



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

Program Title: Chesterfield On Point Blog

Program Category: Communications

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: 

2023 VACo Award Entry:

Chesterfield On Point Blog

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Chesterfield County Communications and Media (now a division within the county's Constituent and Media Services Department) formally launched the county's official blog, Chesterfield On Point, in October 2021 as part of an effort to communicate directly with residents through a new medium and disseminate information in a fact-based manner.

Despite being the fastest-growing locality in the Richmond region and the fourth-largest county in Virginia, with an estimated population of 370,000, Chesterfield faces a challenging media environment. Staffing cutbacks at the region's daily newspaper have had an adverse effect on the quality of its coverage, while both of the county's weekly newspapers have stopped printing. That mostly leaves coverage to our three TV stations, all of which tend to hire young, inexperienced reporters who are new to the area.

Chesterfield On Point blog has proven to be an important resource for the county government in providing depth, background and historical context to both residents and local media. The blog grew quickly from biweekly posting to weekly and now publishes multiple posts in the same week as needed. It has become a go-to source for Chesterfield news and information about the county's many programs, services and events, and a valuable tool for educating residents about complex topics.

THE PROBLEM OR NEED FOR THE PROGRAM

Chesterfield is not unique in feeling the impacts from a rapidly evolving landscape that is local news coverage. Thousands of small newspapers across the country have been shuttered in recent years, as Google, Craigslist and other forms of online advertising crippled the revenue generation that once made such publications profitable. Recent studies of this trend indicate that communities that lose their newspapers quickly become less engaged and informed about their local government's operations, and that makes sense; the reporters who once were paid to attend lengthy Planning Commission or Board of Supervisors meetings and write news stories about what they learned have not been replaced in any meaningful way. Unless there is a particularly controversial item on the agenda, TV stations tend not to even send a reporter or videographer to cover these meetings.

This information vacuum, in many cases, is being filled with social media chatter that is unsourced, poorly researched if at all, unverifiable, agenda-driven and often outright erroneous. This has implications for a thriving county that continues to grapple with important questions around the topics of growth, land use and infrastructure capacity. Whereas our weekly newspapers once provided venues for the community to engage in constructive dialogue on these issues, the volume and vitriol of these conversations are both ramped up significantly on social media. The rapid spread of misinformation is particularly pronounced after the airing of inaccurate or misleading TV reports, which happens on a not-infrequent basis. The county's communications professionals are left scrambling to secure a correction, but by that point the damage has been done.

Recognizing that newspapers' staffs and page counts have been shrinking for many years, Chesterfield leaders concluded that we need to do a better job as a local government of telling

our own stories and disseminating public information directly to our residents. The Chesterfield On Point blog was launched as part of a multifaceted approach to help us “break our own news” instead of having to rely on an increasingly absent private sector middleman, while giving our elected leaders varied platforms to engage with residents on current events and topics of local importance. That proved prescient, as the blog came online less than 18 months before both of our weekly newspapers halted operations.

DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM

Communications and Media published the initial post on the Chesterfield On Point blog in August 2021, to promote a new county web page in advance of National Dog Day events across Chesterfield. Two other articles followed over the next month as part of what amounted to the new product’s soft launch, most notably a lengthy explanation of the county’s plan to open two new middle schools that included quotes from all 10 members of the Board of Supervisors and School Board.

During this period, there was extensive internal collaboration among Communications and Media staff to come up with both a name and permanent logo for the new blog. Since it was envisioned to serve effectively as “the county’s online newspaper” or source for official county information, we initially considered various images of typewriters, but those were quickly dismissed as archaic and inappropriate for an online publication that we want to connect with residents across the demographic spectrum. After settling on the name Chesterfield On Point, we coalesced around the image of a computer cursor combined with a wordmark in old school-style typeface common to publishing. We also had multiple meetings with staff in the Information Systems Technology (IST) Department to create the look and feel we wanted for the blog’s homepage, including multiple opportunities for people to subscribe and tweak an existing “news flash” platform on our website to meet our specific needs.

The blog's official launch took place on Oct. 18, 2021, with an article about planned infrastructure upgrades at the county-owned River City Sportsplex and Chesterfield's vision for bringing complementary development to the area around the athletic facility. The original schedule for the blog was to post a new article every other Monday, but that quickly evolved into a weekly publication and before the six-month mark, we began posting articles more frequently on an as-needed basis.

We have worked with staff in several county departments as the subject matter experts for our articles: Planning, Budget and Management, Community Enhancement, Transportation, Utilities, Economic Development, Juvenile Justice, Citizen Information and Resources, as well as our Police, Fire/EMS and Sheriff's offices and the elected Treasurer and Commissioner of the Revenue. We conduct regular interviews with members of the Board of Supervisors and county administration as sources for our coverage, as well.

The blog was not intended merely to engage our residents about the local government, however; we also frequently write about community and human-interest stories that tend to fly under the media's radar, such as the efforts of the local food bank to meet surging demand during the COVID-19 pandemic, a local Wounded Warrior who helps the community through his two nonprofits, a county family with four generations of police officers and a Chesterfield teen who was chosen to tour with Grammy Award winner Monica.

One of the purposes of this product is to shine a light on positive things that are happening in our community, to counter the negativity that exists in the news and on social media. While it takes time to build trust and credibility with our residents, particularly as a new product created and operated by local government, we are quickly forging meaningful relationships in the community and establishing proof of concept with the publication of each new article.

The timeliness and relevance of the topics we write about has been key to driving engagement with the blog. We are strategic about what we cover and when, and we post articles the same day when covering important events to avoid trailing the news cycle – a recent example of this was our coverage of Chesterfield formally beginning the process of demolishing an underutilized shopping center to make way for a new mixed-use development.

Links to all new blog articles are distributed immediately to subscribers via both email and text. We also heavily promote the blog through social media posts, the Happening in Chesterfield weekly e-newsletter and emails to media members about particularly important topics.

THE RESULTS/SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAM

Chesterfield On Point blog currently has 240 subscribers, making it already one of the top 5 most subscribed-to page on the county's website. As of the date of this entry, we've published 146 articles, averaging more than one per week.

Metrics tracked by our IST Department indicate that readers spend more than two minutes on the blog page on average. That's significantly higher than almost any of the pages on the county's website and indicates people are taking the time to read most of the way (or all, in some cases) through articles that they find compelling enough to click on.

The blog is cited regularly as a news source by local media, which fulfills one of the primary objectives in creating this product: to improve the accuracy and quality of information being disseminated in news reports about Chesterfield. We also publish a roundup of actions taken at every Board of Supervisors meeting to keep the public informed, since we rarely have any media in attendance anymore.

Finally, staff in various county departments reach out to us on a regular basis requesting that we publish a blog article about a given topic – we now have more to write about than we have time to get to everything.

The blog's success has far exceeded our expectations internally, and establishing it as a reliable source of fact-based information has positioned Chesterfield to engage more effectively with residents. It also has softened the blow from the demise of our two weekly newspapers, giving the community another outlet to find out what is going on with their local government.

SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIALS

NEWS RELEASE



For immediate release: Oct. 18, 2021

Contact: Jim McConnell | 804-717-6094 | mcconnellja@chesterfield.gov

Facebook: [chesterfieldva](#) | Twitter: [@chesterfieldva](#) | YouTube: [ChesterfieldCountyVA](#) |

Instagram: [@chesterfieldvirginia](#) | [#Cfield](#)

Chesterfield launches new blog

‘Chesterfield on Point’ provides another resource for residents to stay informed about variety of important topics

CHESTERFIELD COUNTY, VA — Chesterfield residents now have another way to stay informed about what’s happening in their community.

Chesterfield on Point, [a new blog](#) produced by the county’s Department of Communications and Media, officially launches Monday, Oct. 18, with an article about proposed improvements at River City Sportsplex and potential redevelopment of the Genito Road/Route 288 corridor.

The blog will explore a variety of timely, relevant topics across Chesterfield, with depth and attention to detail that often goes missing in today’s hectic 24-hour news cycle.

“Connecting with residents in new and engaging ways has always been a priority to us,” said Susan Pollard, director of Chesterfield Communications and Media. “We are excited to launch our own county blog because it gives Chesterfield another opportunity to share information about the complex issues that impact our residents. Straightforward, with factual information, and direct from the source is what our blog is about. Residents can have confidence that the information is accurate and unfiltered.”

The blog will include news and feature articles, photos, graphics and videos. It is available at chesterfield.gov/blog.

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Chesterfield County Department of Communications and Media | chesterfield.gov

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Providing a FIRST CHOICE community through excellence in public service

Chesterfield On Point Logo:



Chesterfield On Point Blog website link: www.chesterfield.gov/blog

Screenshot of Chesterfield On Point Blog webpage:

Chesterfield.
on point

STAYING INFORMED IS VITAL FOR EVERYONE IN OUR COMMUNITY.
That's the purpose of Chesterfield on Point - we'll explore timely, relevant topics across Chesterfield, with depth and attention to detail that too often goes missing in today's hectic 24-hour news cycle. We'll not only tell you who, what, when, where and how but also why it matters.

SUBSCRIBE

CHESTERFIELD HOLDS RIBBON-CUTTING CEREMONY FOR NEW FLEET SERVICES FACILITY
Posted on March 23, 2023
The 16-bay, roughly 34,000-square foot structure will serve as the primary location for 25 employees, including fleet management, supervisory staff and administrative support, as well as heavy shop technicians and parts room employees [READ ON.](#)

CHESTERFIELD BIDS FAREWELL TO SPRING ROCK GREEN, MAKES WAY FOR SPRINGLINE AT DISTRICT 60
Posted on March 21, 2023
New development will include a mix of residential, retail, office and entertainment uses with abundant green space and connectivity, featuring multiuse trails, wide streetscapes and structured parking to promote walkability, safety and convenience. [READ ON.](#)

Social media posts promoting blog posts:

Chesterfield County Virginia Government 3d · 🌐

Have you read the latest from the Chesterfield on Point Blog?

Today, the county held a ribbon cutting ceremony for our new Fleet Services building! In the latest article, we give a re-cap of today's festivities and share our excitement with you over this long-awaited facility.

Read the full blog post here: <https://bit.ly/3FOxqMW>



Chesterfield County Virginia Government 5d · 🌐

Have you read the latest from the Chesterfield on Point Blog?

Few topics associated with Chesterfield government are more misunderstood than funding for public K-12 education. As the Board of Supervisors prepares to hold public hearings on the county's proposed FY2024 budget at its meeting Wednesday evening, we think it's an ideal time to dispel some pervasive myths about this important issue.

Read the full blog post here: <https://bit.ly/409feph>



Posted on: March 7, 2023

THE POWER OF 'AND': PROPOSED FY24 BUDGET BALANCES INVESTMENT IN CORE SERVICES, TAX RELIEF



Throughout the process of crafting Chesterfield's proposed fiscal year 2024 budget, county administration refused to settle for either making necessary investments in core public services or providing meaningful tax relief to households and businesses.

The budget that will be presented to the Board of Supervisors at a work session tomorrow afternoon accomplishes both objectives.

"The overarching theme of Chesterfield's proposed fiscal year 2024 budget is the power of 'and,'" said Matt Harris, deputy county administrator for finance and administration, during a budget briefing for local media Tuesday morning.

"We're absolutely investing in the bedrock of this community, which is schools, public safety and infrastructure. This budget also delivers a diverse, comprehensive package of tax relief to both our residential and commercial customers," he added. "We don't believe you have to choose one or the other."

The proposed FY24 budget totals \$1.94 billion, an increase of 9.4% from the current fiscal year.

Education accounts for 50.4% of the total budget. The base transfer from the county's general fund to Chesterfield County Public Schools (CCPS) increases by \$20 million, an all-time high and \$3 million more than projected in the School Board's approved budget.

By allocating an additional \$5 million in one-time funds, Chesterfield has addressed half of the projected funding gap in the school system's budget.

"The schools budget is a partnership with the state," Harris said. "The state is still engaged in its own budget process and we're very hopeful additional dollars will come out of that process. We're calling on our state partners to meet us in the middle."

Local funding will accommodate a 7% pay raise for current teachers called for in the School Board's approved budget. CCPS also plans to raise the starting salary for new teachers by nearly \$3,000, from \$49,481 to \$52,421.

Likewise, the proposed FY2024 budget increases starting salaries for public safety (police, fire and sheriff) by 10% and provides a promised 2.25% step increase to current employees on July 1. Existing personnel also receive a 10% pay raise effective Jan. 1, 2024.

Such investments in compensation for teachers and first responders are part of a multiyear process to alleviate acute pay compression, reward veteran employees for their loyalty, experience and institutional knowledge, and keep their salaries in a market competitive position.

Two years ago, Chesterfield implemented new pay plans that positioned the school system and public safety agencies to lead the Richmond region's large counties on all but a handful of early steps on their respective 30-year pay scales, bolstering their efforts to recruit and retain a high-quality workforce.

"Now the goal for us is to make sure we stay at the top of the market," Harris said. "We really are in the driver's seat for pay when it comes to those most important job categories: folks who are in the classroom teaching kids every day and first responders."

With Chesterfield's unemployment rate at 2.6% as of December 2022, the lowest among its regional peers, and average weekly wages in the county having increased by 26.6% since 2016, the local government is having to compete harder than ever for top talent.

Other planned investments in the workforce include implementing Phase II of a new pay plan for non-sworn county government employees and raising the minimum hourly wage to \$16. All eligible employees also will receive a 3.5% merit increase next January.

Chesterfield's proposed budget commences work on a slate of capital projects that were overwhelmingly approved by voters in last November's bond referendum: replacing the Enon Library, facility upgrades at River City Sportsplex

and parks development.

It also includes \$153 million in local funding for construction of Phase I of the Powhite Parkway Extension, from its current terminus to Woolridge Road. Design work for the initial segment of the project is already under way.

There are 36 new positions to achieve Chesterfield Fire and EMS' minimum staffing goal, new Child Safety Officer positions for teaching the Success Through Education and Proactive Policing (STEPP) program, and an increase in Police Service Aides and plans for additional positions in the police department's traffic and enforcement unit.

More than 63 cents out of every dollar in the proposed FY2024 budget is allocated to education and public safety, the top two priorities consistently identified in citizen surveys.

Meanwhile, it is balanced against a comprehensive tax relief package totaling nearly \$37 million.

County homeowners and businesses will receive a 5% rebate on real estate tax bills due in early June. Combined with an already advertised 1-cent reduction in the real estate tax rate, the effective rate for this year will be 89 cents per \$100 of assessed value – generating an average savings of about \$125.

Even as personal property assessments are projected to fall by double digits this year, Chesterfield is maintaining the relief threshold at 50%. Taken together, that will result in significant tax savings on the thousands of vehicles that are registered in the county.

Chesterfield has increased by 8.7% the income brackets for its 2023 real estate tax relief program for the elderly and disabled, ensuring no seniors become ineligible because of the recent cost-of-living increase in their monthly Social Security benefits.

The county also is raising the Business, Professional and Occupational License (BPOL) gross receipts threshold from \$400,000 to \$500,000, which will result in approximately 86% of local businesses being exempt from the tax.

“It’s hard to pick any one of these tax relief items and impact all of our residents and businesses,” Harris said. “It requires a very diverse approach to make sure we’re being attentive and empathetic to the pressures that everyone is facing.”

← [Previous](#)
[Board of Supervisors Roundup](#)

[Next](#) ⇒
[Real estate tax rebate in June part of
Chesterfield's plan for comprehensive tax
relief](#)

Posted on: November 28, 2022

ACROSS FOUR GENERATIONS, RICHTER FAMILY HAS BEEN DEVOTED TO KEEPING CHESTERFIELD SAFE



Chesterfield police officer Justin Richter (left) is following in the footsteps of his father Bruce (center), grandfather Eugene (right) and late great-grandfather Charlie.

When Justin Richter decided to pursue a career in law enforcement, he accepted a position in a neighboring locality to establish himself on his own merits and avoid any appearance that he was trying to get ahead by capitalizing on his last name.

After a decade of service, however, he joined the Chesterfield Police Department in 2020. In the process, his family became the first in the department's history to include four generations of police officers.

"In my interview, I said I feel like I'm coming home," said Justin, a Chesterfield native whose great-grandfather (Charlie), grandfather (Eugene) and father (Bruce) all previously served as officers in the county.

"Whether good, bad or indifferent, how people viewed our name, I thought if I go somewhere else, I know I will be judged on what I do. There couldn't be any, 'He only got this [promotion or recognition] because of his name,'" he added.

"When people asked me why I was leaving, I said repeatedly that I grew up in Chesterfield, I still live in Chesterfield, I know how Chesterfield is and the people have police officers' backs. Same thing for the county administration, commonwealth's attorney, the Board of Supervisors ... they still like the police."

With more than 370,000 residents, Chesterfield is a much different place today than it was when the family's patriarch, Charlie Richter, began his career as a police officer early in the 20th century. The county was mostly agricultural, with only a few thousand residents spread out on sprawling farms and not much crime to speak of.

The police department hadn't yet adopted the concept of squad cars, so officers were required to use their personal vehicles and the county reimbursed them for mileage. Now 96 years old, Eugene still recalls occasionally accompanying his dad as Charlie patrolled his beat in the Hull Street Road corridor.

"Now there's no more 'Bring your child to work' days," Justin noted with a laugh.

"They definitely frown on it," Bruce added.

All kidding aside, Eugene acknowledged the biggest reason he wanted to be a police officer was because of those ride-along experiences and listening to his father talk about his work.

"One day he needed to talk to the chief about something, so he went to his house and took me along. The next time I saw the chief, I was quite a bit older. He said, 'You know what you ought to do? Don't be a policeman, be a lawyer.' I said, 'I want to put people in jail when they won't behave themselves. I don't want to be out here trying to get them out of jail.'"

After a stint in the U.S. Navy, Eugene returned home to Chesterfield and got a job as a railroad worker. But as the youngest and lowest man on the payroll, he was laid off every time his fellow workers went on strike. He changed career paths and briefly tried selling insurance, but didn't like it and took a job with the police department in 1948.

"Eventually they put name tags on our uniforms. One time I ran into somebody who saw my last name and said 'Richter? I know somebody by that name, Charlie Richter.' I said 'Yes, I know him too,'" Eugene said with a laugh.

"I'll tell you one thing," the man continued. "You've got a big pair of shoes to fill."

Eugene went on to work for the Chesterfield Police Department until 1983, eventually becoming its first deputy chief. As the county experienced its first significant population growth in the late 1970s and early '80s, the department launched narcotics and other special units and significantly enhanced its forensic capabilities under his and former chief Joe Pittman's leadership.

Against his father's wishes, Bruce graduated from Chesterfield's police academy and joined the department in 1975.

"There were so many people who would see the name Richter and ask 'Is your daddy Eugene?' They'd relate experiences they had with him. Same kind of thing," he said.

It was a lofty standard for a young officer to live up to.

"You don't want to mess up," Bruce added. "When I started out, I'd run into people who knew my dad and they'd give you the indication that 'You're gonna have to show me you can be as good as he is.' Are you going to toe the line and do what's expected of you, or are you going to try to get by on your name?"

Bruce left law enforcement in 1985 and started his own business, but returned to the Chesterfield Police Department in 1996 and stayed until his retirement in 2007.

"I don't know if it's something in your blood," he said. "I guess if you feel called to police work, you can never really be happy doing something else."

Listening to his father talk about the criticism he and other officers received in the mid-1970s, from antiwar protestors who saw police departments as an extension of the U.S. military's role in Vietnam, Justin "grew up knowing that no matter what you do, some people are going to hate you but the majority of the people don't.

"It really didn't deter me" from pursuing a career as a police officer, he said. "I knew it and accepted it."

But amid nationwide protests and increasingly negative public perception of law enforcement in spring 2020, Justin found himself questioning if it was still the right path for him.

His prayers for guidance were answered in the form of a moving letter from the mother of a victim in a murder-suicide case he had handled.

"I was like, 'Heard you. Got it,'" Justin said, looking to the sky. "I know what I'm supposed to be doing."

"Those kinds of things happen sometimes," Bruce added. "Things are rough, you're feeling discouraged, then somebody sends a letter or just gives you an attaboy, says you did a good job ... that's all it takes."

[Chesterfield Fire and EMS holds dedication ceremony for Magnolia Green Station No. 25](#)

[Chesterfield Remembers gives county residents chance to tell their story.](#)

OTHER NEWS IN CHESTERFIELD ON POINT

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Posted on: March 23, 2023



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Posted on: March 7, 2023



REAL ESTATE TAX REBATE IN JUNE PART OF CHESTERFIELD'S PLAN FOR COMPREHENSIVE TAX RELIEF

Posted on: March 6, 2023



FROM CHESTERFIELD TO CONGRESS: MCCLELLAN MAKES HISTORY WITH ELECTION TO HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES

Posted on: March 1, 2023



BOARD OF SUPERVISORS ROUNDUP

Posted on: February 24, 2023



COMMITTEE WORKS TO COLLECT, PRESERVE AND INTERPRET CHESTERFIELD'S AFRICAN AMERICAN HISTORY

Posted on: February 23, 2023



Posted on: October 21, 2022

CHESTERFIELD DEDICATES FUTURE ENON LIBRARY BUILDING IN HONOR OF DR. WYATT TEE WALKER



Chesterfield supervisors Jim Ingle (left) and Chris Winslow (right) unveil a sign with Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker's family during Friday's dedication ceremony.

A voracious reader and prodigious author even in his later years, Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker's name will be connected to Chesterfield's future Enon Library building in perpetuity following a ceremony Friday morning formally dedicating the new facility in honor of the civil rights icon.

"I think the library is a very fitting host for this event because libraries are about diversity of perspective and thought, learning and challenging ourselves, and helping our community become a better place," said Carolyn Sears, assistant director of Chesterfield County Public Library.

Dr. Walker, who relocated to Chester with his wife, Theresa Ann, in 2004 following his retirement from the ministry and lived there until his death at age 89 in January 2018, made a profound, enduring impact as one of the leaders of America's civil rights movement.

The grandson of a former slave, Wyatt Tee Walker was born Aug. 16, 1929, in Brockton, Massachusetts. He attended Richmond's Virginia Union University, where he earned a bachelor's degree in chemistry and physics, graduating magna cum laude. After receiving a Master of Divinity degree from Virginia Union's School of Religion in 1953, he accepted a position as minister at Gillfield Baptist Church in Petersburg.

He also served as president of the Petersburg chapter of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and as state director of the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE), and helped found the Virginia Council on Human Relations, a biracial group working for desegregation.

In 1960, Dr. Walker and other African Americans protesting segregation were arrested and jailed after entering through the "whites only" entrance of the Petersburg Public Library to check out a biography of Robert E. Lee. It was the first of 17 times he would be arrested for acts of nonviolent civil disobedience.

"In natural Alpha fashion, Brother Walker stood ready to fight the oppression of his people. The symbolic nature of his name being raised on this public library is an intentional reminder of one of his first moves to stand for civil rights for Black Americans," said Dr. Tyren Frazier, president of the Chesterfield-based Rho Iota Lambda chapter of the Alpha Phi Alpha fraternity, of which Dr. Walker was a member.



Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker's daughter, Patrice Walker Powell, takes a photo of the information panels that have been posted inside the Enon Library with biographical information about her father.

Dr. Walker is best known for his tenure as chief of staff to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. During the same period (1960-64), he joined the board of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference (SCLC) and worked as its first full-time executive director.

In 1961, Dr. Walker and Theresa Ann volunteered as Freedom Riders in an effort to enforce the Interstate Commerce Act, which declared that segregation in interstate transportation facilities was illegal. Freedom Riders often faced arrests and violence as buses crossed state lines or as riders disembarked in southern states where the law was not being enforced.

"This [dedication] is personal to me," said Chesterfield County Administrator Dr. Joe Casey, noting that his mother participated in the March on Washington for Jobs and Freedom in August 1963. The march culminated with Dr. King delivering his historic "I Have a Dream" speech in front of the Lincoln Memorial, calling for an end to racism.

"Today is my mom's proudest moment," Casey added. "She said, 'Shake as many hands of people with the name Walker as possible.'"

Several members of Dr. Walker's family attended Friday's ceremony, including his daughter, Patrice Walker Powell, and son Robert Walker. The event also was streamed live on Chesterfield's Facebook page for friends and family who couldn't be there in person.

"On behalf of our whole family, we thank all of you who made this wonderful tribute possible," said Dr. James Holley, Dr. Walker's nephew.

After leaving the SCLC in 1964, Dr. Walker went to work as a marketing specialist for the Negro Heritage Library, becoming its president in 1966. In that role, he carried out part of the library's mission to convince schools to include the views, experiences and contributions of African Americans in their curriculum.

"There are many who would say, as we stand here 60 years later, that goal has not been fully realized. But this honor is a bold and important step toward recognizing and maintaining focus on that need," said Cynthia Hudson, a member of the executive committee of the Virginia NAACP. "If we are inspired by this honor today to know who Dr. Walker was and just how much his work has meant to the cause of racial and social equity in the world, if we're inspired to learn more about what he and others of his era have contributed to the collective American experience, we'll all be grateful for it ... and may we be so inspired."



William McGee, president of the Southern Christian Leadership Conference's Central Virginia chapter, speaks at Friday's dedication.

Dr. Walker went on to become the senior pastor of Canaan Baptist Church of Christ in Harlem, New York. He also formed the International Freedom Mobilization, a movement to oppose apartheid and racial injustice in South Africa, then helped supervise South Africa's first fully representative elections in 1994 -- which resulted in Nelson Mandela becoming the country's first post-apartheid president.

Following his retirement from the ministry in 2004, Dr. Walker continued to write and give interviews and served as a key historian for the Smithsonian's new National Museum of African American History and Culture in Washington, D.C.

"In 1982 he wrote a book about gospel and social change titled, 'Somebody's Calling My Name.' Well today, we're calling the name of Dr. Wyatt Tee Walker in gratitude as we dedicate and name the future Enon Library building after a man whose life and body of work honored all humanity," said Chris Winslow, chairman of the Chesterfield Board of Supervisors. "Let all who enter this space come in a spirit of gratitude for this profound man, a great Chesterfield citizen who helped right the course of America's ship."

Dr. Walker received more than 100 awards and citations for his work in human relations and civil rights. He was inducted into the International Civil Rights Walk of Fame at the Martin Luther King Jr. National Historic Site; was named one of the "Greatest Black Preachers" by Ebony magazine; and received the "Keepers of the Flame" award at the African American Church Inaugural Ball during inauguration events for President Barack Obama.

Even so, William McGee, a Chesterfield resident and president of the SCLC's Central Virginia chapter, recalled that Dr. Walker's public profile was lower than other civil rights leaders of his era because "he was doing work in the background."

“He was getting the job done,” McGee said. “I often talk about walking in the footsteps of giants. Wyatt Tee Walker was one of those giants. I had the privilege of walking in his footsteps and hearing him.”

“Although there will never be another Wyatt Tee Walker,” added Bermuda District Supervisor Jim Ingle, “we can all commit to carry on his legacy of hope, respect and kindness toward others. We look forward to the new Enon Library building bearing Dr. Walker’s name in the near future. Thank you for being here to honor a man of great courage and faith.”

← [Previous](#)

[Next](#) ⇒

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Posted on: March 7, 2023



REAL ESTATE TAX REBATE IN JUNE PART OF CHESTERFIELD'S PLAN FOR COMPREHENSIVE TAX RELIEF

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Posted on: May 23, 2022

'LEARN TO SWIM' CLOSES GAPS IN POOL ACCESS, HELPS SECOND-GRADERS GAIN WATER SAFETY SKILLS



Over the past seven years, thousands of second-graders have learned water safety skills through SwimRVA's program.

As we come to the end of National Water Safety Month, the statistics are sobering:

* 70% of Black children and 66% of Black adults do not know how to swim

* 79% of children from low-income families do not know how to swim

* Drowning is the No. 2 cause of accidental death for those under the age of 14, and No. 1 for those under the age of 4 and for children with autism

Rather than merely lament the situation, though, SwimRVA is doing something about it. Through its Learn to Swim program, the local nonprofit has provided free swim lessons to thousands of children from underserved communities in

Chesterfield and across the region over the past seven years – and demand from schools hoping to participate in the program increases annually.

“It’s about access and opportunity,” said Scott Bennett, director of communications for SwimRVA, an entity formed in 2012 to operate a newly constructed, 54,000-square-foot aquatic center in North Chesterfield and serve as a community hub for aquatics in the Richmond metropolitan area.

“These disparities started back when segregation was in place and different communities never had access to public pools,” he added. “Now it has just happened generationally over the years – people aren’t comfortable around water so their children never learn how to swim. We’re trying to break that cycle.”

Sixteen Chesterfield elementary schools currently participate in Learn to Swim, a foundational element of Swim RVA’s Drownproof Richmond initiative. Most of them serve large populations of students of color and students whose families qualify financially for free or reduced-price school meals; both groups typically have less access to pools than their peers who live in newer, more affluent neighborhoods.

In collaboration with the YMCA of Greater Richmond, SwimRVA’s goal is to give every second-grader in the region a chance to learn how to swim through a unique, station-based program designed by U.S. Olympic Swim Team coaches.

“We’ve found if a child doesn’t learn to swim by third grade, they’re probably not going to. But SOL testing starts in third grade and we’ll never get a principal to agree [to take time out of the school day for swim lessons] for third-graders,” said Debbie Kelo, director of programs for SwimRVA.



A student rings the bell at SwimRVA’s North Chesterfield aquatic center after completing a station.

Learn to Swim provides all second-grade students from participating schools with a 45-minute lesson once a week for seven weeks.

It's a 7-station curriculum. On Day 1, when the children arrive, instructors go over safety rules and things they need to be aware of when they're close to the pool. Then they get in the water and every student is tested to determine which station is appropriate for their skill level.

The first two stations incorporate basic water safety skills, such as learning to breathe properly and open your eyes underwater, float and roll over onto your back to propel yourself forward.

In Station 3, students learn how to kick properly underwater. Then they are taught how to use their arms and legs together in Station 4.

"Every child can learn at their own pace," Kelo said. "When they complete the skills to pass a station, they get to ring a bell and we announce, 'Attention Ladies and Gentleman, so-and-so has passed Station 1.' They go put a sticker on their certificate on the wall, then it's back in the water to work on the next station."

If they progress through the initial stations quickly enough, participants can receive more detailed instruction about the four strokes used in competitive swimming: freestyle, backstroke, breaststroke and butterfly.

SwimRVA also offers discounts for students who want to continue working on their strokes once they've completed the program, creating a more affordable pathway for children from low-income families to advance in swimming and eventually join a summer league, high school or even year-round team – or even become certified as a lifeguard.

According to Bennett, teachers and school administrators regularly report that their students see benefits from Learn to Swim that extend well beyond the pool walls.

"They come here and build positive success habits, reach a goal, get positive reinforcement by ringing the bell, then they take that back to the classroom and are able to use it," he said. "Their self-esteem increases as they realize they can accomplish things. Attendance goes up and they pay attention better."

While teaching children skills they can use for a lifetime, SwimRVA is also gradually improving the Richmond region's relationship with water.

The Learn to Swim program is "a significant game-changer," said Dale District Supervisor Jim Holland, whose district includes the SwimRVA aquatic center. "It eliminates fear of water that is prevalent because many people of color haven't had access to pools. It also creates confidence and encourages a 'can-do' attitude, both in the pool and in the classroom. What a generational gift this is for our community."



Students learn basic water safety, such as how to breathe and open their eyes under water, in Station 1

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[Next](#) ⇒

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celebration kicks off May 21 with Mayfaire
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Posted on: March 28, 2022

THROUGH NEW WELCOME CENTER, YMCA ASPIRES TO FILL RESOURCE GAPS AND FOSTER COMMUNITY CONNECTIONS



Adam Foster (left), executive director of the Manchester Family Y, and Lisa Ramirez, senior vice president of community impact for the Greater Richmond YMCA, outside the Chesterfield facility's new welcome center

It's natural for Lisa Ramirez to relate to newly settled residents who visit one of the branches operated by the YMCA of Greater Richmond.

Not so long ago, she was one of them.

In October 2016, Ramirez met Tim Joyce, then-CEO of the local YMCA, at a conference in San Antonio, Texas. Joyce talked about metro Richmond's growing diversity and Ramirez spoke of her community outreach work on behalf of the YMCA in San Antonio, which has a population that's about 68% Latino.

Their conversation clearly stuck with Joyce, who called Ramirez the following month and asked if she'd ever consider relocating to the Richmond area.

"Sure, why not?" replied Ramirez.

She visited Richmond for the first time the week before Christmas and stayed for four days. When she got back to Texas, there was a job offer waiting.

Ramirez accepted and started in her new role as the YMCA of Greater Richmond's vice president of operations in 2017. She was named senior vice president of community impact last July.

Not long after Ramirez's arrival, the organization embarked on an ambitious plan to improve facilities in Chesterfield, Richmond and Petersburg.

It launched a \$5 million renovation of the Manchester Family YMCA, located on Hull Street Road in northeastern Chesterfield, in February 2020. Despite significant construction delays due to COVID-19, the project is heading toward the finish line – including a new welcome center, at the entrance of the 35,000-square-foot building, that soon will be open to the public.

"It was a vision from our leadership, both staff and volunteers, of how this was going to happen," said Ramirez, standing in the still-unfinished space last month. "I was very fortunate to be invited to come be part of it."

Adam Foster, executive director of the Manchester Y, noted it has been "a three-year-plus journey" to take the welcome center from concept to reality.

The YMCA of Greater Richmond originally envisioned the center functioning much like similar facilities in other parts of the country: primarily serving Chesterfield's growing immigrant community with English as a Second Language classes, helping them resolve any paperwork issues and secure a driver's license, etc.

After it formed a volunteer task force with representatives from local government, nonprofits and the business community, the project evolved into a welcome center for all residents – not only those who are new to the area.

"To align with our mission, we want this to be for everybody who needs it," Foster said.

Through the welcome center, the YMCA aims to facilitate collaboration between local nonprofits and agencies that support what Ramirez calls "the social determinants of health": food, housing, transportation, bridging the language barrier, workforce development and adult education.

"We want to create a sense of belonging for anyone who walks through our doors: You're welcome here and we can help you," she said. "The YMCA is acting as the connector and the convener so we don't duplicate anybody else's work. We can't be the end-all, be-all, but working in partnership with the county and other nonprofits, we can fill the gaps."

According to Dalila Medrano, multicultural community engagement coordinator for Chesterfield's Citizen Information and Resources Department, the county has been part of the YMCA's welcome center task force since its formation.

“It has been really motivating to know this space will be available because the calls and emails I often get are from nonprofits that want to expand into Chesterfield,” she said. “From the county’s perspective, being able to champion that collaboration is something we want to have a part in. That aligns with our goals.”

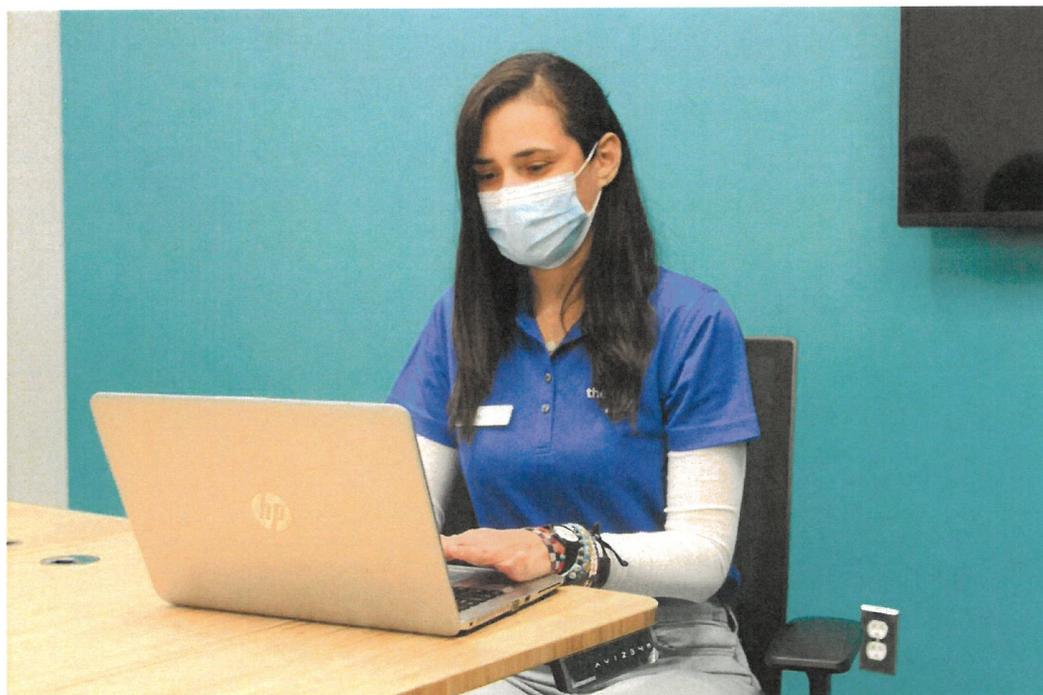
Chesterfield’s population has grown increasingly diverse over the past two decades, to the point that local school leaders now report that more than 100 different languages are spoken by students in county schools and their families.

Noting that many low-income residents don’t have transportation to get from their homes to one specific facility, the YMCA’s goal is to eventually expand the “welcome center” concept to its entire greater Richmond footprint.

That doesn’t necessarily mean additional brick-and-mortar construction; rather, by utilizing the organization’s social needs navigators to perform community outreach – particularly in areas identified as “resource deserts” – and build a network for residents to access services at all YMCA branches.

“Maybe the hub of this starts as a welcome center at the Manchester Y, but how do we then expand it and create a welcome center without walls?” Foster said. “How are we being relevant and responsive to the needs of our community? We know in order to be super-impactful and really lead the charge with our welcome center, we need to do it right.

“We’re not nearly done,” he added. “This is just the beginning.”



Elena Diaz Cupeles, a social needs navigator for the YMCA of Greater Richmond, works in the welcome center at the Manchester Family Y

Posted on: September 6, 2022

NEVER FORGET: MORE THAN TWO DECADES AFTER 9/11, FREEDOM FLAG EMBRACED AS SYMBOL OF REMEMBRANCE



The Freedom Flag flies below the American Flag at a school in Delaware as part of its annual Sept. 11 observance.

On the morning of Sept. 11, 2001, Doug Ketcham was working as a bond trader for Cantor Fitzgerald in the North Tower of the World Trade Center when it was struck by hijacked American Airlines Flight 11.

The Chesterfield native contacted his mother, said there had been an explosion and reported his office was rapidly filling with acrid smoke. "I love you," he said one last time before ending the call.

Ketcham, who had moved to New York City after graduating from the University of Virginia, was one of nearly 3,000 people killed in the terrorist attacks of 9/11. His remains were never identified.

Barely five months earlier, Ketcham had served as a groomsman at the wedding of one of his best friends, John Riley.

“It was the last time I ever saw him,” Riley recalled.

Riley and Ketcham grew up together in Chesterfield. Both attended Robious Middle School, then were nearly inseparable during their four years at Midlothian High School before graduating in 1992. They maintained a close friendship even after heading off to rival colleges, Riley studying at Virginia Tech and Ketcham at U.Va.

They were in their mid-20s on Sept. 11, 2001, and thought they still had their whole lives ahead of them.

Riley now is a father of four, a traffic engineer and president of the board of directors of the Freedom Flag Foundation, a local nonprofit formed in 2002 to advocate for establishing the Freedom Flag as a national symbol of remembrance of 9/11 to educate future generations about the tragic events and lives lost that day.

“It’s a calling,” Riley said of his nearly 14 years of voluntary service to the foundation. “Sometimes you find yourself in a spot in life where you just can’t *not* do something. I know this is what I’m supposed to be doing.”

The Freedom Flag Foundation was established by Richard Melito, a Henrico County restaurant owner, who drew an initial sketch of what is now known as the Freedom Flag on a napkin nine days after the terrorist attacks. Melito initially intended to hang the symbol on the wall of the restaurant to serve as a reminder to customers. It has since grown into something much more significant.



The Freedom Flag Foundation's board of directors with then-Virginia Gov. Ralph Northam on Sept. 11, 2018.

There’s special meaning behind every individual element that makes up the Freedom Flag:

*Thin, horizontal red stripes at the top and bottom of the flag represent the blood shed by those who perished at the Pentagon (Arlington, VA), crew and passengers on American Airlines Flight 77, and crew and passengers on United Airlines Flight 93.

*Three horizontal white stripes represent the first responders and rescue workers who descended on the World Trade Center and Pentagon during and after the attacks.

*Two broad, red horizontal stripes represent the twin towers and the blood shed by everyone who died at the World Trade Center, on American Airlines Flight 11 and on United Airlines Flight 175.

*The blue rectangular field represents all Americans united for freedom.

*The white star represents all who have lived and died to preserve freedom.

*The five white bars, aligned around the star, represent the Pentagon and the organized protection of our freedom.

“[The flag] is inclusive – it doesn’t leave anyone out,” said Chesterfield resident and Ret. Fire Lt. Clarence Singleton (FDNY), another member of the Freedom Flag Foundation board. “In these times I think that’s what we need, to be together.”

In 2003, then-Virginia Gov. Mark Warner (now a U.S. Senator) issued an executive order designating the Freedom Flag as the Commonwealth’s official symbol of remembrance of 9/11.

The flag’s status has been recognized as an official emblem of the Commonwealth under Virginia law in 2018, when bipartisan legislation sponsored by former state Sen. Glen Sturtevant and current Del. Lamont Bagby unanimously passed both chambers of the General Assembly and was signed by then-Gov. Ralph Northam.

“We like to call it proof of concept – if it worked in one state, it can work everywhere,” Riley said.



Through the "The National Freedom Flag and World Trade Center Steel Education Program," students can touch a piece of steel from the fallen towers.

The Freedom Flag has been widely embraced across the nation by educators, first responders and the general public. Oklahoma lawmakers adopted it as their state's official symbol of 9/11 remembrance on May 16, 2022, and a similar bill also has passed the Delaware legislature, where it awaits the governor's signature.

While the foundation continues its efforts to have the Freedom Flag established as a national symbol, it also recognizes the need to engage and educate the current generation of American students who hadn't been born on Sept. 11, 2001, and thus have no memories of that day.

In 2019, the Freedom Flag Foundation launched a pilot program in Virginia, Delaware and Texas called "The National Freedom Flag and World Trade Center Steel Education Program." School partners receive a free kit containing a Freedom Flag and a small section of a steel beam from the twin towers that the foundation received from the buildings' owner, the Port Authority of New York and New Jersey.

Riley asked Tara Krohn, a fellow Midlothian High graduate and Cub Scout leader, if she'd be willing to take one of the kits and kick off the program at Woolridge Elementary, where she has taught for 24 years. On Sept. 11, 2019, Krohn took a piece of World Trade Center steel around to different classrooms and told students the story of 9/11.

Krohn joined the Freedom Flag Foundation board in 2020. That led to her writing "Unfurling the Freedom Flag: A 9/11 Story," a children's book that chronicles the flag's origin. The book was illustrated by Emily Merry, a Midlothian High School

graduate and Krohn's next-door neighbor.

"My favorite moments as a teacher are being in front of the class, making a book come alive," Krohn said. "Not only does this book make the 9/11 story come alive, but the flag's story as well. It's a safe way to tell the story in a way that's appropriate for school-age children."

Raising the Freedom Flag below the U.S. Flag, reciting the meaning of its 10 elements, and holding a moment of silence has become part of the traditional Patriot Day observance in schools across Virginia. The Freedom Flag Project also calls for schools to formalize an annual tradition of raising and flying the Freedom Flag below the American Flag on Sept. 11, creating a unique reminder to current and future generations of the victims, heroes, and survivors of that day.

"I think we have to keep the story in circulation or we're one generation away from forgetting it," Krohn added. "I feel like this is my mission and my calling now."

Likewise, Singleton joined the Freedom Flag Foundation board as one way to honor the first responders and civilians who were killed on 9/11.

Singleton, a retired New York City firefighter, rushed to the World Trade Center after hearing a news report about a plane hitting the north tower. The south tower had already collapsed by the time he made it down to Ground Zero, where he and other emergency personnel assisted victims and tried to put out multiple fires.

Singleton was injured trying to flee the area when the north tower fell, suffering a dislocated shoulder after being knocked off his feet by a tremendous rush of wind, but he somehow managed to escape with his life.

More than 400 first responders – including 343 firefighters -- were not so fortunate.

"I don't believe we truly die until we stop being remembered," Singleton said. "I'm hoping we never forget ... it's important that we keep their memory alive."



Teacher Tara Krohn reads her book, "Unfurling the Freedom Flag: A 9/11 Story," to students at Woolridge Elementary School.

← [Previous](#)

[2022 Community Facilities Bond Plan:
Libraries and Parks](#)

[Next](#) ⇒

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Schools](#)

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