



## SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2024.** 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

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

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

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

# Library and Police Partnership: Read with a Copy Story Time

2024 VACo Achievement Award Submission – Chesterfield Public Library

## Executive Summary

While Americans generally have a high level of trust in their local police departments, tension has grown since 2020, when George Floyd died at the hands of police in Minnesota. Both media coverage and the increase in violent crimes across the country have contributed to an elevated mistrust of police, even when localities have a long-standing history of solid relationships between police and the public. Chesterfield Public Library saw an opportunity to help bolster the relationship of Chesterfield County Police Department (CCPD) and county residents by offering Read with a Cop story time. The partnership demonstrates strong intergovernmental cooperation and coordination in addressing shared problems and encourages community conversations with police officers. The program has grown to other library locations and continues to make a positive impact with residents across the county.

## Problem/Challenge

Violent crimes in Chesterfield County increased by 7% in 2021 and by 24% in 2022. News media spotlighted the dichotomous opinions and strained relationships between police and local communities on regional and national levels. Chesterfield County was not immune to these tensions. Positive police interactions that had taken place regularly before the COVID pandemic in 2020, such as Success Through Education and Police Partnerships (STEPP), were put on pause while the country was on lockdown and students were learning from home rather than in schools. Chesterfield County Public Schools reopened to in-person learning gradually, starting near the end of 2020, and personal interactions were adjusted to fit protocol issued by the Centers for Disease

Control and Prevention. Programs were reintroduced to a different world with different parameters, experiences and mindsets than existed pre-COVID.

During the pandemic, Chesterfield Public Library introduced measures like curbside pickup to ensure the safety of citizens while providing uninterrupted access to library materials. These measures resulted in a centralized information line call center being established for the library. The information line was housed at Enon Library and eliminated indoor space for programs or events at that location, as the space was transformed for staff to answer phone calls. Enon Library customers were disappointed to learn no programs could be offered at Enon once the library was reopened for in-person services. Story time was the most requested program, as many parents who had experienced story time at Enon Library as children now wanted to bring their children in for a similar experience. Although Enon Library's concerns looked very different than the aforementioned tensions between police and county residents, the library and CCPD worked together to find a solution to both.

## Description of the Program

Read with a Cop story time was developed by Enon librarians and CCPD Community Engagement Officer, Timothy Morton, with several objectives. First, by partnering together, the library and CCPD wanted to give county residents a positive experience with county police. Secondly, residents should understand better what police do and feel more comfortable with police. Lastly, Enon Library customers would have access to story time at their local library and children would learn more about safety.

Development of the program happened organically as Library Regional Manager, Jessica Gonzalez, and Officer Morton discussed the problems each were facing. Creating details, marketing and delivering the first Read with a Cop story time took a couple months. Subsequent Read with a Cop events take less time to plan and advertise, as the program has been running since 2021 and each

event follows a similar rubric. Hard copy marketing materials are designed and printed quickly. Library staff also promote Read with a Cop by word of mouth and social media.

Enon Library is a quaint 4,100 sq. ft. library tucked in a neighborhood and surrounded by trees. It has a spacious parking lot and grassy lawn that lends itself to an outdoor, interactive Read with a Cop story time experience. During the first story time event, Officer Morton read two books, highlighting safety tips throughout each story, as they were applicable. Children then got to explore, touch and try on the equipment supplied by Officer Morton that is also worn by officers while on duty, such as body cameras and utility belts. Children learned about the 911 operator job and how to call 911 for a life-or-death emergency. Police officers answered questions for children and children were candid and straightforward in their curiosity. For example, one child asked, "Would you hurt me if I got in trouble?" Exchanges like this enable police to dispel myths and urban legends that have perpetuated in recent years.

As the program continued to grow in popularity, it also grew in substance and reach. Officers from CCPD took turns reading for story time and brought various types of show-and-tell, from a boat used for search-and-rescue efforts to Magic, one of the CCPD canines. Pages for participants to color are developed to correspond with each story time. Police officers incorporate seasonal or holiday information into books read at those times, such as the trick-or-treating safety tips given by officers around Halloween. Chesterfield Public Library introduced Read with a Cop at two other library locations, and the partnership remains successful and ongoing. Some customers enjoy the program so much that they return for future events; however, at least half of program attendees each time are having their first experience with Read with a Cop, proving the partnership between the library and CCPD is affecting a growing audience.

Chesterfield County has a population of more than 385,000 across 424 square miles that include acres of rural farmland and miles of urban development that is often considered an extension of the

city of Richmond. Chesterfield County is the largest locality in the Richmond, Virginia Metropolitan Statistical Area, accounting for over a quarter of the MSA population, and is the fourth largest county in Virginia. Roughly a quarter of the county's population is under 18 years old. Story time at the library is designed for pre-K children and their caregivers. Costs of the Read with a Copy story time program have been minimal. Printed promotional materials and coloring sheets used during story time are negligible and fold into the established operating budget for the library. The program is consistently well attended. Each library location can accommodate different amounts of people for each event, ranging from 20 to nearly 60 attendees, depending on space constraints.

The Read with a Cop story time succeeded in meeting all of its objectives. It regularly engages the community in positive exchanges with the police department and continues to foster the relationships it creates. The program has given citizens firsthand knowledge of equipment and vehicles used by CCPD. Read with a Cop at Enon Library, in particular, brings a beloved program back to the community who very much wanted it.

## Collaboration: A Model for Localities

Read with a Cop story time promotes intergovernmental cooperation and coordination in addressing shared problems, namely, tensions between citizens and police as well as utilization of the library. By encouraging citizens to utilize their library and engage in conversations with their community police department, the program enhances the level of citizen participation in, or the understanding of, government programs. The collaboration that began in Enon Library served as a template for other library locations and remains a model for other counties that might be interested, as well.

Supplemental Materials

