



SUBMISSION FORM

All submission forms must include the following information. Separate submission forms must be turned in for each eligible program. **Deadline: Friday, April 3, 2026.** Please include this submission form as the first page of your electronic entry. Contact [Gage Harter](#) with any questions.

PROGRAM INFORMATION

County: Wythe

Program Title: Wythe County Digital Communications

Program Category: Communications and Community Outreach

CONTACT INFORMATION

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2026 VACo Achievement Awards Program Submission

Program Title: Wythe County Digital Communications Improvements

County: Wythe

Category: Communications & Community Outreach

Program Overview

Wythe County is a rural Southwest Virginia community where communication is not one-size-fits-all. Residents live across a wide geographic area—from more populated corridors to remote hollows and ridge-top homes—where access to broadband, cell service, and even transportation can vary significantly.

In Wythe County, communication is not just about convenience. It is about access, safety, and trust. It is how residents learn about services, prepare for severe weather, follow local government decisions, and stay connected to their community.

Recognizing this, Wythe County undertook a comprehensive, County-led effort to modernize how it communicates with and serves its residents. This initiative was not limited to a single platform or tool. It redefined communication as an integrated system that connects digital access, emergency alerts, public meetings, and service delivery.

The effort included a full website redesign, expanded online services such as water bill payments and permitting, implementation of accessibility standards, a coordinated social media and emergency communications strategy, and upgrades to in-person and broadcast communication infrastructure.

This included the modernization of the Board of Supervisors meeting room with a new audiovisual system capable of supporting live-streamed meetings, recorded content, press conferences, and community



town halls. An FM transmitter was also implemented to improve accessibility for residents who may have hearing challenges or prefer to participate from their vehicles or nearby areas.

These improvements were not theoretical. Hurricane Helene and its recovery highlighted critical gaps in how Wythe County communicated with residents during rapidly changing conditions. That experience directly shaped the County's strategy, leading to a more coordinated, accessible, and resilient communication system designed to deliver timely information when it matters most.

Today, Wythe County's communications system reflects the realities of its community—accessible, flexible, resilient, and built to serve residents wherever they are.

The Challenge

Prior to this initiative, Wythe County's digital communication tools were fragmented, outdated, and increasingly misaligned with how residents expect to access information and services. Wythe County's size, terrain, and rural character present unique communication challenges. Residents access information in different ways, and not all have consistent internet or mobile connectivity.

The County's website lacked intuitive navigation, mobile responsiveness, and consistent organization, making it difficult for users to find critical information quickly. Many services required in-person visits or manual processes, creating inefficiencies for both residents and staff.

Accessibility was also a growing concern. With updated federal expectations for digital accessibility, the County needed to ensure its online content met WCAG standards to serve all users, including those with disabilities.



At the same time, communication across departments and platforms was inconsistent. Social media accounts varied in tone, frequency, and purpose, limiting their effectiveness as tools for public information and engagement.

Emergency communication further highlighted these challenges. In situations such as severe weather events or infrastructure disruptions, residents needed timely, accurate information delivered through multiple channels.

Residents increasingly expect government services to be accessible online, available 24/7, and easy to use. Wythe County faced a clear challenge: how to modernize its digital presence in a way that improves service delivery, ensures accessibility, and builds trust with the public.

Innovation

Wythe County approached this challenge not as a technology upgrade, but as a fundamental shift in how local government communicates and delivers services.

The County's website redesign introduced a user-centered approach to digital communication. Built on the CivicPlus platform, the new site prioritizes intuitive navigation, plain language, and mobile-first design. Content is structured around user needs rather than departmental silos, making it easier for residents to find information and complete tasks.

A key innovation was the integration of accessibility into every stage of development. The County implemented WCAG 2.1 Level AA standards across the website, including improved color contrast, structured headings, alternative text for images, and accessible document formatting. This ensures that all residents—regardless of ability—can access essential information and services.

The County expanded digital services by launching online water bill payments and online permitting.

These tools allow residents and businesses to access services on their own time, reducing barriers and improving efficiency.

Wythe County also implemented a coordinated social media strategy with a defined voice, consistent messaging, and clear protocols for routine updates and emergency communication. This ensures residents receive timely, accurate information across platforms.

Emergency alert systems, including Everbridge, were integrated into the County's broader communication framework, allowing for rapid notification during critical situations.

In addition to digital improvements, the County invested in physical communication infrastructure. The upgraded Board room audiovisual system supports live-streamed meetings, recorded sessions, press briefings, and community town halls. This enhances transparency and allows residents to engage with local government regardless of location.



The addition of an FM transmitter provides another layer of accessibility, allowing residents to listen to meetings and updates in real time from their vehicles or nearby areas—an important option in a rural community where transportation, comfort, or accessibility needs may limit in-person participation.

Together, these innovations create a layered digital ecosystem that ensures information is accessible, reliable, and adaptable.

Collaboration

The success of Wythe County's digital communications improvements was driven by strong internal coordination and strategic external partnerships.

County leadership provided clear direction and support, recognizing digital communication as a critical component of public service. The Public Information Office led the initiative, working closely with departments across the organization to align content, services, and communication practices.

Departments including Information Technology, Building Inspection, and Water and Wastewater played key roles in implementing online services such as permitting and bill payment systems. This cross-departmental collaboration ensured that digital tools were both functional and aligned with operational needs. Emergency Services and Dispatch played a key role in integrating alert systems and ensuring communication protocols aligned with the County's Emergency Operations Plan and covered gaps identified during Helene.

The Board of Supervisors supported investments in communication infrastructure, including the upgraded audiovisual system and FM transmitter, recognizing their importance for transparency and accessibility.

Externally, Wythe County partnered with CivicPlus to design and launch the new website, leveraging industry expertise to create a platform that meets modern standards for usability and accessibility.

The initiative also reflects ongoing engagement with the community. Resident feedback, common service requests, and observed communication gaps informed both the website structure and content strategy.

By bringing together leadership, staff, technology partners, and community input, Wythe County created a unified and sustainable approach to digital communication.

Implementation

Wythe County implemented its digital communications improvements through a phased, strategic process focused on long-term success.

The project began with a comprehensive assessment of existing digital assets, identifying gaps in usability, accessibility, and service delivery. From this foundation, the County developed a clear vision for a centralized, user-focused digital platform.

The website redesign process included content audits, restructuring of navigation, and development of standardized templates to ensure consistency across departments. Accessibility improvements were incorporated throughout, including training for staff on creating WCAG-compliant content.

Meanwhile, the County worked to expand online services. Online water bill payment functionality was introduced to provide residents with a convenient and secure payment option. Online permitting systems were implemented to streamline applications, reduce processing times, and improve transparency for applicants.

The County also formalized its social media strategy, establishing guidelines for tone, content, and account management. This ensured consistent messaging and strengthened the County's ability to communicate effectively during both routine operations and emergency situations.

At the same time, the County upgraded its Board room audiovisual system to support live streaming, recording, and flexible use for public meetings, press conferences, and community engagement events. The addition of an FM transmitter further expanded accessibility options.

Training and internal coordination were critical throughout implementation, ensuring that staff across departments could effectively manage and sustain the new systems.

Results

Wythe County's digital communications improvements have significantly enhanced how residents access information, interact with government, and receive services.

The redesigned website provides a centralized, easy-to-navigate platform that improves transparency and reduces frustration for users. Residents can now find information more quickly and access services without unnecessary barriers. Online payments and permitting increase convenience and reduce administrative burdens. These tools reduce in-person visits, streamline workflows, and provide greater flexibility for users.

The enhanced social media and emergency communications strategy improves the County's ability to deliver timely, consistent updates, particularly during emergencies.

Accessibility improvements ensure that all residents, including those with disabilities, can fully engage with the County's digital content. This commitment to inclusivity strengthens public trust and aligns with evolving federal standards.

The County's coordinated social media strategy has improved communication reach and effectiveness. Residents receive timely updates, clearer information, and more consistent messaging, particularly during emergencies and high-interest events.

Upgrades to the Board room audiovisual system have expanded access to public meetings and increased transparency. Residents can now watch, listen, or participate in meetings through multiple formats, including 4K video and FM broadcast.

Collectively, these improvements position Wythe County as a modern, responsive, and service-oriented local government. The initiative not only addresses current needs but establishes a scalable foundation for future digital enhancements.

Executive Summary

Wythe County's Digital Communications Improvements initiative represents a comprehensive, County-led effort to modernize how government communicates and delivers services to residents.

Serving a rural Southwest Virginia community with diverse communication needs, the County recognized that effective communication is essential to both daily operations and emergency response. The initiative included a full website redesign using the CivicPlus platform, implementation of WCAG 2.1 accessibility standards, and expansion of online services such as water bill payments and permitting.

The County expanded online service delivery by launching online water bill payments and online permitting, allowing residents and businesses to complete transactions conveniently and efficiently. In addition, Wythe County implemented a coordinated social media strategy to improve communication, enhance transparency, and provide timely updates to the public.

These improvements have increased accessibility, streamlined operations, and strengthened engagement between the County and its residents. The initiative demonstrates how rural local governments can leverage technology, collaboration, and strategic planning to deliver high-quality public service.

Wythe County's approach provides a scalable and replicable model for modernizing digital communications while maintaining a strong focus on accessibility, efficiency, and community connection.