



## 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: York County  
Program Title: Herren Project Clubs  
Program Category: Health & Human Services

### CONTACT INFORMATION

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

Name: Susan Goodwin  
Title: Deputy County Administrator  
Signature:



## 2026 VACo Achievement Awards Submission

**Program:** Herren Project Clubs

**Category:** Health & Human Services

### **Executive Summary**

The York County Herren Project Club represents a collaborative, youth-centered response to early substance use, vaping, and mental health challenges among middle school students. State-level data and local law enforcement reports revealed that youth often begin experimenting with substances as early as age eleven and frequently underestimate the risks associated with over-the-counter medication misuse, vaping, and marijuana. In response, York County, the York/Poquoson Department of Social Services, and the Boys & Girls Club of the Virginia Peninsula partnered to implement a flexible, activity-driven prevention program anchored in relationship-building, meaningful conversations, and practical decision-making skills. Supported entirely by opioid settlement funds and operated within Yorktown Middle School, the program provides accessible weekly sessions that blend hands-on activities with structured discussions about substance use and wellness. In its first full year, the Herren Project Club demonstrated strong engagement and tangible student growth through a series of youth-led initiatives such as a revitalized garden project, independent event planning, peer outreach nights, and positive-message campaigns. These activities reflect the program's broader impact, empowering students to make healthy choices, strengthening peer connections, and fostering leadership in a supportive environment. The initiative also presents a replicable model for other localities having already inspired neighboring Poquoson to develop its own chapter, further demonstrating the program's effectiveness and adaptability.



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### **Abstract of the Program**

York County, the York/Poquoson Department of Social Services, and the Boys & Girls Club of the Virginia Peninsula partnered to bring the Herren Project Club—a nationally recognized, substance-free lifestyle program for youth—to middle school students in York County. The goal of this collaboration was to empower students to make healthy choices, strengthen their resilience, and build the knowledge necessary to avoid substance use. Through weekly after-school sessions focused on hands-on activities and open discussion, the Club worked toward several strategic aims:

- Reduce youth drug use and vaping
- Educate youth and parents on the dangers of drug use and vaping
- Promote healthy lifestyles, including skill-building and positive health choices
- Educate youth and parents on healthy lifestyle practices
- Promote youth self-empowerment, self-care, and self-esteem
- Educate youth on bullying, eating disorders, grief, abuse, depression, and anxiety
- Channel these skills to promote health and wellbeing

These goals shaped a program that fosters peer support, builds decision-making skills, and creates an environment where young people can talk openly about challenges that affect their well-being.



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### **The Problem or Need Addressed by the Program**

York County's efforts began in response to a growing need for early, meaningful prevention. Data from the Virginia Substance Abuse Prevention Block Grant Annual Report (2021–2022) revealed that youth begin experimenting with over-the-counter medications as early as age eleven, and that many do not fully understand the risks associated with vaping, marijuana, or medication misuse. These patterns are viewed as gateway behaviors that can lead to later opioid use, a concern reinforced by local law enforcement during presentations to the Historic Triangle Drug Prevention Coalition. The trends indicated that without early intervention, youth would continue to face increasing exposure to substances and mental health pressures without the necessary tools to navigate them. This program emerged as a direct response to these concerns.

### **Program Description / Implementation**

The collaborative effort to establish the Herren Project Club brought together county government, social services, and the Boys & Girls Club to design an accessible, supportive, and evidence-informed youth program. After exploring multiple approaches, the partners developed a structure that allowed the Boys & Girls Club to operate the program within Yorktown Middle School—making participation straightforward for students while creating a trusted and familiar environment.



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The Herren Project curriculum, founded by former NBA player Chris Herren, is facilitated by a Boys & Girls Club coordinator and is designed for groups ranging from five to fifty participants; York's program averages around twenty. Students are able to participate at no cost, and the curriculum includes twenty-seven activity-based lessons each year with optional additions, allowing flexibility to respond to emerging trends.

Activities such as baking, bracelet-making, games, and other creative projects provide a natural setting for important conversations about substance use, peer pressure, mental health, and healthy decision-making. A simple baking session, for example, once organically sparked an honest conversation about underage drinking among peers.

Throughout the program's first full year—completed on September 17, 2025—students were consistently encouraged to reflect on challenges, build confidence, and develop a foundation for long-term well-being. The program's success in York County has also influenced the neighboring City of Poquoson, which is now planning to implement its own chapter in the 2026–2027 school year.

### **Program Costs**

The program's funding model is intentionally structured to avoid creating new financial burdens for local taxpayers. York County supports the Herren Project Club through Direct



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Distribution funds from national opioid settlements, which must be used for substance abuse prevention and related initiatives. These funds cover curriculum materials, activity supplies, and a part-time program coordinator at the Boys & Girls Club. Because the Boys & Girls Club uses its existing space within Yorktown Middle School, there is no facility cost associated with the program.

A locality wishing to replicate the model can expect costs of roughly \$16,000. This includes the curriculum, supplies, and a \$9,500 appearance fee for Chris Herren to participate in a kickoff event. Not included in these costs are optional expenses for a dedicated part-time coordinator, a van for transportation to events, and a custom wrap for the van for additional program advertisement.

### **Program Results / Success**

The program's first year produced both measurable engagement and strong indications of student growth. Several student-led efforts demonstrated increased confidence, teamwork, and peer connection:

- Club Garden – Members revitalized empty raised beds into a shared garden space, building responsibility and pride through cooperative work.
- Christmas Party – Students independently planned and hosted a holiday celebration featuring food they prepared, crafts, and games, strengthening collaboration and creativity.
- Bring a Friend Paint Night – As a way to expand participation, members hosted a relaxed



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painting event, encouraging self-expression and introducing more peers to the program.

- Positive Message Outreach – Students staffed a table at a middle school basketball game, sharing positive messages and program information while encouraging new youth to join. Each of these activities reflected the program’s underlying philosophy: equip students with real-life experiences that reinforce healthy relationships, positive decision-making, and leadership in their school communities.

### **Innovation**

The program’s innovation lies in its creative use of existing community resources to overcome common challenges in youth prevention work. Constrained staffing levels in social services made it difficult to implement new programming internally, but the county’s partnership with the Boys & Girls Club offered an elegant solution: the Boys & Girls Club already had expertise in youth engagement and personnel to implement the program, and they leveraged their existing space and relationship with Yorktown Middle School to provide a meeting space for the Herren Project Club at no additional cost. By combining these strengths with opioid settlement funding received by York County, the County introduced a high-impact program without the need to use tax dollars or requiring additional staff.

The structure also allows the curriculum to shift with emerging drug trends and student needs, ensuring relevance year after year. This adaptive, collaborative, and fiscally responsible model has proven highly effective and accessible.