



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
Program Title: Inaugural Engage Hanover Citizens Academy
Program Category: Communications

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: John A. Budesky
Title: County Administrator
Signature: 

Program title: Inaugural Hanover Engage Hanover Citizens Academy



Executive Summary

Hanover County communicates with residents through a variety of channels, including social media, a weekly e-newsletter and a biannual print newsletter. These outreach efforts reflect the County's ongoing commitment to transparency and are supported by a highly engaged community, as seen in citizen input at Board of Supervisors meetings and the steady rise of social media followers and *Here in Hanover* e-newsletter subscribers.

Despite these efforts, misinformation and public skepticism about local government persist — often reflected in comments on County social media posts. It's clear that many residents lack a basic understanding of how their local government works.

To bridge this gap, Hanover County's Communications and Community Engagement team launched the inaugural [Engage Hanover Citizens Academy \(EHCA\)](#) in September 2024. The 10-session program offered participants a behind-the-scenes look at County operations through a series of interactive sessions, presentations and hands-on activities. Led by County staff at multiple locations across Hanover, sessions explored the roles and responsibilities of departments, community services and key facilities while showcasing each of the County's magisterial districts.

EHCA builds on the proven success of the Hanover County Sheriff's Office's long-running citizen academies, which have shown residents are eager to learn about County agencies. The 30-year-old Citizens Police Academy and the 15-year-old Senior Citizens Police Academy have educated hundreds of residents and inspired ongoing civic engagement through volunteer service with the Sheriff's Office.

The new EHCA is off to a promising start, receiving stellar feedback from its first class: 94% of participants rated the experience as "excellent," and the remaining 6% rated it "good."

Problem/Challenge

Hanover County government is dedicated to transparency, and the Communications and Community Engagement Team ensures residents stay informed through a range of channels, including social media, newsletters, news releases and public events.

Over the past year, engagement has continued to grow:

- The County's Facebook page has climbed to more than 17,700 followers.

- The *Here in Hanover* weekly e-newsletter has nearly 7,000 subscribers.
- *The Hanover Review*, a biannual print newsletter, is mailed to every household and business in the County.

Yet, despite these efforts, misinformation continues to circulate. This is often evident in inaccurate comments on County social media posts, suggesting a disconnect between the information provided and residents' understanding of how local government works.

The Engage Hanover Citizens Academy was developed not only to improve transparency but also to proactively educate residents about County departments, operations and services, and to open a direct line of communication for meaningful public feedback.

Program Description/Execution

The inaugural EHCA launched in September 2024 and concluded with a graduation ceremony in March 2025. Over the course of five months, more than 20 residents took part in 10 engaging, 2.5-hour evening sessions. Together, these sessions provided a comprehensive, hands-on introduction to Hanover County government.

Beginning with the welcome reception on opening night, participants were eager and enthusiastic to begin learning about their local government. That first evening featured remarks from the County Administrator, three Deputy County Administrators, and the Chair of the Board of Supervisors, who outlined their roles and set the stage for the sessions ahead.

Sessions took place at multiple locations across the County, allowing participants to explore Hanover's facilities and experience the diversity of its magisterial districts. Sites included the Sheriff's Office, Emergency Communications, the County Courthouse, Animal Protection and Shelter, a school, Atlee and Mechanicsville libraries, and the brand-new Montpelier Recreation Center and Library. Along the way, participants also met the six remaining Board members, who attended a session in their respective districts.

Throughout the program, department directors, constitutional officers, the county attorney and County staff shared insights into their day-to-day work through engaging presentations, activities and interactive tours. Participants learned about every aspect of local government, from public safety and public works to schools, finance, planning and community services.

Academy highlights included an interactive budgeting activity that illustrated the challenges of funding and prioritizing community services, as well as hands-only CPR instruction led by Fire-EMS. Participants also witnessed a powerful demonstration by the Sheriff's Office that recreated a high-risk traffic stop, offering a firsthand look at the dangers deputies face in the line of duty. And just weeks after a regional water crisis, the class toured the Public Utilities lab where water was tested to ensure it was safe before the boil water advisory was lifted.

Attendees shared their insights through session feedback forms and a comprehensive post-program survey, offering valuable suggestions that are already shaping plans for the second EHCA starting this fall.

The program concluded with a celebratory reception and graduation ceremony during a Board of Supervisors meeting, where participants were recognized with certificates.



Financing and Staffing

The four-member Communications and Community Engagement team planned and executed the entire EHCA program, including the sessions, two receptions and a graduation ceremony.

Director Kristin Smith Dunlop coordinated the overall program, including scheduling, speaker logistics, session locations, feedback forms and post-program evaluations.

The total program cost was \$1,610, which covered materials, including an Engage Hanover Citizens Academy cinch sack, a binder with Academy handouts, light refreshments for each session and reception, and branded shirts for all participants.

Program Results/Success

The first Engage Hanover Citizens Academy exceeded expectations — from the participants' enthusiasm and engagement throughout the program to the nearly full attendance at the final graduation event.

While at least two members of the class already served on County boards or committees, several others expressed interest in becoming more involved with local government as a direct result of the program. Though not easily measurable, many participants left the program as informal ambassadors for Hanover County government, likely to share their experience and knowledge with family and friends.

Feedback throughout the program was overwhelmingly positive. On post-session forms and the final EHCA evaluation, participants praised the program's structure and content.

Final survey highlights include:

- Overall program rating: 94% Excellent, 6% Good
- 88% enjoyed traveling to different County locations for sessions
- 88% would recommend EHCA to others

Suggestions for improvements included more live demonstrations, interactive activities and behind-the-scenes tours.

Here are some comments EHCA graduates shared about their experience:

- “One reason I attended the Academy was because I’d love to see more parks in the County. However, when I learned about Hanover's exemplary record of staying within its budget, I realized that while I’d love to see additional parks, they were not a higher priority than fiscal responsibility.”
- “I think there’s a lot to learn about the County. There were so many aspects of County government I had no idea even existed.”
- “The Sheriff’s Office did a wonderful job with their presentation. Sheriff Hines’ personal touch made it feel like he works for the citizens and not just in that position.”
- “My favorite part was learning about the water treatment and sewage facility. It was really interesting,”
- “Economic Development had a very informative presentation. I loved the extra goodies they handed out. Definitely don’t change anything here.”
- “Animal Protection had a wonderful presentation. I know that's one of the smallest departments in the county, and Chief Parker did a wonderful job.”

