

SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: July 1, 2025.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your 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: _____

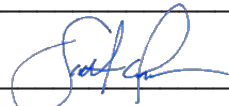
Telephone: _____ Website: _____

Email: _____

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: _____

Title: _____

Signature:  _____

Executive Summary

Chesterfield transformed how the public finds government information by developing a smarter, AI-powered search experience that eliminates silos, improves accuracy and makes accessing services seamless. Traditional site search only indexed website content, leaving out critical public information stored in external systems like Parks and Recreation programs, zoning cases and meeting agendas. This created frustrating dead ends, forcing users to search multiple platforms or give up entirely. To solve this, Chesterfield redesigned and re-engineered its search experience to work across multiple data sources, unifying government information into a single, intuitive interface. AI-generated responses now complement traditional search listings, ensuring users receive quick, accurate, and actionable results without needing to know where information is stored. By strategically integrating and structuring data across systems, this customized, AI-powered approach has made it easier for the public to find and interact with county services, improving digital accessibility and service delivery.

Problem, Challenge or Situation

Before implementing a smarter search experience, Chesterfield's out-of-the-box website search was severely limited, searching only the content within its sitemap while much of the county's most important public-facing information lived in external systems. This frustrated users who frequently searched for services—such as Parks and Recreation

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programs—only to receive no results because that content was housed elsewhere. Some departments duplicated content to compensate, but this led to fragmented, inconsistent information and hurt Search Engine Optimization (SEO) for global search platforms like Google. Chesterfield needed a centralized search solution that could seamlessly connect external data sources into a single, comprehensive experience without redundancy.

Search frustration extended beyond technical limitations—it was one of the top complaints from both constituents and county staff. The existing search tool lacked ranking controls, search rules or external integrations, leaving Chesterfield with no way to improve results. Compounding this, the website had become bloated with outdated content, making an already bad search function worse. The solution required a complete overhaul, both replacing the outdated search tool and addressing structural content issues.

Chesterfield also evaluated the growing trend of chatbots but found that maintaining a separate chatbot alongside site search created an inconsistent and redundant experience. A floating chatbot added unnecessary clutter, particularly on mobile devices, without solving the fundamental issue: search itself needed to be smarter. Instead of forcing users to navigate two search tools, Chesterfield prioritized a unified, omni-channel experience that indexes content across several major public-facing data sources, not just content on the website.

By leveraging AI-driven search technology, developing custom Application Programming Interfaces (APIs) and integrating external data sources, Chesterfield transformed search

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from a frustrating bottleneck into an effective self-service tool, improving access to information across multiple platforms.

Awards Criteria

Many local governments have turned to chatbots and AI tools to improve digital service delivery, but too often, these solutions overcomplicate the user experience. The result is an overload of floating buttons, overlays and redundant search interfaces that create confusion rather than clarity. Chesterfield took a different approach, focusing on a centralized, AI-powered search experience that combines AI-generated responses with traditional search results in a single, seamless interface. Additionally, custom search banners intelligently display for common, misdirected searches—such as road maintenance or school-related issues—guiding users to the appropriate agency, reducing frustration and improving multi-agency service access. This eliminates fragmented tools while delivering relevant, immediate answers without unnecessary complexity.

Before implementation, search analytics revealed high levels of frustration. Users frequently searched for services—such as Parks and Recreation events—only to find no results because the information lived in a separate system. Rather than forcing users to navigate multiple platforms, Chesterfield integrated key external data sources so search results became intuitive and comprehensive. Since launching, searches that return no results have plummeted, outlinking to third-party services has increased, and tens of thousands of AI-generated responses have helped users find information more efficiently.

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Rather than layering on new tools, Chesterfield improved search itself, making it smarter, more intuitive and more transparent. By integrating AI-generated responses with structured, weighted search rankings, the county has streamlined how users find information while reducing digital clutter. This unified search experience improves access to government services and sets a model for how AI can enhance usability without adding unnecessary complexity.

How the Program was Carried Out

After evaluating various search and chatbot solutions, Chesterfield selected Cludo as the framework for its new search due to its flexibility and ability to easily integrate into our website Content Management System (CMS). Cludo enabled us to develop customizable search rankings, AI-generated responses and the ability to integrate external data sources—none of which were possible with our previous out-of-the-box search tool. The goal was to create a more centralized and responsive search experience that provided both immediate AI-powered answers and traditional search listings, ensuring users could quickly find relevant information without navigating multiple systems.

The implementation was part of the Chesterfield.gov redesign and modernization project in 2024, led by the eGovernment Services team within the Information Systems Technology (IST) department. The Data and Analytics team, also within IST, managed structured data hosting, while the Application Development team engineered solutions to extract data from systems without open APIs. The initial phase focused on configuring the search engine to

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crawl the website and optimize result rankings. The team then prioritized integrating external data sources to eliminate content silos and improve information access.

The county first connected search to Municode (local ordinances), CivicClerk (meeting agendas and minutes) and ActiveNet (Parks and Recreation programs). A second phase introduced a dedicated Library search engine integrating their Communico system (library event listings). A key feature of this enhancement was the catalog hand-off, which allows users to enter a search term and instantly pass that query to the Library's book catalog system, delivering results without requiring a separate search.

Additionally, an integration into our custom-developed Active Development and Planning Cases application allows users to search zoning and development cases by entering a case number or project title and be taken directly to its details, reducing the complexity of accessing planning information.

Since launch, Chesterfield has continued refining and expanding search functionality, introducing canned AI responses for high-priority topics, ensuring key information is always presented correctly. AI-generated responses now include a feedback mechanism, creating a real-time improvement loop to refine search accuracy. The county also implemented AI response citations, allowing users to verify information sources and directly access official pages within generative AI responses.

By centralizing data from multiple systems, Chesterfield has eliminated fragmented search tools, improved transparency and made it easier for the community to find government services and resources.

Financing and Staffing

The implementation of AI-Enhanced Site Search required a one-time investment of approximately \$40,000, with an ongoing annual cost of around \$20,000 for maintenance and service. Additional purpose-built search engines, such as the Library engine, incur an extra \$1,000 per year. While there are data hosting costs, these are managed internally and absorbed within existing infrastructure budgets. The primary operational cost beyond licensing is staff time for initial setup and tuning, though once optimized, the system largely maintains itself with minimal ongoing management.

Chesterfield was able to streamline procurement by leveraging a cooperative agreement to partner with Cludo, avoiding lengthy procurement processes. The project was funded through the county's general budget as part of a broader website modernization effort, with leadership recognizing the investment as a necessary step toward improving digital services.

For counties looking to replicate this project, the costs would be comparable, assuming internal IT resources are available. Chesterfield benefited from having dedicated data and analytics staff and application developers to build API connections and automate data retrieval, which eliminated the need for external development support. However, a county without these internal resources may need to budget for additional development or integration services.

Program Results

Improving site search presents a unique paradox—while a powerful search tool is valuable, the ultimate goal of a well-designed website is to be so intuitive that users don't need to search at all. However, local governments house hundreds of pages, thousands of events, and critical records across dozens of independent departments, making search an essential tool for helping users navigate a complex ecosystem of information.

Success is not just measured by search volume (high volume can indicate larger concerns like poor navigation), but by search quality. Since launching the new search experience, over 99% of searches now return results, compared to frequent dead ends in the past. The click-through rate is 42%, a major improvement over our Google search click-through rate of just 5%. But even a lower click-through rate can indicate success—our AI-generated responses often provide immediate answers, eliminating the need for extra clicks while still resolving user inquiries efficiently.

Since launch, Chesterfield has generated nearly 150,000 unique AI responses, averaging over 850 per day—a massive leap from our previous independent chatbot, which only saw about 100 interactions per day. The centralized search experience has significantly increased engagement with external resources, seamlessly connecting users with critical services across multiple platforms.

For example, the Active Development and Planning Cases application, launched alongside the new search experience, has seen steady and increasing engagement. This tool has

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generated over 26,000 pageviews and 63,000 unique interactions, averaging 270 interactions per day. The seamless integration of planning case information into search results has made zoning and development information more accessible, discoverable and user-friendly. AI-generated summaries simplify complex planning case details, linking directly to full records while improving transparency and community engagement.

The impact of these improvements is also seen in the absence of complaints. Previously, Chesterfield received weekly complaints about poor search results—since the launch of the new system, there have been none. Sometimes, the best measure of a great design is that it's invisible—it simply works.

Looking ahead, Chesterfield is leveraging this success to expand AI-powered search even further, exploring a specialized search engine for our Department of Social Services and other call-center-intensive departments to help users find eligibility information, service details and contact numbers more efficiently. The success of this project has demonstrated a controlled, practical application of AI in local government, laying the foundation for future innovations in digital service delivery.