



Virginia Association of Counties

ACHIEVEMENT AWARDS



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: Hanover County
Program Title: Celebrating a Century: Honoring Hanover County Centenarians
Program Category: Health & Human Services

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Bret Schardein
Title: Deputy County Administrator
Signature: Schardein, Bret

Digitally signed by Schardein, Bret
Date: 2025.06.26 10:12:37 -04'00'

Celebrating a Century: Honoring Hanover County Centenarians

Hanover County Annual Centenarian Celebration



Vision Statement: To honor and celebrate the extraordinary lives of Hanover County's centenarians by fostering a community rooted in respect, storytelling, and civic pride. By gathering to share their stories and experiences, we bridge generations, celebrate family traditions, and strengthen the spirit that unites our community.



Nomination for the 2025 Virginia Association of Counties Achievement Award | Hanover County
Department of Community Resources | July 1, 2025

Executive Summary:

The Hanover County Centenarian Celebration, now in its third year, is a signature program rooted in pride, dignity and storytelling. Held annually in May during Older Americans Month, the celebration brings together centenarians, their families, community leaders and partners to honor those who have reached the age of 100 or older. Hanover County sees this as more than a birthday; it is a civic milestone.

Each year, centenarians are invited to a special luncheon held in their honor, surrounded by loved ones and community leaders. Centenarians are often seated together, creating a warm environment that naturally encourages conversations and shared memories among the honorees. What makes this event exceptional is its personalization. Centenarians are invited to submit both childhood and recent photos, which are featured in a celebratory PowerPoint presentation, that showcases highlights from their lives well lived. Through answers shared on the event registration form and follow-up conversations, we reveal their “secrets to longevity,” life philosophies and cherished memories, adding warmth and character to each tribute. This heartwarming celebration is the centerpiece of the recognition and sets the tone for honoring these remarkable individuals. These personalized tributes culminate in a meaningful public recognition that affirms each centenarian’s lifelong contributions to family, community, and county.

In addition to the annual luncheon, each honoree receives a framed certificate signed by the Board of Supervisors Chair and County Administrator, along with a corsage or boutonniere. Members of the Board of Supervisors personally present the certificates to each centenarian and sit with them during the luncheon, sharing in their stories and celebrating their milestone firsthand.

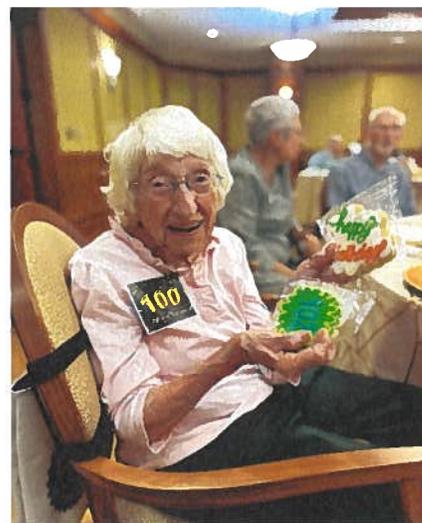
The event represents a powerful collaboration between local government and community partners on a local and federal level, serving as a model of compassionate civic engagement and age-friendly

community building. Furthermore, the event fosters intergenerational connections through storytelling, via the newly launched *Intergenerational Wisdom Project*, in partnership with Randolph-Macon College.

The Problem:

As a society, we often celebrate youth and progress while overlooking the wisdom and resilience of our oldest citizens. Reaching the age of 100 is a rare and remarkable milestone that deserves more than quiet admiration; it calls for meaningful recognition. Centenarians are deeply vulnerable to social isolation, which is linked to increased risks of depression, cognitive decline, and poor health outcomes (National Academies of Sciences, 2020). Public recognition enhances emotional well-being and reinforces Centenarians' value to the community, improving health outcomes (Thomas et al., 2021). The World Health Organization (2021) also stresses the importance of combating ageism through inclusive, community-based efforts.

A powerful example of health outcomes comes from Marie S., a centenarian (pictured) whose daughter shared how much the Hanover County Centenarian Celebration means to her family. This year marked 101-year-old Marie's second celebration. Marie looked forward to the event with excitement, so much so that even during an unexpected hospitalization in April, she kept talking about her upcoming party with staff and insisted she needed to get better so that she wouldn't miss it. Sure enough, Marie attended the May celebration, radiant and full of smiles. Her family credits this event as a source of hope and motivation that directly influenced her recovery and well-being.



Hanover County, with an estimated population of 114,148 as of July 1, 2023, is experiencing a significant demographic shift. Approximately 19.7% of the county's residents—around 22,500 individuals—are aged 65 and over, reflecting a steady increase over the past two decades (census.gov). In alignment with this demographic change, the number of centenarians in Hanover County has also been increasing. According to Social Security Administration data, the county had 47 centenarians in 2023, 50 in 2024, and is projected to have 58 in 2025, marking a 6.4% increase from 2023 to 2024 and a 16% increase from 2024 to 2025. This growth underscores the importance of programs like the Centenarian Celebration, which not only honor these remarkable individuals but also highlight the county's commitment to supporting its aging population.

As the number of centenarians in Hanover continues to grow, the county faces a unique and timely opportunity to lead by example—ensuring these extraordinary residents are not only remembered but celebrated.

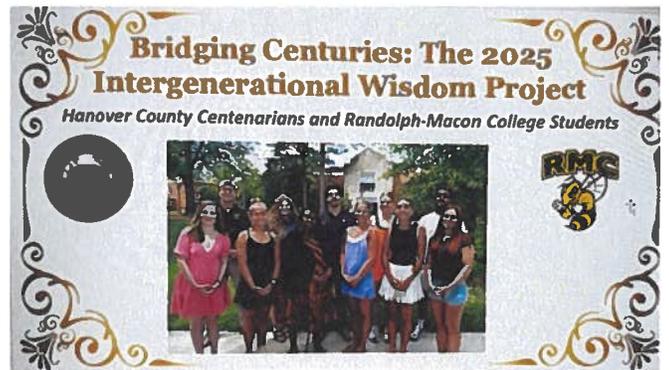
The Solution:

In response to these challenges, Hanover County launched the Centenarian Celebration in 2023, an annual event honoring residents who reach 100 years and beyond through personalized recognition and storytelling. Now three years strong, the event uplifts honorees with a catered lunch, framed certificates, floral gifts, and public tribute. The program also brings together centenarians from across the county, offering them a rare opportunity to meet and connect as a special cohort. As shared in the welcome remarks, *"These individuals haven't just witnessed history; they've helped shape it. Their lives are filled with stories of hard work, love, resilience, and wisdom. Age isn't just a number, it's a story."* A new partnership with a local college, planned in 2024 and launched in spring 2025, adds oral history interviews led by students. Supported by the Social Security Administration, local businesses, and volunteers, the program promotes dignity and inclusion. The initiative is strengthened by strong county

leadership commitment, which secures necessary resources and fosters community engagement. Its effectiveness rests on an innovative approach that gives centenarians a meaningful platform to be seen and celebrated, strong intergovernmental collaboration, and a replicable model that other local governments can adopt. The following sections highlight these key elements and demonstrate how Hanover's initiative serves as a model for other localities seeking to celebrate the rich lives of their oldest residents.

Representing Innovative Approach:

The Centenarian Celebration has evolved into a program unlike any other in the region, grounded in the powerful combination of storytelling and civic pride. By inviting Centenarians to share their life stories, wisdom and "secrets to longevity," the event not only honors their remarkable journeys, but also fosters a deep sense of community appreciation and respect for the county's oldest residents. This storytelling approach brings personal history to life, connecting attendees emotionally and reinforcing the county's pride in its diverse heritage and resilience.



Building on this foundation, in 2024, Hanover County added a powerful new dimension to the event: *The Intergenerational Wisdom Project*, which pairs Randolph-Macon College students with centenarians to conduct life story interviews and produce celebratory keepsake booklets. When Debbie Preston, Hanover County's Director of Community Resources and a gerontologist, envisioned expanding the Centenarian Celebration, she saw a unique opportunity in partnering with Randolph-Macon College (RMC), located in Hanover County. Although RMC does not offer a formal gerontology program, Debbie believed engaging local students could create a meaningful intergenerational connection, demonstrating that impactful initiatives don't require specialized aging programs to succeed.

Drawing on her expertise, Debbie developed *Bridging the Gap: The Intergenerational Wisdom Project*, a comprehensive guide preparing students to respectfully interview centenarians by emphasizing empathy, cultural sensitivity, and active listening. This guide was shared with Dr. Nthemba Mutua-Mambo, Associate Professor of Communication Studies at Randolph-Macon College, who integrated the project into her interviewing course syllabus. Dr. Mutua-Mambo worked alongside Hanover County Attorney Elena Hernandez to develop an interview plan that ensured legal protections, privacy, and responsible data handling.

The project also underwent an Institutional Review Board (IRB) review at Randolph-Macon College to ensure academic integrity and participant protections; only non-identifiable student reflections were used for research purposes, with no personal data collected from centenarians. This step not only reinforces the project's ethical rigor but also enhances its replicability for other academic-community partnerships. Dr. Mutua-Mambo has committed to continuing the project in future semesters, forming a sustainable partnership with the Department of Community Resources that will bring intergenerational learning to new student cohorts each year.

The project not only gave students hands-on experience with interviewing but also introduced them to the realities and richness of aging. Students conducted in-depth interviews with eight



centenarians from the 2024 celebration cohort, gathering insights about their lives, values, and lessons learned. The insights gained through these interviews became legacy stories, shared with families and at the celebration itself. Students worked in teams of two or three, engaging respectfully and attentively with

participants, many of whom expressed deep appreciation for the experience.

Student reflections highlight the profound impact of the interviews: One student shared that the project helped them feel more connected to their community and taught the value of listening to others' stories, calling the experience humbling and enlightening. Another was inspired by witnessing a centenarian living independently—still driving, attending church, and managing her own home—which reshaped their view on aging and encouraged them to reduce screen time and be more present in daily life. A third student described the interview as eye-opening, gaining a deeper understanding of aging as an accumulation of resilience and perspective shaped by historical events like the Great Depression, WWII, and the Civil Rights Movement. This experience transformed their perception of older adults, seeing them as rich sources of wisdom rather than simply “old.”

Together, these experiences demonstrate how the *Intergenerational Wisdom Project* fosters empathy, respect, and meaningful community connections, while offering a replicable model that other local governments and academic institutions can adopt to honor their oldest residents.

Promoting Intergovernmental Cooperation:

The Hanover County Centenarian Celebration is a shining example of community collaboration and shared commitment to honoring the county's oldest residents. At the heart of this success is a strong partnership among county departments, local organizations, businesses, and key state and federal agencies. Each May, the Hanover County Board of Supervisors formally recognizes Older Americans Month with an official proclamation, signaling the county's dedication to celebrating aging and reinforcing the significance of the Centenarian Celebration as a centerpiece of this observance.

Ensuring every eligible resident is honored requires thoughtful coordination. For the past three years, the Department of Community Resources has worked closely with Jackie Weisgarber, Public Affairs Specialist at the Social Security Administration (SSA). Because the SSA cannot share personal

information due to privacy policies, Hanover County provides Ms. Weisgarber with a list of county ZIP codes. The SSA then sends an official letter of support, attached to the Centenarian Celebration event flyer and registration form, directly to all centenarians residing within the county and their responsible parties. Utilizing the SSA as the trusted source reassures recipients that the invitation is genuine and encourages their participation. In addition to her behind-the-scenes support, Ms. Weisgarber attended the celebration in person, offering remarks, and representing the SSA's public commitment to honoring the lives and legacies of the region's oldest residents.

Integral to the event's success is the hands-on support of Hanover's Council on Aging members. These dedicated volunteers promote the celebration within their magisterial districts and assist with event setup, decorating, registration, and cleanup, ensuring the event runs smoothly and warmly welcomes each centenarian and their guests.

For the past two years (2024 and 2025), Covenant Woods Life Care Community has generously hosted the celebration, offering not only a beautiful and accessible venue at no cost but also broadcasting the program live to residents through their internal television channel. They provide a shuttle service to assist families, and their resident musical group, the Creaky Crooners, contributes lively entertainment—also at no cost. Meals are catered by Woodhouse Catering, Covenant Woods' on-site food service provider, ensuring convenience and quality.

Local business support further enhances the event experience. SignGypsy of Mechanicsville donates customized "Happy 100th Birthday" yard signs that include each centenarian's age, such as 101



or 103, and provides patriotic military branch yard signs for veteran honorees. These signs offer a joyful, tangible tribute and are often used by families for keepsake photographs and social media posts.

Although the event is by invitation only, Hanover County's Communications Department produces video content and written features on each centenarian, celebrating their unique stories. These materials are shared with local media outlets—who are also invited to attend—and are distributed through the county's "Here in Hanover" e-newsletter and social media platforms, amplifying public awareness and reinforcing community pride in its oldest residents.

The consistent involvement of local leaders, SSA representatives, community organizations, and private partners illustrates Hanover County's deeply rooted commitment to recognizing and celebrating its oldest citizens. The Hanover County Centenarian Celebration stands as a model of how intergovernmental cooperation and community spirit can converge to honor the lives and legacies of those who have shaped a century of progress. This well-coordinated, collaborative approach not only brings generations together but does so in a way that is both meaningful and replicable across other localities.

Program Cost:

The Hanover County Centenarian Celebration is an annual event honoring residents aged 100 and older, typically drawing 90 attendees including centenarians, their families, county leadership, and community partners. Now in its third year, the program is fully funded by county leadership at the request of the Department of Community Resources. This support has made the event a sustainable and heartfelt tradition. The cost structure below provides a practical, replicable model for other localities. While the core program is county-funded, minimal community sponsorships may be considered to help offset costs if needed.

Expense Category	Details & Cost
Catering	~90 attendees annually. Cost \$4,452.00 (plated brunch, dessert, sparkling cider toast, servers).
Event Supplies & Décor	\$738.47 total (one-time purchase) for reusable items: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 14 polyesters round tablecloths: \$265.85 • 14 lanterns: \$237.86 • LED Candles: \$87.96 • Table number holders: \$68.86 • Gold Centerpiece chargers: \$35.97 • 2 themed wall backdrops: \$27.98
Recognition Gifts (15 Centenarians)	\$1,129.70 total: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Flowers: 13 corsages & 2 boutonnieres- \$650.00 • 15 Frames: \$269.85 • 15 '100 Years of Awesome" tote bags: \$299.95
Disposable Tableware & Party Items	\$274.59 total: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Plates, cups, gold silverware in pre-rolled napkins for 90 place settings: \$214.65 • Gold/black kazoo: \$31.96 • Gift Bags for cookies: \$27.98
Total Estimated Cost	\$6,500-\$7,000 (some costs are one-time only). Future costs decrease due to reusable items.

Providing a Model for other Local Governments:

Hanover County's Centenarian Celebration is a scalable, replicable model for honoring older residents while building community and intergenerational connections. Its success stems from careful planning, genuine partnerships, and personalized recognition.

Steps to Replicate the Program:

- **Establish Budget & Date:** Set an event date and secure funding for catering, supplies, and recognition items.
- **Secure Venue & Partners:** Choose an accessible venue. Collaborate with local businesses and care communities for support services and gifts.
- **Coordinate Registration & Privacy:** Use a simple registration form with consent language for photos and interviews. Add engaging questions such as: *"What's your secret to longevity?"*, *"What's your favorite invention in your lifetime?"*, and *"What hobbies or passions have brought you joy?"* These responses can be highlighted during the event or shared in follow-up materials.

- **Engage Local Colleges:** Partner with faculty to offer student-led oral histories as a service-learning opportunity.
- **Work with SSA:** Coordinate with the Social Security Administration to distribute invitations respectfully and confidentially.
- **Recruit & Train Volunteers:** Assign roles for setup, greeting, photography, and cleanup.
- **Plan Catering & Program:** Choose a caterer, prepare certificates, floral gifts, and coordinate leadership remarks or entertainment.
- **Invite Leadership & Media:** Ensure County officials are involved and invite local media to share centenarian stories.
- **Host with Heart:** Celebrate with care—highlight each honoree and consider recording or live-streaming the event.
- **Evaluate & Follow Up:** Collect feedback and send thank-you notes to sustain engagement and improve annually.

Hanover County's celebration is a replicable model that blends careful planning with community heart. With adaptable steps and scalable costs, any locality can honor its centenarians in a meaningful and lasting way.

Results

The Hanover County Centenarian Celebration is more than just an event, it is a powerful, community-driven initiative that honors the extraordinary lives of our oldest citizens while fostering deep intergenerational connections. Since its inception, the program has celebrated centenarians with meaningful recognition, storytelling sessions, and opportunities for young people to engage directly with these living legacies through the *Intergenerational Wisdom Project*. This unique blend of celebration and education sets Hanover County apart, creating a rich experience that is both heartfelt and impactful.

Each centenarian in the county turning 100 or older receives a personal invitation to participate in the celebration, either directly or through a designated responsible party, depending on who receives the Social Security mailing. While not every invited individual chooses to participate, the program ensures no one is overlooked despite privacy and logistical challenges. The collaboration with local partners, including Randolph-Macon College, the Social Security Administration, local businesses, and the County Attorney—creates a seamless network that supports and enriches the event. The involvement of college students in interviewing centenarians not only preserves vital oral histories but also equips young adults with empathy, communication skills, and a deeper understanding of aging, which they might not have gained elsewhere.

What truly makes this program award-winning is its replicability. The Hanover County model offers a clear blueprint for other local governments seeking to honor their elderly residents while fostering intergenerational dialogue. By partnering with local educational institutions to create oral history projects, engaging community businesses for sponsorship, and navigating privacy issues thoughtfully with the help of the SSA, other counties can easily adopt and adapt this initiative. The program fosters a culture of respect and appreciation for older adults, encouraging youth involvement and creating stronger, more connected communities.

A particularly moving moment from the 2024 celebration illustrates this impact: two WWII veteran centenarians—one from the Navy, the other from the Army—were seen sitting together, quietly sharing stories of their service. As they conversed, Ruth, a fellow centenarian and former journalist during WWII, approached and began asking them questions about their experiences, instinctively slipping back into her reporter role. This spontaneous exchange, observed by



the Director of Community Resources, captured the essence of the event—connection, memory, and mutual respect spanning lifetimes.

Through this celebration, Hanover County not only preserves the rich histories and wisdom of its centenarians but also builds a legacy of inclusion and respect that will inspire generations to come. It is this lasting impact, combined with thoughtful innovation and community collaboration, that makes the Hanover County Centenarian Celebration a standout candidate for the Virginia Association of Counties Achievement Award.



Supplemental Information

To view a video from the 2024 Hanover County Centenarian Celebration, click on the following link:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YBfssnVdKro>

References

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