



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: Stafford County, Virginia

Program Title: Mascot Provides Link to Unify Stafford County's Services, Communications and Identity

Program Category: Communications

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Donna Krauss

Title: Deputy County Administrator

Signature: Donna S. Krauss

Title: Mascot Provides Link to Unify Stafford County's Services, Communications and Identity

Executive Summary

Stafford County, Virginia, sought to unify and enhance its efforts at providing information to residents. People would call or email and get passed around to different employees before finding the right person. The Community Engagement Department decided a chatbot on the website would be a good first point of reference for residents. In this process, they devised a mascot to represent the chatbot and realized it could encompass many other things and become a brand for the County. When folks see Blu, they know they will get answers. Using this character is innovative and easily replicated by other localities.

Blu is a great blue heron like the many herons found in the waters around Stafford. Once Blu was created, staff quickly created Blu's backstory of growing up in the County and his deep knowledge from being a native Staffordian.

Blu became the point person on the AskBlu app which operates like a chatbot. Blu became the purveyor of "Blu's News," the County's monthly newsletter with repeats of stories and press releases. Blu was used to brand the texting feature where residents can text questions. Blu also became the namesake of Stafford's citizen's academy, an online educational program.

The biggest costs associated with Blu are \$25,000 for the virtual chat feature for the website and the AskBlu app, and the \$18,000 for Text Blu. All other costs were staff time.

One of the biggest successes of the initiative has been declining phone calls to departments. Blu now answers eight out of 10 questions. Sign-ups for the newsletter have increased and the response to Blu's Academy was very positive. Overview of the Program

Stafford County, Virginia, created a chat mascot, Blu the Great Blue Heron, that quickly morphed into an umbrella for branding and multiple service options. Before Blu, residents submit questions by calling 311 from a landline, dialing Stafford's main information line, or tracking down the email for the correct staff person. Stafford decided to add a chat option to its website hosted by Blu the heron, a bird found among the many bodies of water in and around the county. Staff realized that Blu's persona was more than a mascot. It was an umbrella concept for other efforts at making information more quickly available to residents: a monthly newsletter, Blu's News; Blu's Academy, an online citizen class for learning about government; an online request system; an app; coloring pages for kids; and even a texting feature. There are endless possibilities for using Blu to assist the public better. The goal is to ensure that when people see Blu, they know they can ask Blu anything and get assistance.

The Problem or Need for the Program

The primary way for citizens to request information or have questions answered was by calling Stafford's 311 line, which is only available to persons using a landline within the county, by calling the main information number or by email. Inevitably, residents would contact the wrong person and get passed from one staff member to another, frustrating the resident and staff. With the continuing decline of media outlets in the area, Stafford needed to become its news outlet and find an identifiable way for people to recognize a trusted source of information.

Description of the Program

AskBlu is an umbrella concept for many information offerings to Stafford's residents. Stafford created a brand and a logo – Blu the Great Blue Heron. Blu has [an origin story](#), complete with a video introducing Blu as Stafford's new virtual ambassador. A few months before the program's debut, Stafford posted "coming soon" information for people to expect Blu – to create buzz and awareness. Once staff made the heron's "story," the ideas quickly started flowing for all the ways Blu could be utilized to tell Stafford's story better.

Blu and his offerings quickly became identifiable as a source of reliable and official information to the public. Staff members also integrated Blu immediately as shorthand for communication efforts and projects. Blu essentially unified the many Stafford communications efforts into one readily identifiable system.

The components of the program include

1. **A virtual chat feature on Stafford's website** - Staff worked with departments to list top questions and answers, allowing the chat to direct residents. If Blu cannot find a solution for a resident, the asker is directed to the correct staff member and department.
2. **The AskBlu App** – The app is a mobile form of Stafford's website, but it also allows users to track requests and upload submissions.
3. **Blu's News** – Stafford planned to launch a community newsletter but struggled with a concept and design for the newsletter. After the creation of Blu, staff quickly reimagined

a monthly Blu-branded newsletter with repeats of stories and press releases already being put out.

4. **Text Blu** – You can text Blu on any mobile device, and Blu will respond in seconds.
5. **Blu's Academy** – Stafford had an in-person Citizen's Academy before COVID. Originally a multi-evening class culminating in graduation, its appeal had waned. Stafford has a large population of families with busy schedules, and it's a commuter area. People no longer have as much discretionary time to take evening classes. The class was reimagined into Blu's Academy and became an online class with videos about the activities of each of Stafford's departments. Upon completion of the viewing of the videos, class members were invited to take an online test to become "graduates." The one thing retained from the old system is an in-person "graduation" complete with refreshments and Blu-branded giveaways. The class is held quarterly.

Plans call for Blu-branded apparel for staff for events so people can quickly identify the "helper" people, Blu-branded items for the public for National Night Out with links to the mobile app and website, and much more.

Expanding and Advancing Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

Staff members could not agree if Blu were male or female. Then they realized Blu did not have to be identified as either since male and female blue herons look identical. Blu appeals to everyone no matter how they identify, and Blu's reach is meant to include the rich diversity of Stafford's residents.

The Cost of the Program

1. **A virtual chat feature on Stafford's website** – \$25,000 from GoGov
2. **The AskBlu App** – included in the \$25,000 above
3. **Blu's News** – There was no additional cost for Blu's News. Staff regularly disseminates press releases and stories. The text was repurposed into a template branded with Blu in an already used email service – MailChimp.
4. **Text Blu** – \$18,000 from CitiBot
5. **Blu's Academy** – Stafford has a videographer on staff, so she created the videos at no additional cost. The website administrator created an online test form at no extra cost. The only cost will be the cost for the refreshments and graduation items, with a budget of around \$500.

A locality could do something other than the more expensive aspects of AskBlu initially.

Identifying and making your communications mechanism visible is a significant first step, and other ideas can be phased in.

The Results/Success of the Program

One of the most successful results has been declining phone calls to departments. It is estimated that Blu now answers eight out of 10 questions before being sent to a representative, and the number of those who have downloaded the app is rising daily. These are all questions now being asked in an unavailable way. The email sign-ups for the newsletter have increased by 10% since it launched. On the first day the online Blu's Academy was launched to the public, eight people signed up – more than our last in-person class of the

Citizen’s Academy. By the end of the day, one resident had already watched all the videos and completed the online test.

Fulfilling the Awards Criteria

COVID showed everyone that government and businesses needed to be able to operate entirely online if need be. It also taught us to be more imaginative and innovative in delivering services. Digital and online offerings are more cost-efficient as well. Stafford examined its communications methods and pivoted to fit better how people prefer to receive information these days. The old days of “going down to city hall” between 9:00 a.m. and 5:00 a.m. no longer meet the needs of modern residents. Stafford identified a simple problem – getting people to the correct information – and created a new system easily identifiable to its residents. Stafford could have just put a chat system in place, created an app, and sent out a newsletter – under three different banners, but it would have been disjointed. Identifying its various offerings under one common umbrella or program solved the problem of leading folks to the official information from a trusted source – a precious thing in a world overloaded with too much information, much of it untrustworthy. Stafford was innovative in creating a memorable brand and mascot that can be used across different media.

Supplemental Materials

[AboutBlu](#)

[Blu’s News](#)

[TextBlu](#)

[Download Blu](#)

[Blu's Academy](#)

The AskBlu chat is featured on the bottom right of Stafford's [website home page](#).