



## 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: Stafford

Program Title: Start on Success: Empowering Students Through Opportunity and Partnership

Program Category: Health and Human Services

### CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Shannon Eubanks

Title: Community Engagement Manager

Department: Community Engagement

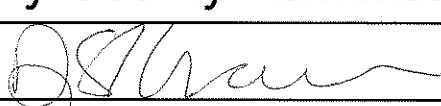
Telephone: 540-845-4106 Website: www.staffordcountyva.gov

Email: seubanks@staffordcountyva.gov

### SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Donna Krauss

Title: Deputy County Administrator

Signature: 

## **Title: Start on Success: Empowering Students Through Opportunity and Partnership**

### Executive Summary

For some students with disabilities, opportunities can feel out of reach. The Start on Success (SOS) program—a partnership between Stafford County Government and Stafford County Public Schools—helps bridge that gap. Designed for rising juniors and seniors with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), the initiative combines part-time government jobs with classroom instruction to build real-world skills and confidence. County employees mentor students through hands-on training tailored to their strengths. Now in its second year, the program has already led to successful employment for a student at Stafford’s Animal Shelter. With strong collaboration between schools and government, this model is both impactful and easily replicable. The Stafford SOS is part of a larger state-wide program with student outcomes including college, employment and military participation.

### The Problem

In Virginia, a student with an Individualized Education Program (IEP) is one who has been formally identified as having a disability that requires specialized instruction and support to meet their unique learning needs. These students often face barriers to accessing traditional career exploration experiences—such as internships and job fairs—which are typically geared toward the general student population. As a result, they are less likely to gain early exposure to career opportunities that can help them build confidence, develop workplace skills, and envision a path toward independence and self-sufficiency. In Stafford County Public Schools, 21% of students in 2024 qualified as Students with Disabilities under either a 504 Plan or an IEP,

underscoring the importance of tailored programs that prioritize inclusivity. Many of these students are overlooked or overwhelmed by conventional career readiness activities, limiting their awareness of the range of possibilities available to them. To address this gap, there was a clear need for hands-on, real-world work experiences designed with these students in mind—opportunities that recognize their strengths and help them succeed in the workplace. Equally important was the need for dedicated staff willing to invest in the success of these students by collaborating with schools and taking the initiative to learn how best to support them in professional settings.

### Program Implementation

Stafford County Government has partnered with Stafford County Public Schools on this innovative program for a three-year term. While many student internship initiatives focus on private-sector placements, Stafford's program is unique in offering students hands-on experience in public service. This not only introduces students to career paths in local government, but also emphasizes service, teamwork, and community impact.

Each year, a small cohort of students is selected through an interview process to ensure a good fit for the program and the work environment. Four students participated in the first year, with five in the second year. Due to the individualized attention and close supervision required to support students with disabilities, the program intentionally maintains a limited number of placements to ensure high-quality experiences. The priority is not volume, but providing the support and structure necessary for student success.

Students are given the opportunity to indicate their areas of interest, and program staff work closely with departments to match students to placements that align with their strengths and preferences. Each student is assigned an “in-department supervisor,” a staff member responsible for providing direct, day-to-day guidance. A backup supervisor is also designated to ensure continuity and support. Local government staff are well-suited for these roles, as they are service-oriented professionals accustomed to supporting diverse needs in the community.

Throughout the program, County staff collaborate with the Schools’ program director to learn how best to accommodate each student’s unique communication and work style. For example, some students may prefer written communication over verbal instructions or may need tasks broken into smaller steps. Once preferences and accommodations are identified, departments are able to adjust tasks and expectations accordingly.

The program runs during the spring semester, from January through May, with students working weekday afternoons from 1 to 4 p.m. At the end of the program, a graduation ceremony is held to celebrate the students’ accomplishments. This event offers them the chance to share their experiences, reflect on their growth, and be recognized for their contributions to Stafford County Government.

### Cost and Funding

There is no cost to Stafford County except for the time of the staff supervisors. County Government partnered with the schools to receive a grant from the Start on Success program. There is a peer support position that coordinates. That position is funded by the grant.

## Results and Impact

The results of the program have been deeply meaningful for both students and staff, demonstrating its value far beyond the initial goals. Last year, one student excelled so well in his internship at the Stafford County Animal Shelter that he was offered—and accepted—a part-time job after graduation. This tangible outcome speaks to the power of matching students with real responsibilities and the right environment to showcase their abilities.

This year, a student with a passion for graphic design was placed in the Utilities Department under the guidance of the Public Information Officer. She has already produced multiple graphics that have been featured on the County's official social media channels, giving her professional portfolio pieces and real-world validation of her skills.

Students have also shared powerful personal growth stories. One noted that the program helped him better understand his own character and how to work effectively in a team. Another shared that it significantly improved his handwriting, communication, and typing skills—small but essential progress that will serve him well in any workplace. Several students mentioned a boost in their confidence, thanks to being treated as capable contributors and having their efforts genuinely valued.

The impact on County staff has been equally important. Working closely with students of varying abilities has given employees a deeper understanding of how to effectively support diverse learners. What may initially appear as limitations are often easily addressed with simple accommodations and clearer communication. Through this experience, staff have learned to focus on potential, not perceived shortcomings. This shift in perspective is helping the County

build a more inclusive workplace culture and cast a wider, more thoughtful net when considering future hires.

### Innovation

While this program exists statewide, Stafford County's approach stands out as an innovative model—by pairing students with disabilities directly with local government departments, the program creates a unique synergy between public service and inclusive workforce development. Unlike traditional career readiness programs that place students in private-sector internships, this initiative leverages the strengths of government employees—people who are mission-driven, accustomed to serving a diverse population, and committed to making a difference in their community.

What makes the program truly innovative is its adaptability. Each student who participates brings their own individual strengths, preferences, and challenges. There is no one-size-fits-all placement. Instead, County staff are encouraged—and empowered—to reimagine workflows, adjust routines, and design tasks that align with each student's capabilities. Whether it's modifying communication methods, breaking assignments into manageable steps, or simply creating a welcoming and supportive environment, the program constantly evolves to meet students where they are.

This level of customization requires creative thinking, empathy, and flexibility—traits often found in public servants but rarely called upon in traditional internship models. By placing students in an environment that values service and inclusion, Stafford County has built a

program that not only prepares students for the future but also models what an equitable and innovative workplace can look like.