



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: Prince William County
Program Title: Office Of Elections Open House
Program Category: Customer Service & Community Outreach

CONTACT INFORMATION

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SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Christopher J. Shorter
Title: County Executive
Signature: 



PWC Office of Elections Open House - A Model for Other Governments in Voter Education and Community Outreach Initiatives

Summary – Opening Doors, Winning Hearts & Minds

Prince William County's "sold out" Open House allowed hundreds of voters to get a firsthand view of the Office of Elections, demonstrated transparency and the effectiveness of voting processes, and garnered significant media attention across the region.

In August of 2024, the PWC Office of Elections opened its doors to the public for two full days to demonstrate five major election areas – voter registration, mail voting, election equipment, election officer training, and results reporting. Guests of the Open House toured through the Office of Elections to hear lectures, participate in hands-on activities, and ask open questions of elections' staff.

Nearly 300 reservation slots "sold out" in just a few days and the event had a large waiting list. Many requested the event be repeated and it will continue in 2025.

Individuals who attended included election officers, election skeptics, and voters with curiosity. They all came away with increased confidence in the voting system and a deeper understanding of how elections work.

Not only were participants impressed by the many layers of security in elections, but the act of demonstrating such transparency has value with the broader public.



Director of Elections Eric Olsen shows how the Office of Elections reports results on election night.



Attendees learn how election officers are trained and staff before each election.

A Battle Against Misinformation

Elections are facing a unique challenge across the nation. Narratives being pushed and amplified by established media outlets, coupled with wildfire-like spread of information and algorithm curation on social media have combined to provide an uphill battle for elections communications. Individual offices often do not have the same reach or resources as national new outlets, and do not create content that is frequent or tailored enough to break into individual users' social media feeds.

Creativity and Innovation

Holding an Open House creates a few profound effects:

- Allowing people in a generally secure space reduces the concerns of “skeptics” as they can see, touch, and understand things directly.
- Answering questions from participants provided non-scripted insights for participants who get to experience demonstrations of staff knowledge and expertise.
- Skepticism of processes based on the fear of “the other” is reduced when you directly meet and interact with staff.



Nearly 300 voters signed up for the Open House in just a few days and the waiting list exceeded 50 people.

Aside from providing public accessibility, the Open house program doesn't ask staff to do anything other than demonstrate their excellent work.

It simply provides an opportunity to explain that work to voters, election officers, and decision makers. Attendees participated directly by helping election staff report election results and assign election officers in mock exercises.

No limitations were placed on attendee participation other than making a reservation. In

addition to voters, the Virginia Commissioner of Elections, local elected officials, and the PWC County Manager attended the event. Finding out more about the election process was very beneficial for them.

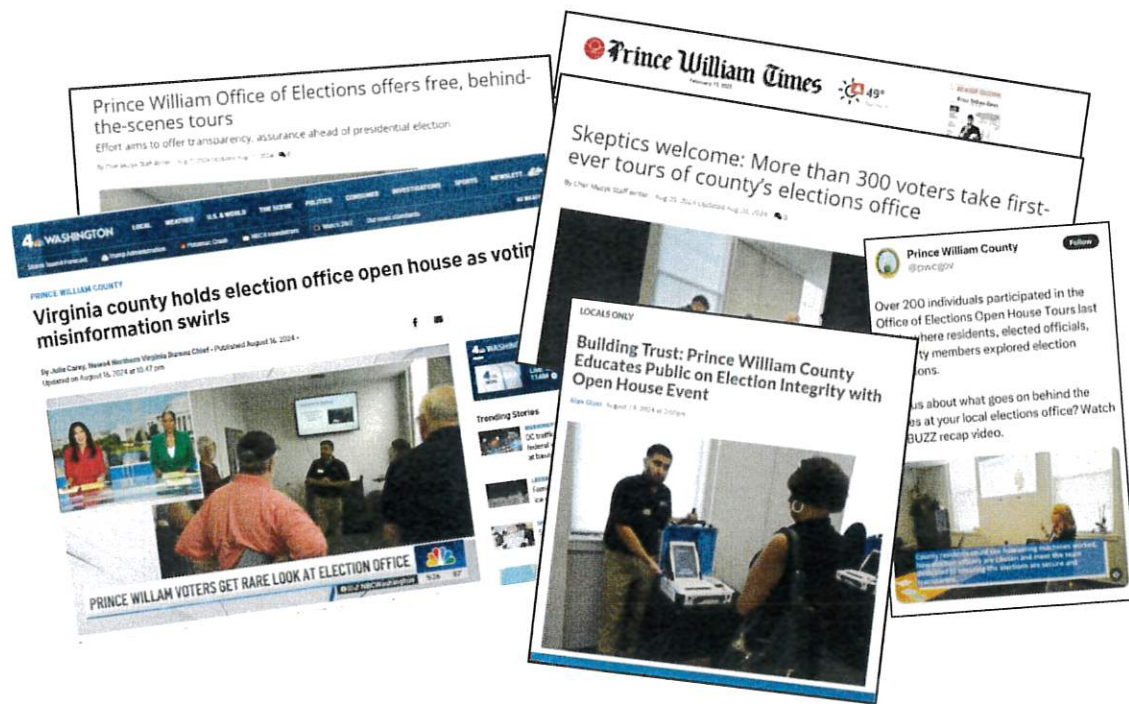
Collaboration

Our office collaborated both within other government agencies and local media to get word out about the Open House program. We garnered several stories in local and regional media including coverage from our county communications office, two articles in our local papers, and a nearly 3 minute segment on NBC4's 5pm regional news.

The Open House program was also replicated by neighboring Loudoun County earlier this spring, garnering state-wide media coverage for both counties, and spurring statewide interest among other Virginia offices of election looking to hold their own events.



Attendees included several elected leaders and decision makers.



Cost Effectiveness

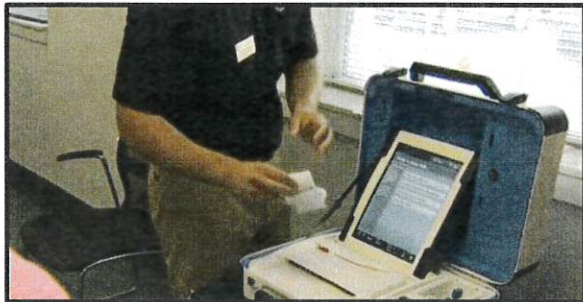
The program did not cost anything beyond the PWC Office of Elections' baseline budget, drawing on the existing employees, resources, equipment, and office space.

Regarding total time investment, here is a quick breakdown of the Open House:

- The Event Coordinator (1) took about 6-7 days to promote and coordinate the event.
- Presenters (5) needed 1 day of preparation and 2 days of presentation.
- Tour guides (8) worked for 1 day each to help manage tour groups.

In sum, that totals roughly 30 days of staff time (or the equivalent of one employee for 6 weeks), but that time investment could be scaled based on public demand, the number of Open House days, etc. With materials now prepared, future events will be even more cost/time effective.

Overall, the investment was well worth it as news broadcasts and articles covering the event will reach tens of thousands of voters in our region. Additionally, participants will share their experience with many others. While election offices cannot compete with the social media of individuals with millions of followers, they can connect directly with their own community and provide a personalized educational experience that social media cannot match.



Existing staff, election equipment, and A/V resources were used to complete the Open House, so no resource other than staff time was needed to complete the event.

A Replicable Model

The Open House program can easily be customized and replicated in any county and focus on the subject matter of that locality. Strong presentation skills and good relationships with local media would be the only specialized resources a locality would need to replicate this program. This program could be done by any office, individuals comfortable with public speaking and handling questions is an important qualification for those in the Presenter role.

For our staff, election equipment, mail voting, and results reporting were areas of particular concern, so those received more time and attention in this Open House.

Meets Category Requirements

The Open House was a voter education and communications program to educate the public. Participants had no restrictions other than signing up for a time slot. The subject matter dovetails with other voter education products built by the PWC Office Of Elections and the educational component represented a new strategic direction.

In 2022-2023, our Office and Board were getting many demands from election skeptics that were pulling attention and time from critical Office objectives. While the Board and Office heard and answered these concerns, it was clear spending excessive hours devoted to a small group of individuals (1) had little public benefit and (2) would not convince them of their own inaccurate assumptions and conclusions.

This was a strategic decision to shift away from the unreasonable concerns of the few towards the education of a broader audience of the public.

The idea for the Open House was launched with this in mind. The focus was clear – convincing extreme partisans at either end of the spectrum was not a cost-effective use of time. Focusing on a message to educate voters broadly and generate public attention to our excellent work bet both our mission and our Oath.

Outcomes for Voters/Election Officials

On the second day of the Open House, one attendee noted to our staff that her husband (an election skeptic) had attended the event the previous day. She noted he came home from the event feeling totally different and had no idea all the protocols and measures in place to ensure election accuracy. His outlook had changed.

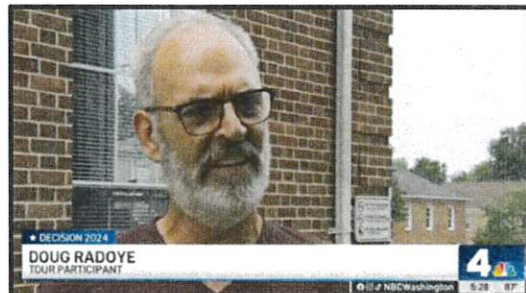
This was the premise of the Open House – if people learned and participated in all the steps that go into making elections accurate and fair in their community, it is almost impossible to be skeptical afterwards.

This program educates the public, improves the safety of our staff and election officers, and builds trust in our great democratic institutions.

Other election offices should replicate because tweets and news stories will come and go, but seeing and experiencing the process firsthand can be transformative for voters.



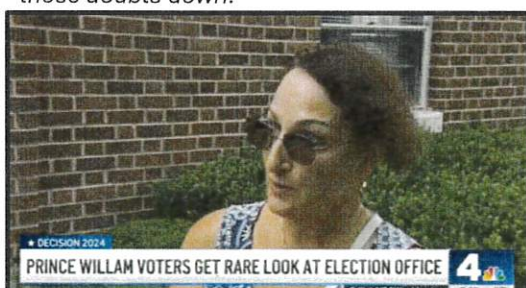
"I'm very confident... the elections are very secure."



"Yes, you do have doubts... but after seeing this process... it's really calmed some of those doubts down."



"...a lot of the things you hear are just not accurate ... The way you can counteract that is to have good information."



"They have a lot of safeguards, a lot of double checks, triple checks."

More information and media coverage of this event can be found at the following links.

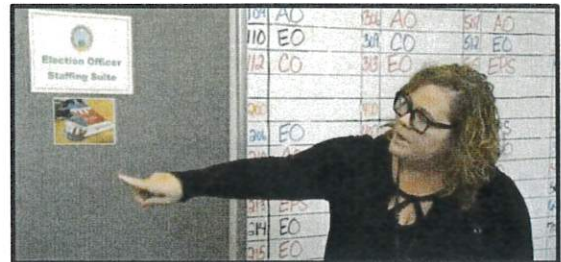
Resources

PWC Office of Elections Open House Weg Page:

<https://www.pwcvotes.org/open-house>

PWC Communications Office overview video:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IRoars5Lgdg>



Media Coverage

NBC4 Washington 2.5-minute primetime news story:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VIFfe_3Ntyk

Prince William Times Coverage of Event

https://www.princewilliamtimes.com/news/skeptics-welcome-more-than-300-voters-take-first-ever-tours-of-county-s-elections-office/article_0efeed3c-5eab-11ef-bc6a-776b444422f7.html

Potomac Local Coverage of Event

<https://www.potomaclocal.com/2024/08/19/building-trust-prince-william-county-educates-public-on-election-integrity-with-open-house-event/>

Prince William Times Announcement of Upcoming Open House

https://www.princewilliamtimes.com/news/prince-william-office-of-elections-offers-free-behind-the-scenes-tours/article_8f77fc12-54b3-11ef-82a9-87cf1ea2faf2.html