

Citizen Engagement – Chesterfield County Government Citizens Academy

Citizen engagement is an integral part of good governance. It ensures that community members have contributed ideas and knowledge to the decision-making process, and that decision makers, whether elected leaders or appointed staff, are well informed. Chesterfield County is committed to citizen engagement, and one way that it demonstrates this commitment is through its Government Citizens Academy. This academy provides a hands-on learning opportunity for residents and is designed to enhance and grow the county's communication efforts and increase citizen engagement.

The academy is free and held twice a year, in the evenings in the spring and in the mornings in the fall. Citizens not only learn about their local government, but, most importantly, provide the county with important feedback and suggestions for improvement. Currently, the academies span nine weeks, and each session lasts two and a half hours, with a Saturday field trip included. They are scheduled in county and school facilities, among other sites across the county. More than 55 representatives from 35 departments and/or programs participate, including Board of Supervisors members, the county administrator, deputy county administrators, department directors and professional staff, and the school superintendent and staff. Their presentations and discussions with the participants raise the visibility of the broad range of services, programs and volunteer opportunities offered to Chesterfield County residents. Since its inception in 2017, more than 125 citizens graduated from these academies, which are planned and hosted by the department of Citizen Information and Resources, the Community Engagement and Volunteerism division. Graduation always includes recognition during a Board of Supervisors meeting.

As one graduate from this fall's academy commented, "The presentations have been outstanding, fascinating and inspiring. Chesterfield's personnel are the most consistently professional, knowledgeable, respectful and helpful people I have ever met. Please extend my gratitude to leaders and officials who support all the Citizen Academies. It is evident that they value citizen participation and input."

This fall the Senior Ambassador Program was also introduced, partnering with the Office of Aging & Disabilities Services, which was held directly after Government Citizens Academy sessions. The purpose was to provide information and resources to residents, ages 50+, or their family members or caregivers, in order for them to remain active, independent and vital contributors in their community. Many of the GCA members attended both sessions and there were participants who came just for the Senior Ambassador Program.

Another new academy, My Chesterfield Academy, began in June 2019 in partnership with the Asian & Latino Solidarity Alliance of Central Virginia, or ALSACV. This academy was designed to provide residents from multicultural communities the opportunity to explore how their local government works, learn how to resolve issues, and obtain government information and resources. as well as connect to other community resources. The program was the first of its kind in Virginia. The day-long sessions were held monthly, and were scheduled in county and school facilities, among other sites across the county.

A successful outcome resulting from each of the academies have been citizens that become ambassadors in the community. Equally important has been the interest of graduates serving on commissions and committees as well as becoming volunteers. Whether individuals are new to Chesterfield County or longtime residents, participation in the academies has been a win-win for all involved.

For more information about Chesterfield County's academies, please email ruthc@chesterfield.gov or call 804-768-7498.