

Virginia Municipal League Announces Winners of the 2024 Innovation Awards in Local Government

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Contact: Director of Communications Robert Bullington, rbullington@vml.org

The Virginia Municipal League (VML) is pleased to announce the winners of its annual awards for excellence in local government. The statewide competition recognizes innovative problem-solving, excellence in management, citizen participation, and improved services to citizens.

Of this year's Innovation Awards, VML Executive Director Michelle Gowdy says: "Every year, the Innovation Awards entries remind me how much our local governments do for their communities. While all the projects detailed in the submissions are worthy of praise and admiration, in the end there can only be one winner in each category. I encourage all our localities to keep up the great work and I congratulate all the winners!"

One of the category winners will also receive the **President's Award for Innovation**. This additional award will be announced at the Awards Banquet on Sunday, Oct. 13 at the Marriott Virginia Beach Oceanfront during the [2024 VML Annual Conference](#)

The winners of the 2024 Innovation Awards are:

Category: COMMUNITY HEALTH

Winner: City of Chesapeake

Entry: Chesapeake Thrives: A Plan for Health and Well-Being

The Chesapeake Thrives Plan for Community Well-being was established to address city-wide and neighborhood-specific challenges. Thanks to Chesapeake Thrives, residents can call one phone number to get connected to resources in eight key areas: Aging in the Community, Behavioral Health, Early Childhood, Health, Housing, Poverty and Economic Support, School-Age Programs and Support, and Workforce Development.

This "no wrong door" referral service uses the city's Customer Contact Center to send referrals to Thrives Case Managers who connect the resident with resources available through the city's partnerships with the many agencies, non-profits, businesses, and faith-based organizations in Chesapeake that strive to help children, individuals, and families.

The work of the Chesapeake Thrives Plan was steered by an inter-agency working group, comprised of local subject matter experts with diverse experiences and perspectives from city agencies and non-profit organizations. Referred to as the Backbone Group, this working group established the values, goals, and objectives of the plan; articulated, and defined outcomes; and identified key themes and priority focus areas. The Chesapeake Commission on Health and Well-Being serves as the Steering Committee and governs the collective impact of the Chesapeake Thrives Plan and ensures that the benchmarks of the eight priority areas are being achieved.

Educational videos are [available here >](#).



Category: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT**Winner:** Town of Elkton**Entry:** Downtown Marketplace

For over 100 years, the property in downtown Elkton known as “Lawn Party Hill” served as the site of the town’s social activities. Thirty years ago, the Downtown Elkton Streetscape plan first proposed a pavilion and small park on the spot, but it wasn't until 2021 that the owners were willing to sell, and the town was able to purchase the property.

Now completed, the Elkton Downtown Marketplace serves as the epitome of a project built by the community, for the community. The construction of the project totaled around \$1 million which is no small task for a town of only 3,000 residents and where precious tax dollars are needed for infrastructure projects. Initial plans included earmarking \$400,000 in federal ARPA funds to go towards the project, which were matched with \$400,000 in local donations. The most meaningful donation came from the students at Elkton Elementary School who collected \$1112.02 in funds – no small task for a school of just under 300 students! Approximately \$200,000 in town funds from the sale of additional real estate owned by the town. By using various revenue streams, the construction was funded without relying on real estate or personal property taxes.

Today, the Elkton Downtown Marketplace is a handicapped accessible, all-encompassing, centrally located park serving as the town's social hub and a stimulus for economic development for its small businesses, farmers, musicians, and artisans. It features a pavilion for a farmers' market (launched in July), a performance stage, green space, and parking. The Marketplace has revived the tradition of Lawn Party Hill and will be the hub of Elkton's social activities and an important step in the town’s revitalization efforts.

View the [promotional video here >](#).

Category: ENVIRONMENTAL QUALITY**Winner:** Town of Leesburg**Entry:** Treesburg Project

Leesburg, like many growing localities, has not been immune to the detrimental effects of development on its tree canopy. It’s understandable then that many residents have expressed mixed, and sometimes largely negative, feelings about the development of land that was once vacant or greenspace into residential or commercial uses. “Treesburg” is a major town effort to restore Leesburg's tree canopy by planting and caring for thousands of new trees each year. The Treesburg initiative allows residents to plant a tree and record it using a geographic information system (GIS) map which shows its location and description as well as a photo that can be uploaded. Participants are being encouraged to update the listing for their tree each Arbor Day to track its growth.

Treesburg was the brainchild of the town's volunteer resident led Tree Commission with assistance and guidance from the town's urban forester. However, it would not have been a success without public enthusiasm. The Tree Commission distributed about 1,500 free tree native tree seedlings during the town's annual Flower & Garden Festival, which draws thousands of attendees over a weekend each April. The following week a free tree giveaway distributed 150 more. A local construction company and a girl scout troop volunteered to plant about 50 leftover trees from the giveaway.

The tree giveaway was incredibly popular, with many messages sent to town staff before and after the event asking if there were still any trees available. The public has enjoyed being able to take an active role in adding to the town's tree canopy, and the initiative has stayed popular since it began with more tree plantings planned for high school classes this fall.

Watch an informative video about the [Treesburg initiative here >](#).

Category: RISK MANAGEMENT

Winner: City of Bristol

Entry: Bristol Fire Department's Active Shooter/Stop the Bleed Program

The Bristol Fire Department's Active Shooter / Stop-the-Bleed program was developed to address the need for public safety personnel and school staff to be better prepared for an active shooter incident. To make the program possible, several Fire Department members completed Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training (ALERRT) and then became credentialed as Active Attack Integrated Response (AAIR) instructors. So far, the Fire Department personnel have helped train 120 new police recruits at the Southwest Virginia Criminal Justice Academy and 40 veteran dispatch personnel on the concepts of incident command, staging equipment, rescue-task-force (RTF), medical procedures, lifts/draggs/carries, wound packing, and tourniquet placement. The training is ongoing and will have a region-wide benefit.

Because the #1 cause of death after an assault is hemorrhaging, three members of the Bristol Fire Department have taught the Stop-the-Bleed program to Bristol Public School teachers. The Fire Department also conducted a fund-raising campaign for Stop-the-Bleed kits to be placed in all Bristol Public schools. As a result of the fund-raising campaign, the Fire Department was able to purchase approximately 120 kits for the schools at no cost to the taxpayers.

The Active Shooter/Stop-the-Bleed programs have also been taught to groups of citizens who may choose to help others who are injured in an accident or active shooter incident. It has also been offered at the Bristol Public Library and at local job fairs. By empowering individuals to be prepared to save lives, these programs are making a positive difference in the community.

Watch a news feature on the [Stop-the-Bleed kits here >](#).

Category: WORKING WITH YOUTH

Winner: Town of Hillsville

Entry: Youth Entrepreneurship Program

The Youth Entrepreneurship Program (YEP) at the Town of Hillsville Farmers Market harnesses the power of local resources to cultivate young entrepreneurial talent. In partnership with Virginia Tech's Carroll County Virginia Cooperative Extension, YEP provides students with a unique opportunity to engage directly with the community and its economic activities. By utilizing the farmers market as a hands-on learning environment, the program effectively connects youth with local agricultural producers, vendors, and consumers.

One of the key strengths of YEP is its ability to make efficient use of existing resources within the Hillsville community. Local farmers and business owners serve as mentors, offering valuable insights and guidance based on their extensive experience. This mentorship helps students develop practical, attainable business ideas that are tailored to the market's

needs and the region's agricultural strengths. The farmers market itself acts as a dynamic platform where young entrepreneurs can test and refine their business concepts in a supportive, real-world setting.

Furthermore, workshops and training sessions cover essential topics like business planning, marketing strategies, and financial management, equipping students with the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed. By capitalizing on the synergy between local knowledge, mentorship, and educational support, YEP empowers youth to create viable businesses that contribute to the local economy.

Through YEP, Hillsville is building a future generation of entrepreneurs who are deeply rooted in and dedicated to the growth of their local community.

Watch interviews with some [YEP participants here >](#).

Category: COMMUNICATIONS

Winner: City of Falls Church

Entry: East End Small Area Plan

In June of 2023, the City of Fall Church's adopted its final small area plan, the East End Small Area Plan, which included Eden Center, the largest Vietnamese commercial shopping center on the East Coast. Misinformation about the small area plan began to spread and prompted fears of gentrification and possible redevelopment. This fear of displacement and gentrification was rooted in local history. In the 1980s, Vietnamese owned businesses had been displaced due to rising rents linked to Metro construction in Arlington and many had relocated to Eden Center.

To overcome the misinformation, the city received input from local Vietnamese and Asian American non-profits, civic, and grassroots groups and collaborated with them throughout the process. To promote transparency, and connect with the community at Eden Center, the Falls Church Planning team hosted a series of four on-site pop ups at the Eden Center to "bring the plan to the people". The events were advertised not just through standard means but also through two local Vietnamese newspapers. All materials presented as part of community outreach efforts were in two languages (Vietnamese and English) and interpreters accompanied the Planning team. At the encouragement of the Vietnamese community, the city included a Vietnamese speaking outreach specialist in the FY2024 and FY2025 budgets. This position ensures that the city effectively and inclusively engages the Vietnamese speaking community at Eden Center – and beyond – in city processes.

The city also conducted door to door outreach to businesses with elders and civic leaders from the local non-profit, civic, and grassroots groups whose involvement in the whole process was a huge step towards equitable and effective engagement and communication. Feedback collected included widespread support for renaming Wilson Boulevard, the street that fronts Eden Center, to Saigon Boulevard. In 2024, the city kicked off the East End Small Area Plan with the honorary naming of Saigon Boulevard which generated enthusiasm for the whole project.

Ultimately, the city's decision to "bring the plan to the people" made what could have been a difficult process a fun and equitable project.

Watch city staff talk about the [outreach initiative here >](#).

**Category: PUBLIC SAFETY****Winner:** City of Roanoke**Entry:** Lock in Safety, Unlock Hope

Following several years marked by increasing gang related gun violence, the City of Roanoke increased its focus on policing, intervention, and prevention efforts in the community. Through this multi-pronged approach, “Lock in Safety, Unlock Hope” was born. The initiative utilized American Rescue Plan funding to purchase 10,000 gun locks to be distributed throughout the community. The locks are located at numerous convenient locations including all city libraries, the Police Department, the Department of Social Services, the courthouse, and are distributed by participating non-profit organizations. Locks are also distributed at any community event that the police department, sheriff’s department, social services, or the library has been invited to. The “no questions asked” policy has allowed many residents to access a lock without judgment.

To support the program, the city also created educational resources on gun safety including videos on the proper use of gun locks. The videos are conveniently located on the “Lock in Safety, Unlock Hope” website and are available through a QR code for easy access.

The City of Roanoke is already seeing the long-term quality of life effects for its citizens. Consider the following statistics:

- In the first quarter of 2024, compared to 2023, the City of Roanoke experienced a 75% decrease in the number of homicides and a 62% decrease in the number of aggravated assaults.
- In 2021 the city experienced 16 homicides by firearm, with 5 known offenders in the 11-25 age range and 7 of the victims in the 11-29 age range. In the first quarter of 2024, no juveniles were involved in or suspected of involvement in homicides.
- In 2021 of 51 aggravated assaults by firearm, the 14 known offenders were in the 11-25 age range, and 37 of the 62 victims were in the 11-29 age range. In the first quarter of 2024, no juveniles were involved in or suspected of involvement in aggravated assaults.

Watch a great [overview of the program here >](#).