



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2023.** 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: \_\_\_\_\_

Program Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Program Category: \_\_\_\_\_

### CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Department: \_\_\_\_\_

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

Email: \_\_\_\_\_

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

Joseph P. Casey, Ph.D.

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

County Administrator

Title: \_\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_ 

## **2023 VACo Award Entry:**

### ***Chesterfield Behind the Mic***

#### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

In an effort to expand the ways in which it shares information with citizens, Chesterfield County Communications and Media (now a division within the county's Constituent and Media Services Department) sought to branch out of its more traditional media roots by putting together a multi-faceted podcast.

The purpose of "Chesterfield Behind the Mic" is clear: Bring on guests from both the county and the community as a way to tell new stories in a different, more engaging way. The podcast has both a video and audio component, with each format tailoring its message accordingly.

Listeners are able to hear interesting, insightful episodes that either tell them a story they haven't heard or give them information they need. Viewers, meanwhile, get to experience the audio with visuals, be that of the guests themselves, accompanying video footage, images, and/or graphics.

Chesterfield Behind the Mic achieved much success and progressed where other podcast offerings had not, blending the audio and video in a way so that those who interacted with the show came away not only more informed but more likely to return.

#### **THE PROBLEM OR NEED FOR THE PROGRAM**

Chesterfield County is home to more than 370,000 residents, according to the latest U.S. Census estimates. The number of those residents who subscribe to local newspapers or ingest traditional media continues to dwindle. Regardless of the age demographic, they are more likely to get their information from other sources.

Thanks in large part to the pressures that the pandemic put on community involvement, the county was ripe for a change of information delivery and by launching both the Chesterfield Behind the Mic podcast and the Chesterfield On Point blog, the county sought to meet that need.

While the idea of a podcast had been percolating for some time prior to the launch of Chesterfield Behind the Mic, the podcast industry had exploded. From the early days of Apple's iPod (which gave the medium its naming convention) to the more modern times where podcasts have become ubiquitous among entertainment and news, it was clear that it was time for local governments to get in the game. But what constituted a "podcast" differed greatly from show to show. So too did the types of topics on which episodes of these various podcasts were formed among various localities.

Chesterfield decided to address the need of getting information to more non-traditional stakeholders in its own way, by merging the video and audio components together and giving residents a choice as to which version of the show they most enjoyed.

Given that many younger people interact with news and information through mediums like podcasts, this allows the county to connect directly with citizens and deliver that information straight to them, meeting them in the apps where they were already listening, watching, or both. This merger of medium gives Chesterfield Behind the Mic a unique framework through which to share the county's stories.

## **DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM**

Communications and Media launched the Chesterfield Behind the Mic podcast in fall 2021. From the outset, the goal has been to share information about Chesterfield County and tell the stories of its citizens and government in an engaging and interesting way via compelling visuals and discussion.

This podcast began as an effort to communicate directly with residents through an additional medium, meeting people where they are and allowing the county to have longer conversations about topics that are important to those who live in and around Chesterfield. In addition to providing programming across the county's various content channels, Chesterfield Behind the Mic was positioned as a vital new tool to reach those in Chesterfield for whom more traditional media (newspapers, TV, radio, etc.) had become less and less prevalent with the expectation being that it would continue to do so.

At launch, the podcast was posted and pushed across numerous listings/services online so it could be easily accessed no matter the device or location of the potential user. That number of sources has grown and will continue to over time as more sources offer podcast downloads.

Chesterfield Behind the Mic started out as a conversation-oriented program with rotating guests and posted new episodes every other week. Over the course of its first year, the show evolved into one that would routinely be released more often than just bi-weekly. Each episode continues to feature timely topics and relevant guests. At certain points of the year, like the holidays, during budget season, or at the start of the school year, the episode topics have been more timely and focused on content the public would expect to hear about then. Otherwise, episodes have been driven more by the topics themselves, like upcoming meetings, functions, causes, or community-sponsored events.

The long-term vision of Chesterfield Behind the Mic is to continue to grow from running episodes every other week to eventually adopting a standardized weekly format with increasingly more on-site productions and more live broadcasts in the not-too-distant future.

A key part of the entire planning and launch process was an intentional focus on passing along information and telling stories in new and different ways. The early topics included not only the standard government fare but also local stories like a softball team that made it all the way to the championship game of the Little League World Series, a Thanksgiving meals program in the

community, how residents could stay safe during the holidays, and a preview of spring programming available from the local Master Gardeners group.

Chesterfield uses the podcast to fuse community and government in a variety of ways, too. One episode featured a representative from Fire and EMS talking about a new program called PulsePoint, which allows citizens to assert themselves in times of cardiac emergency. Another episode told the story of a docuseries centered on the Sheriff's Department and the ways it was helping current and former inmates battle addiction in the county jail. From local American Idol contestants to Parks and Recreation programming, the podcast looks to include any and all stories across Chesterfield County.

Episodes were primarily distributed on a bi-weekly basis until the spring of 2023 when the need for more became too great to pass up. The Board of Supervisors and County Administration supported the podcast in both personnel and equipment, going above and beyond to make sure the endeavor had the tools and the people it needed in order to share the stories.

The podcast quickly became an integral part of the county's messaging and information apparatus, playing an important role in many strategic communication decisions such as helping to educate the public on important parking regulation reform, on the different path Chesterfield was taking with regards to recycling in the county, and especially in the way the county passed along information to interested voters about its 2022 Bond Referendum.

Among the many ways that Chesterfield Behind the Mic covers the entire county is by drilling down to the district level. The show regularly welcomes back members of the Board of Supervisors to talk specifically about things in their respective magisterial districts.

In all cases, preproduction meetings have been a vital part of the operation. The host talks with production staff about the upcoming episode and then spends time discussing the topic and the potential visual elements with the upcoming guest. This allowed Chesterfield Behind the Mic to be much more than just an interview show but one where conversation is the vehicle for not only information but also education. This is a win/win for both the guests and the user. This allows

the guests—many of whom are appearing on a podcast for the first time in their lives—to find a sense of comfort while the end listener/viewer is more informed due to the time invested in making sure the story is told well.

The show posts directly to YouTube as well as the various podcast apps and is promoted via Chesterfield's social media channels, including a Facebook page that is devoted specifically to the podcast itself and features behind-the-scenes content, too.

It's also been important for the county that the podcast and blog complement each other and offer supplemental information where appropriate. In instances where the two focus on similar topics, they share different vantage points. The podcast is able to dive into more detail and spend more time on a topic, allowing for a more intimate, approachable point of view. That is aided greatly by being able to hear directly from the guest, usually someone who has vast experience that the user can draw from as they learn more about the respective topics.

For example, county budgets can be especially hard for people to understand even when they are looking at line items of data. That's why it was critical that Chesterfield Behind the Mic bring on subject matter experts from the county's budget department and county administration to speak directly to things that were priorities in the budgetary process. In addition, the same was true during the runup to the 2022 Bond Referendum, when the podcast allowed those experts to break down each portion of the plan in detail ahead of when voters would decide on whether to pass the measure or not.

That also highlights the way in which Chesterfield Behind the Mic focuses on timely topics, giving people information about important matters right when they need them. As such, stakeholders can go through the budget process with a deeper understanding of the proposal based on episodes which are released in proximity. The same was true for the Bond Referendum—which passed by an overwhelming majority—and a host of other episodes throughout the run of the show.

## THE RESULTS/SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAM

Chesterfield Behind the Mic has already achieved its goal of gaining traction within the community and in the larger media environment, especially in supplanting itself as a key tool in the communications toolbox.

Highlights of its trajectory include:

- Held initial team meetings, defined responsibilities, planned out launch
- Took inventory of existing equipment and what was still needed
- Worked with the county's Information Systems Technology Department to create a Chesterfield Behind the Mic podcast website that includes video and audio versions of the show as well as a listings of past episodes and a place for viewer/listener feedback
- Planned out the initial on-location filming of Episode 1
- Recorded and distributed a trailer prior to launch
- Designed advertisements and promotional material for launch
- Designed a podcast logo that spoke to the big-picture goals and branding
- Worked with the audio vendor to host an RSS feed for the podcast in order to distribute files to podcast apps
- Launched Chesterfield Behind the Mic on location at Manchester High School
- Recorded more than 40 episodes of the podcast, including featuring all five Board of Supervisors members as well as the County Administrator, Chiefs of both Fire and EMS and Police, the Sheriff, the Registrar, the Director of Economic Development, numerous county staff, and even the chairman of a neighbouring locality's Board of Supervisors to discuss a common goal.

The success of the podcast was evident early on when county departments began sending along numerous ideas for potential topics and submitting requests to have something from their

areas of expertise as focal points. The level of interest and degree of positive feedback resulted in the accelerated need to go to a more weekly format.

The podcast is posted across every discernible listing app/website, including Apple Podcasts, Spotify, Google Podcasts, Overcast, and Stitcher, among many others. The video version lives on the county's YouTube page. Both formats of all shows are also available on the county's website at [chesterfield.gov/podcast](https://chesterfield.gov/podcast).

The reach into the community has continued to grow. Views and listens range depending on the topic but typically are within the 200-400 range, solid numbers for a government-run podcast still in its early stages. The show has also seen a steady increase in social media impact, with more than 500 followers on the podcast-specific Facebook page alone and a recent 47-percent increase in engagement across the platform. And thus far, web traffic confirms the continued growth: In 2023, 57% of all visitors to the podcast's page were new users, demonstrating continued reach and engagement, as well as a healthy amount of returning visitors. In addition, 61% of all visitors to the podcast page were from a mobile device, which trends toward many of the users being part of a younger demographic.

Lastly, the community impact and the role the podcast can play in the evolving media landscape is exemplified by Episode 38 ("How Chesterfield Played a Role in the Moon Landing") being published by The Richmond Free Press in March 2023.

The Chesterfield Behind the Mic podcast has become an indispensable tool for how Chesterfield County not only shares important information but also shines a light on interesting, underserved stories past and present. The intimate nature of the medium and the way Chesterfield merges audio and video in such a unique way lends itself to connecting people across the county. The way the county has harnessed that potential has allowed the podcast to grow beyond being just a bi-weekly opportunity for the organization to pass along information. It's part of a greater picture where Chesterfield is able to meet the informational needs of its residents on its own by going in-depth in ways traditional media simply never could or would,



especially in today's realities. It has also made itself compelling to staff, the administration, the county's Board of Supervisors, and members of the community as a whole.

That's important not only because members of the community and those within county government have sought to be on the show but also because it meets a clear need and clearly does it well. It's a first for the county, to use a mixed-medium production like the Chesterfield Behind the Mic podcast to deliver on not just the good news but also the complex, to excel at being both entertaining and yet also informative.

The podcast makes the value proposition clear to all who interact with it regardless of the way in which they choose to experience the show. Both the visual and audio versions of the podcast achieve the same standard and have from the outset.

The success Chesterfield Behind the Mic has shown in making all of those conclusions possible is not only a testament to the way the organization has followed through on the vision and iteration of the show but also underscores why it is worthy of a 2023 VACo Achievement Award.

## **BRIEF OVERVIEW**

Chesterfield Behind the Mic is a bi-weekly podcast that was launched in fall 2021 that focuses on the people, stories, and information of Chesterfield County. Every episode of the podcast is distributed in both video and audio forms across not only the county's website but across a myriad of podcasting platforms including Apple Podcasts, Spotify, and YouTube.

In a time when traditional media continues to shrink, the podcast allows the county government to communicate directly with residents. This is essential both because it allows Chesterfield to share important information about services, projects, and upcoming events but it also allows Communications and Media to focus on interesting community stories resident otherwise might not have heard.

## **SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS**

- News release
- Website: [Chesterfield.gov/podcast](https://chesterfield.gov/podcast)
- [Episode 20: American Idol Contestant Carrie Brockwell](#)
- [Episode 33: Explaining Chesterfield's Recycling Changes](#)
- [Episode 35: State of the County 2022 with Dr. Joe Casey](#)
- [Episode 38: How Chesterfield Played a Role in the Moon Landing](#)
- [Bonus Episode: Telling the Story of Jailhouse Redemption](#)