of residents. In addition, the trailer eliminates some of the danger

of placing an upset, squirming animal into tight quarters, similar to the incident with the pigs on the golf course.

"If we can get them back here where they are safe and secure, that's a good thing," Helmick said.

Animal Control also plans to use the trailer in the event of abandonment or seizures of large quantities of animals.

UPDATE: In December, Animal Control was able to use its trailer for a case that involved bringing a sheep, over 30 goats, nearly 90 rabbits, and more than 40 chickens to the Animal Care and Adoption Center.

