



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: Launching Wythe County Emergency Services: A Regional Funding and Rural Response Model

Program Category: Criminal Justice and Public Safety

CONTACT INFORMATION

Name: Allyson Williams

Title: Public Information Officer

Department: Public Information


Telephone: 276-223-4522 Website: wytheco.org

Email: atwilliams@wytheco.org

SIGNATURE OF COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR OR DEPUTY/ASSISTANT COUNTY ADMINISTRATOR

Name: Stephen D. Bear

Title: County Administrator

Signature: 

2026 VACo Achievement Awards Program Submission

Program Title: Launching Wythe County Emergency Services: A Regional Funding and Rural Response Model

County: Wythe

Category: Criminal Justice and Public Safety

Program Overview

Wythe County is a rural Southwest Virginia community where distance matters. From interstate corridors to quiet back roads and remote hollows, emergency response is shaped by geography, travel time, and available personnel. For residents, access to emergency medical care has not always been consistent, particularly in areas where volunteer coverage has become more difficult to sustain.

Recognizing these challenges,

Wythe County made a deliberate

decision to establish a County-

led Emergency Services

Department. The goal was simple

but critical. Ensure that every

resident, regardless of location,

has access to timely, dependable emergency medical care.



Launching a new department required more than staffing ambulances. It required building a system that could support response, training, public education, and long-term sustainability.

Wythe County approached this effort with a focus on smart investment and community impact. A key component was leveraging funding from the Southwest Virginia Regional Improvement Commission, formed following the development of the Hard Rock Casino in Bristol. By using these regional funds to

support startup and operational costs, the County was able to build capacity without additional taxpayer burden.

Since launching in Spring 2024, Wythe County Emergency Services has expanded beyond response. The department has developed training and education programs, formed a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), and secured over half a million dollars in additional grant funding to strengthen equipment, workforce development, and community preparedness.

Today, Wythe County Emergency Services represents a shift toward a more reliable, coordinated, and community-centered approach to public safety. For residents, this means that a call for help is more likely to be answered quickly, regardless of where they live in the County.

The Challenge

Providing consistent emergency medical services in a rural locality presents ongoing challenges.

Wythe County covers a large geographic area with varied terrain and a significant amount of traffic along Interstate 77 and Interstate 81. Call volume continues to grow, while distances between response points can impact response times.

Historically, both EMS and fire protection coverage relied heavily on volunteer agencies. While these agencies have long served the community with dedication, changes in workforce availability, training requirements, and call demand have made it increasingly difficult to maintain consistent coverage across all areas of the County.



At the same time, communities expect and deserve reliable service. Residents should not have to question whether help will arrive in a timely manner based on where they live.

The County faced a difficult balance. Improve service reliability and response capability while remaining fiscally responsible and mindful of the tax burden on residents.

There was also a broader challenge. Public safety is not limited to emergency response. It includes preparedness, education, and community involvement. Wythe County recognized the need to build a system that supports all aspects of emergency services, not just the response itself.

Innovation

Wythe County's approach to building its Emergency Services Department focused on practical, sustainable solutions tailored to a rural community. At the center of this effort is a hybrid system that strengthens existing volunteer agencies rather than replacing them. The County combined a county-led EMS model with part-time paid fire staffing support, community training programs, and diversified funding sources to create a coordinated and sustainable emergency services system.

One of the most significant innovations was the use of regional gaming commission funding to support the development of the department. These funds, generated through economic activity tied to the Hard Rock Casino in Bristol, provided a unique opportunity to invest in public safety infrastructure without placing the full financial responsibility on local taxpayers.

This funding strategy allowed the County to move forward with establishing the department while maintaining fiscal balance.

Beyond funding, Wythe County expanded the role of emergency services to include education, fire protection, and community preparedness. Wythe County implemented a hybrid staffing model that supports volunteer fire departments with part-time paid personnel.



This approach helps ensure more consistent coverage, particularly during daytime hours, while preserving the role and identity of volunteer agencies.

The department launched an education and recruitment program that provides training opportunities for both responders and the public, including CPR, AED use, and basic emergency response skills.

The formation of a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) further strengthened this approach. CERT provides residents with the training and tools needed to assist during emergencies, building local capacity and resilience.

Since launch, the County has aggressively pursued grant funding to support growth and sustainability. To date, Wythe County Emergency Services has secured more than \$540,000 in competitive grants, including support for equipment, training, safety gear, and community programs.

This approach reflects a shift from a reactive model to a comprehensive system that includes response, training, prevention, and community engagement.

Collaboration

The development of Wythe County Emergency Services has been built on strong collaboration across multiple levels.

Within the County, leadership, staff, and emergency response partners worked together to design and implement the new department. Coordination with dispatch, fire departments, and existing EMS providers has been essential to maintaining continuity of service and strengthening overall response capability.



The Southwest Virginia Regional Improvement Commission played a critical role by providing funding that made the initial development of the department possible. This partnership demonstrates how regional economic development can directly support local public safety needs.

The County has also worked with state agencies, nonprofit partners, and grant programs to support training, equipment, and education initiatives.

Community members play an important role as well. Through programs like CERT and public training opportunities, residents are not only recipients of services but active participants in building a safer community.

Implementation

Wythe County implemented its Emergency Services Department through a phased approach focused on stability and growth.

The department launched in Spring 2024 with initial staffing, equipment, and operational structures in place to begin providing service. Early priorities included establishing reliable coverage, integrating with dispatch systems, and ensuring personnel were properly trained and equipped.

As the department became operational, the County expanded its focus to include training and education. Programs were developed to support both workforce recruitment and community preparedness, including CPR and emergency response training.

The County also established its CERT program, providing structured training for residents who want to assist during emergencies and support response efforts in their communities.

At the same time, Wythe County actively pursued grant funding to enhance capabilities. Grants have supported training programs, simulation equipment, and other resources that improve both responder readiness and public education.

This phased approach allowed the County to build a strong foundation while continuing to expand services and capabilities.

Results

Since its launch, Wythe County Emergency Services has improved the reliability and consistency of EMS coverage across the County, reduced reliance on mutual aid, and trained dozens of residents through CERT and our education program.

Residents now benefit from a more structured response system that helps ensure emergency medical care and fire protection is available when and where it is needed. The County's investment in staffing, equipment, and coordination has strengthened overall response capability.

The use of regional gaming funds has allowed the County to build this system and offset costs that otherwise would have fallen more heavily on local taxpayers.

Grant funding has further expanded the department's reach, supporting training, equipment, and program development. Education initiatives and the CERT program have increased community preparedness and engagement, helping residents play a more active role in emergency response.



Wythe County has also taken a strategic approach to equipment lifecycle management by repurposing or transferring surplus apparatus and equipment to neighboring agencies at reduced cost. This approach supports regional partners who may not have the resources to purchase new equipment, while



allowing the County to reinvest in updated resources and maintain long-term sustainability.

Wythe County Emergency Services is now more than a response agency. It is a comprehensive system that supports public safety through response, training, and community involvement.

This model is replicable for other rural localities because it does not rely on a single funding source or large tax increases. It combines regional funding, phased implementation, targeted staffing support for volunteers, and strategic use of grants. Each component can be adapted based on local needs and available resources.

This approach demonstrates how rural localities can strengthen emergency services by building on existing volunteer systems while adding targeted staffing, training, and funding support.

Executive Summary

Wythe County established a County-led Emergency Services Department to improve the reliability and consistency of emergency medical response in a rural and geographically diverse community.

Historically reliant on volunteer agencies, the County faced challenges related to staffing, response coverage, and increasing call volume. To address these issues, Wythe County developed a structured EMS system designed to provide dependable service across all areas of the County.

A key component of this effort was leveraging funding from the Southwest Virginia Regional Improvement Commission, created following the development of the Hard Rock Casino in Bristol. These funds helped offset startup and operational costs, reducing the burden on local taxpayers.

Since launching in Spring 2024, the department has expanded through additional grant funding, supporting equipment, training, and program development. Wythe County has also established an education and recruitment program and formed a Community Emergency Response Team (CERT) to strengthen community preparedness.

The result is a more reliable, coordinated, and sustainable emergency services system that improves public safety and community resilience.

Wythe County's approach demonstrates how rural localities can build modern emergency services systems and support existing volunteer agencies through innovative funding, phased implementation, and strong community engagement.