



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: Chesterfield County, VA

Program Title: Managing the Water and Wastewater Assistance Programs for Customers During COVID-19

Program Category: Customer Service

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Joseph P. Casey, Ph.D.

Title: County Administrator

Signature: Joseph P. Casey, Ph.D.

Digitally signed by Joseph P. Casey, Ph.D.
DN: cn=Joseph P. Casey, Ph.D., o=Chesterfield County, ou=County Administration,
email=caseyjoe@chesterfield.gov, c=US
Date: 2023.06.27 12:20:52 -04'00'

Managing the Water and Wastewater Assistance Programs for Customers During COVID-19

The Overview:

Chesterfield County Utilities Department provides services to over 119,000 water customers and 101,000 wastewater customers in the county. There were three utility assistance programs that were administered in part or fully by Chesterfield County Utilities Department and with the help of our IST Department. The first program was the CARES Utility Relief Fund, where \$151,722 (459 applications) was provided from October 20, 2020, through November 30, 2020, to customers that had past due balances after the March 1, 2020, billing cycle. This program was administered by the local Social Services department in determining the qualifications of the applicant.

On December 1, 2021, Chesterfield County Utilities Department was awarded the Municipal Utility Relief Program funds as part of the Coronavirus Aid Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. This was the second program provided to customers with 4,271 applications and a total of \$1,245,548 provided. On February 2022, the Utilities Department was also awarded its third program, the American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) with 4,164 applications received and in the amount of \$1,446,279. All these programs and funding were designed to protect the American people and industries from the health and economic impacts of COVID-19. These programs were intended to help customers affected by the pandemic with past due balances on their water and wastewater bills.

Chesterfield County Utilities Department's long-term goal is to provide guidance and assistance to all customers, especially during the height of the pandemic from March 2020 through November 2021. The Utilities Department and our customers consistently work to develop a

trusting relationship, but greatly during a time when many of our customers were experiencing hardships while paying their monthly bills and everyday expenses. It is important that our customers know we support them and will assist with their needs to the best of our ability.

The \$2,843,549 of water and wastewater assistance program funds received by Chesterfield County Utilities Department helped 8,894 families and businesses receive relief for their past due utility bills, bringing these customers peace of mind and assurance that their families and businesses were safe.

The Challenge:

During the COVID-19 pandemic, our customers faced many challenges, including job loss, reduction of income, illnesses, and much uncertainty. As a result of this, the State of Virginia enacted a disconnection moratorium, prohibiting utilities from disconnecting customers for past due balances. Many customers took advantage of the disconnection moratorium and did not make payments on their utility accounts due to financial challenges. The Utilities Department personnel were concerned about customers as they fell behind on payments and their past due balances continued to grow. Due to continuous changing guidelines issued by the county, state and federal governments, important information regarding the pandemic (COVID-19) was scripted for our Customer Service Representatives and website to establish standard responses to our customer's inquiries, questions, concerns, and complaints. We sought to ensure our Customer Service Representatives (CSR) were knowledgeable on a wide range of topics of concerns. We wanted each CSR to inform and reassure customers that they would have water and wastewater services even if they were unable to pay their bills due to a change in financial situation caused by the pandemic. The CSRs were trained to inform customers to complete the

CARES/Municipal Utility Relief Program funding application on our website. The CSRs also notified customers not qualified for the CARES/Municipal Utility Relief Program about other potential sources of funds available throughout the County. For the ARPA program, customers were not required to apply for these funds. Funds were allocated to past due accounts based on criteria determined by the US Department of Housing and Community Development and were applied to past due accounts by the Chesterfield County Utilities Department internally.

With innovations during the pandemic, CSRs were able to inform our customers of all the funding programs available to them. These programs eased customer's financial burden related to their utility account.

The Program Description:

On March 27, 2020, the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act was passed by Congress and was signed into law. The State of Virginia passed \$1.3 million of its Federal Coronavirus Relief Funds for CARES to Chesterfield County Utilities Department to be applied to customer accounts between March 2020 and November 2021 past due bills, applying \$1,245,548 of the funds. Chesterfield County Utilities Department was awarded \$1,446,279.35 for the ARPA/SLFRF in February 2022, both State and Local Fiscal Recovery Funds, for the Municipal Utility Relief Program. These programs provided direct assistance to customers with a delinquent water and/or wastewater balance on their account. Funds were available to customers who experienced a financial hardship resulting directly or indirectly from the COVID-19 pandemic. The CARES Municipal Utility Relief Programs required the customer to apply for financial assistance.

CARES Funding Requirements:

1. The customer was more than thirty days delinquent.
2. The delinquent charges were incurred between March 1, 2020, and November 1, 2021.
3. The funds could not be used for deposits, down payments, fees, interest, or penalties.
4. The customer applied for funds and certified they experienced financial hardship due to the COVID-19 public health emergency.
5. Awards were only granted for amounts delinquent due to the approved reasons related to COVID-19 for the transactions between March 1, 2020, to November 1, 2021.
6. For residential customers, the cause of economic hardship due to the COVID-19 was required to be one or more of the following reasons:
 - Been laid off,
 - Place of employment closed
 - Experienced a reduction in hours of work
 - Must stay home to care of children due to closure of day care or school
 - Lost child or spousal support
 - Not able to work or missed hours due to contracting COVID
 - Unable to find work due to COVID-19
 - Unwilling or unable to participate in previous employment due to high risk of severe illness COVID-19

ARPA Funding Requirements:

- Customers did not have to apply.
- Available to residential customers only.

- Awards were only granted for customers with past due balances as of August 31, 2021, for billing transactions between March 12, 2020, and June 30, 2021.
- Penalties and Interest were not eligible for payment.

Execution of the Program:

For the CARES funding, with the guidance of Chesterfield County leadership, our Information Systems Technology (IST) personnel helped develop a customer application on the Chesterfield County Utilities Department website. The application captured program-required information and downloaded the customer information into a spreadsheet. The Utilities Department personnel downloaded an excel spreadsheet from our Customer Information System (CIS), to calculate the amount the customer was eligible to receive.

For the implementation of the ARPA funding, our billing system vendor wrote a program based on the criteria set forth by the Virginia Department of Housing and Community Development to create a spreadsheet of eligible accounts and amounts. The spreadsheet was downloaded to our billing software and posted the funds to the customers' accounts.

The Results:

In March 2020, employees were given telework kits and began working from home. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, the way of doing business and processes of how business should be run needed to be rolled out properly and effectively for the safety and health of our employees and customers. All employees were trained to complete their tasks in any situation or environment. The lobby was closed for several months and reopened in July 2021. Since reopening, there are fewer customers coming into the lobby for assistance or to make a payment.

Because of the lobby closure during the pandemic, the volume of the calls to our call center increased. Our call center employees were able to relay the message regarding financial assistance to our customers for the programs available

Our department also relayed funding availability messaging to our customers through webpage notification, flyers, brochures, and mass email notifications regarding the program using our payment engine Paymentus and an advertisement was also put in a local newspaper, as well as a news release advertising the funding.

For the programs, all awarded funding was applied to the customers' accounts according to strict State guidelines prior to program end dates. The department received and reviewed 8,894 applications for assistance. We applied \$2,843,549 of funds to eligible applicants' accounts.

Our Commitment:

The Utility Relief program, CARES and ARPA were very successful for Chesterfield County Utilities Department customers. All available funds awarded to the Utilities Department were applied to qualified customer accounts. During the pandemic, our commitment to our customers stayed the same: provide world-class customer service. Our objectives during the pandemic were also unwavering:

- Provide innovative and creative strategies for achieving customer excellence for every customer contact
- Create an innovative service package for our customers
- Adopt service strategies resulting in a higher levels of customer satisfaction
- Adopt process improvements that have measurable results

Chesterfield County Department of Utilities
Virginia Association of Counties
2023 Achieve Award Submission – Managing Water and Wastewater Assistance Programs During
COVID-19

The assistance fundings helped alleviate our customers' concerns about paying their bills.

Customers were given instructions and assistance applying for the program and were notified of their application approval status. We firmly believe the March 2020 CARES Act passed by

Congress and signed into law and the ARPA funds were highly beneficial for many of our

customers. The major components of the Utilities Bill Relief, CARES Act and ARPA established relief to aid local governments for the direct impact of the pandemic on our citizens. The

Chesterfield County Utilities Department was very thankful and worked diligently to provide the

maximum allowable direct assistance to our customers experiencing financial hardship and past-

due balances on their water and wastewater account.