

# 2022 SCAC Awards Program

This application is for:

J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award

**Project Title**

Partnership at the Polls

**County/Counties**

Charleston

**Staff Contact**

Shawn Smetana

**Job Title**

Innovation

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North Charleston, SC, 29405

**Please provide a summary of your entry (no more than 100 words) to be used in a handout for the awards competition and included in press releases/publications. You may either type the summary in the text box or upload it as an attachment below.**

Faced with the on-going challenge of poll worker staffing, the Charleston County Board of Elections and Voter Registration turned to the local community and the government workforce for a solution. The Adopt a Polling Location and Day for Democracy programs provide a blueprint for future success in upcoming elections. These initiatives are sustainable and can be replicated in other municipalities across South Carolina and the United States.

**Presentations may include more than one speaker; however, each speaker should be aware that the 10-minute time limit is strictly enforced. Please list the name, title, and e-mail address of each speaker:**

Name	Title	Email
Isaac Cramer	Director - Board of Elections and Voter Registration	ICramer@charlestoncounty.org

**Please check boxes for attachments you will submit as part of your application**

A concise Project Description to explain the purpose and significance of the entry (up to eight pages). Please follow the prescribed naming convention for your Project Description file.

Any additional materials needed to support your application (up to five pages).

J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award applications must include a letter of support from the county council chairperson or county chief administrative officer. Barrett Lawrimore Memorial Regional Cooperation Award applications must include letters of support from the council chairperson or chief administrative officer for EACH participating political subdivision.



# PARTNERSHIPS AT THE POLLS

Charleston County Board of Elections and Voter Registration  
South Carolina Association of Counties  
J. Mitchell Graham Memorial Award 2023



## PARTNERSHIPS AT THE POLLS

Across the United States, election officials are facing a shortage of poll workers. Poll workers have long served as the backbone of our democracy, allowing voters to cast their ballots with confidence. While election officials work behind the scenes to ensure our elections remain free and fair, poll workers are street-level bureaucrats, directly serving our voters and influencing the public's views on election legitimacy. However, according to a 2018 U.S. Election Assistance Commission report, nearly 70% of jurisdictions reported that recruiting a sufficient number of poll workers was either "difficult" or "very difficult."<sup>1</sup>

Charleston County has 99 polling locations, selected based on factors such as geography, population, and ADA adherence to maximize accessibility for all voters. Each polling location needs a clerk and several poll workers to assist voters in checking in, making selections, and casting their ballots. In accordance with South Carolina state law, we offer curbside voting for persons who are unable to walk into the polling location or stand in line, which requires at least two poll workers to support. If we were unable to recruit enough poll workers, polling locations would need to be closed and lines across the county could stretch on for hours.

Dwindling numbers of poll workers have been attributed to a wide swath of causes: an aging workforce, comparatively low wages, an increasing number of households relying on two incomes, disinformation about elections, and fear of harassment and threats. Given the multifaceted nature of these issues, targeting a sole cause would require significant resources with minimal return.

To address this issue, rather than swimming against the current by tackling large-scale societal problems, we implemented two programs in 2022 as part of our Partnerships at the Polls initiative: **Adopt A Polling Location** and **Day for Democracy**. The objective of these programs is to lay the foundation for fully staffed polling locations in Charleston County for decades to come while supporting the community and bolstering our workforce.

### ADOPT A POLLING LOCATION (APL)



An opportunity for nonpartisan organizations to "adopt" a polling location on Election Day. Each organization's staff serve as poll workers and the poll worker pay is donated directly to a local nonprofit of their choice. The organizations can establish themselves as a community presence, earn social capital, and promote their work. Charleston County benefits from locations that are fully staffed with professionals.

### DAY FOR DEMOCRACY (DFD)

Offers Charleston County employees the chance to serve their community on Election Day, earning poll worker pay in addition to their county pay. Through this program, our voters benefit from reliable staffing, professional service, and a reduced administrative burden. We are able to reinvest funds into our community, highlight Charleston County's dedication to public service, and build relationships among our workforce.



<sup>1</sup>U.S. Election Assistance Commission. (2018). *Election Administration and Voting Survey*. [bit.ly/3K5Isi6](https://bit.ly/3K5Isi6)

## **BENEFITS**

### **Sustaining Democracy**

In the view of the Board of Elections, all of the County's residents benefit from this project. We hold true to the belief that democracy is essential to the fabric of America. All government operates as an extension of the leaders we elect. Voters, non-voters by choice, non-voters by circumstance, no matter who you are, your life is touched by your elected officials. Without the support of poll workers, we could not possibly conduct elections that offered our county residents the same access to voting. We operate with a full-time staff of 19. The Board staff works to ensure that our elections are accurate and secure, but need poll workers to ensure that our elections are truly representative of the will of the people.

### **Community Investment**

In Charleston County, approximately two-thirds of our residents are registered voters. While those 270,000+ voters see the direct effects when they head to the polls, the entire county benefits from our programs. Organizations that participate in Adopt a Polling Location donate their earnings to local nonprofits, which support Charleston County residents on a daily basis. Pay for Day for Democracy workers goes to the staff who work in Charleston County, presenting an opportunity for the funds to be reinvested into the community.

### **Taxpayer Savings**

Recruiting independent poll workers is a time-intensive, difficult task. Poll workers are paid individually through the Charleston County payroll system. Each worker must be processed by our staff on the front end, gathering identification, I-9 documentation, and Social Security numbers. On the back end, we must verify that each worker attended training and worked a full day on Election Day before providing that documentation to the Human Resources department. The turnaround time for payment is 30 business days and, in the interim, our staff fields calls, emails, and visits from poll workers.

By reducing the number of independent poll workers needed, our staff will spend significantly less time processing workers for payroll. Previously, a polling location would have required our staff to process twelve workers individually. Now, with APL, our team can make a single payout to the designated nonprofit organization. Day for Democracy participants are Charleston County employees; no additional documentation needs to be collected to pay them for their participation.

## **ADDRESSING THE PROBLEM**

In the past, we have attempted to introduce a number of programs and initiatives to increase staffing rates at our polling locations. Outreach at local community events has focused on getting people interested in working the polls. On National Voter Registration Day in 2022, the South Carolina Stingrays donated tickets to support a raffle for people who signed up as poll workers, and Frothy Beard Brewing offered a limited edition draft in support of our mission. A local pizzeria provided 10% off to people who signed up to work. Charleston County Council supplemented poll worker pay to incentivize participation.

## PARTNERSHIPS AT THE POLLS

While some of these programs did help in the short term, it is difficult to definitively link them to a poll worker's participation. As responsible stewards of taxpayer funds, we are constantly evaluating the outcomes of our efforts in the face of the cost. With APL and DFD, we can directly see the impacts of each program. Rather than incentivizing submission of an interest form to work at a polling location, these programs encourage people to serve as poll workers on Election Day. Participation is linked to their status as a member of a group, whether it be County employees or employees of local organizations. Serving with other members of their groups can increase the likelihood of adherence to the program.

## METHODS

Our internal teams broke down the programs into smaller projects during the planning and implementation stages, allowing us to manage our own areas of expertise while collaborating to ensure we were allocating resources appropriately and staying on target.

### Coalition-Building



Day for Democracy would not have been possible without the support of Charleston County government leadership. Executive Director Isaac Cramer met with three groups of decision-makers: department heads, deputy county administrators, and the county administrator. Their buy-in was important: we needed them to allow their staff to participate on Election Day which, for them, is simply a Tuesday.

Coalition-building within the County government has always been essential to our work. The collaboration necessary for this project's success was predicated by years of cross-departmental support. By the time Executive Director Cramer met with county leadership, our executive team had already cultivated and maintained strong relationships with other departments. Our prior collaborations laid the foundation for the cooperative effort needed for Day for Democracy.

### Networking

As this program was piloted in 2022, networking was required to get the organizations to sign on. Executive Director Cramer met with leadership to pitch the program and, after Election Day, presented the organizations with their checks. The photographs and videos from these events were promoted on our social media channels and on our Adopt a Polling Location landing page.

Our long-standing partners, the South Carolina Stingrays, helped us to pilot this program for the 2022 Primaries. For the 2022 General Elections, we had support from five local organizations: Charleston Parks Conservancy, James Island Charter Wrestling Team, Charleston Promise Neighborhood, Lowcountry Food Bank, and the Exchange Club of Charleston.

## PARTNERSHIPS AT THE POLLS

### Marketing

To promote the programs, our Outreach team created logos, pamphlets, presentations, and flyers. Logos incorporated our branding colors along with star theming intended to invoke patriotic feelings commonly associated with elections and voting. Our Adopt a Polling Location logo, intended for external distribution, includes our CHS Votes logo.

For Adopt a Polling Location, a nine-page program overview guide and application were made available on the APL landing page of our website. A bifold brochure was created to promote the program's marketing viability. Following the election, each organization was presented with a check for its earnings and promoted on our social media channels.

A presentation for Day for Democracy was used to market the program to county leadership. Afterward, we promoted the program with a two-page flyer in the county's weekly internal newsletter, the County Courier, and offered sign-ups on our intranet homepage.

### Training

All poll workers are required to attend training within 30 days of the date of the election. Instructors scheduled training at the participating organizations' locations and at the Public Services Building, Charleston County's main office.

### After Action Review

In January 2023, Day for Democracy and Adopt a Polling Location participants were asked to complete a survey about their experience. The survey was an opportunity for us to gather feedback to both improve the program in the future and get testimonials to be used in future promotional material.

### Cost

Other than standard overhead and personnel costs, Adopt a Polling Location did not cost the Board of Elections. Poll worker pay comes from a combination of state and county funds and the total amount remains the same no matter the beneficiary. For the Day for Democracy program, county departments gave their staff eight paid hours of leave for Election Day. Participants earned their standard wages alongside poll worker pay. Given that, the departments had to ensure they had funding to provide paid leave for their team members.

## RESULTS

For the 2022 General Election, a total of 1,122 poll workers assisted our voters on Election Day. Of those, 15.5% were participants of either Day for Democracy or Adopt a Polling Location.

### Day for Democracy

128 Participants  
51 Polling Locations

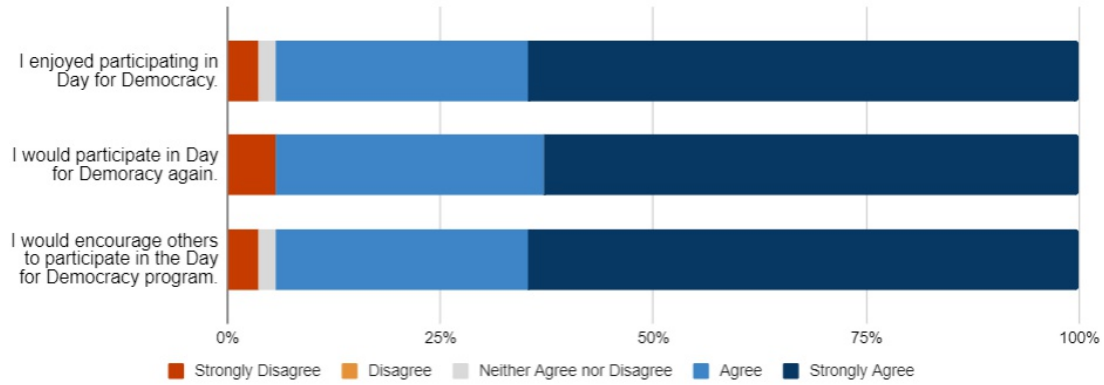
### Adopt a Polling Location

5 Adopt a Polling Location Organizations  
46 Adopt a Polling Location Participants  
7 Polling Locations

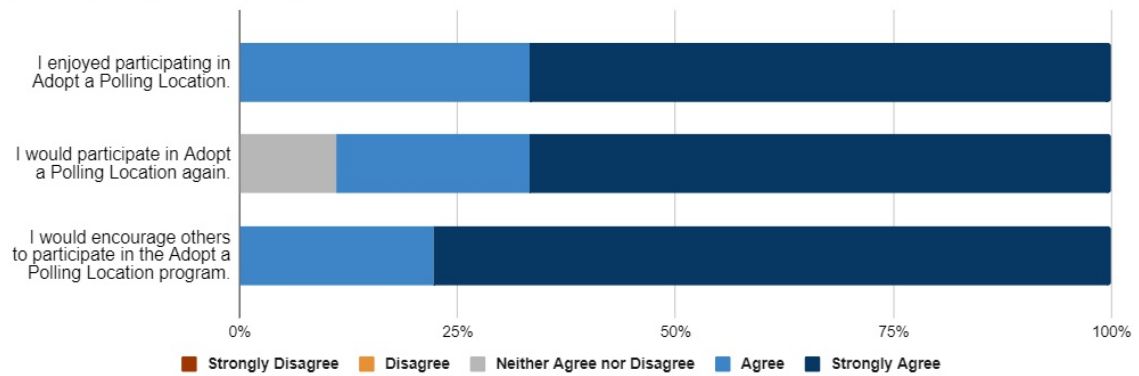


## PARTNERSHIPS AT THE POLLS

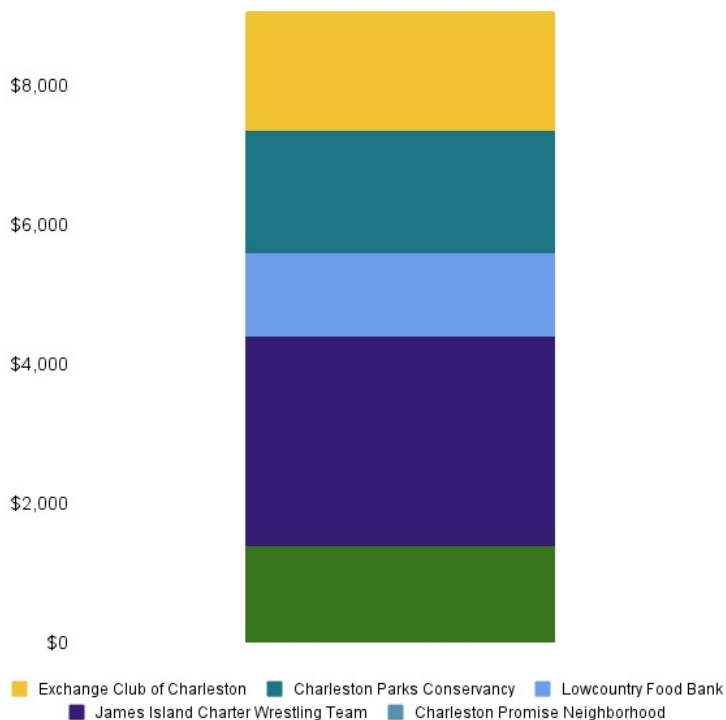
Survey respondents were overwhelmingly positive, with almost 95% of respondents stating that they would participate again.



Respondents lauded the program, with 100% of respondents stating that they enjoyed participating in the program.



A total of \$9,080 was reinvested into our community.





## PARTNERSHIPS AT THE POLLS

One indicator of our success was linking organizations and nonprofits together. The South Carolina Stingrays donated its proceeds from the June 2022 primaries and sales from an auction for a custom-made Get Out the Vote hockey jersey to the Charleston County Public Library. The funds were used to support the library's Free and Fresh Program, which offers fresh produce at select libraries to the public at no cost. In total, \$5,260 was raised for the Free and Fresh program!

Another indicator: participants' attitudes towards elections were shifted. National sentiment regarding the reliability of elections has impacted our voters. Many of the participants had positive remarks regarding their experiences learning about election operations and working alongside seasoned election workers. We look forward to sharing this opportunity with more participants in the future in the hopes of strengthening trust in elections.

Both programs were also profiled in the Bipartisan Policy Center's 2023 report *Policy to Carry Us Beyond the Next Election* as examples of innovative solutions to address poll worker shortages that benefit local communities and incentivize participation in the democratic process.<sup>2</sup>

## ORIGINALITY & INSPIRATION

We are the first county Board of Elections in South Carolina to implement Adopt a Polling Location and Day for Democracy programs. Charleston County is the gold standard in elections in the state of South Carolina. We set the bar high and continue to pursue innovations in accuracy, security, and accessibility. While many other counties have programs intended to recruit and retain election workers, our programs are multi-purpose. Our programs serve to improve voter experiences, give back to our community, and build strong internal and external bonds. Free and fair elections are made possible with the support of our local partners. Through these programs, we will gain a network that will continue to grow and flourish. We set ourselves apart by prioritizing marketing, replicability, and sustainability.

### Marketing

We placed heavy emphasis on marketing the programs through social media channels, local news stations, and our own internal communications teams. These programs are an all-around win for the Board of Elections, the participants, and, ultimately, the citizens of Charleston County. The largest barrier to growing the program is getting the word out. We are utilizing data from the implementation year to market the programs and build on their success. Testimonials and data on participation will give credence to the programs' positive outcomes for all involved.

### Replicability

The APL and DFD programs are intended to serve as a roadmap for other counties. As part of our role as election officials, we engage in knowledge transfers and problem solving with counties across the nation and the state. Documentation of our work will allow us to share our work with other election offices facing similar staffing issues.

<sup>2</sup>Bipartisan Policy Center. (2023). *Policy to Carry us Beyond the Next Election*. <https://bit.ly/3N20ncm>

## PARTNERSHIPS AT THE POLLS

### Sustainability

#### *Room to Grow*

Participants in the APL and DFD programs have the opportunity to shift to a role with greater responsibility after their first election. From there, participants who have shown mastery of basic skills can work as a clerk or an assistant clerk. Clerks are responsible for managing their polling location independently, with minimal guidance. Giving participants the ability to progress and improve is intended to provide structure, increase retention rates, and lift up the employees of both our County and local organizations who serve Charleston County residents every day.

#### *Succession Planning*

Given the numerous hurdles to jump in traditional recruitment, new staffing models such as APL and DFD are essential to ensuring we can still offer free and fair elections to our residents. As part of our office's long-term strategic planning, we are documenting our standard operating procedures and policies for these programs. While a lot of effort went into preparations for this year's programming, the ideal scenario would be for future staff members to be able to seamlessly take ownership of these programs.

## WHAT'S NEXT

### **By 2026, 50% of polling locations will be staffed by program participants.**

The Adopt a Polling Location and Day for Democracy programs are intended to be utilized for large-scale elections. Going forward, we would like to increase the number of organizations that participate in Adopt a Polling Location by continuing to grow our network of community partners. For Day for Democracy, we are creating recruitment videos for County employees in the hopes of getting additional participants.

### **Offer quarterly training sessions to keep participants engaged, bolster their learning outcomes, and increase retention rates.**

Rather than a brief training session directly before Election Day, we'd like to offer quarterly training throughout the year. A good number of survey participants requested additional training going forward. We want to ensure that participants feel they have the training and support they need to best serve our voters. Spacing out training will give us an opportunity to reinforce important topics and help participants better retain their training. It is also our hope that continued engagement with participants will reduce attrition rates in the long term.

### **Develop a program to connect current and future election workers with our partner nonprofits to directly donate their wages.**

Election workers are often involved because they want to do their part in supporting our democracy. Many have expressed their desire to volunteer rather than be paid for their work. The opportunity to play such a vital role in our elections is their end goal. Given that, we would like to give all election workers the opportunity to donate a portion of or all of their wages directly to local nonprofits.

## LOWCOUNTRY FOOD BANK

The Lowcountry Food Bank joined us for Election Day and raised \$1,200 to support its mission to fight hunger in ten South Carolina coastal communities!

Executive Director Isaac Cramer thanked members with a check presentation, where the organization's team held up signs celebrating their dedication to serving our region. More than 200,000 of our community members are served each year by the Lowcountry Food Bank.



## CHARLESTON PARKS CONSERVANCY



The Charleston Parks Conservancy earned \$1,760 for its organization. The organization advocates for and serves as stewards for the parks in the Charleston area. Executive Director Isaac Cramer posed with Parks Conservancy staff in front of Magnolia Park and Community Garden, the newest and largest garden in the area.

## **TESTIMONIALS**

Participants from both programs praised their experience, commenting not only on their enjoyable day working with voters, but also their appreciation for the opportunity to serve our community and be a part of the democratic process.

**"I hope this program is offered to County employees in future elections because I would definitely volunteer again."**

**"I thought the program was very informative and team leader(s) were well prepared, organized and helpful."**

**"I would highly recommend it! What a great way to lend a hand, learn something along the way and to feel a sense of contributing to something much larger than yourself!"**

**"Rewarding, educational, confidence building in the integrity of the SC voting process."**

**"Overall, I was just thrilled to be assisting them in their participation in our democracy. How can you not be proud to be part of a community of voters?"**

**"In 2020 we always made a big deal when there was a first time voter, and it was fun to share that celebration on the Day for Democracy when we had a few young people voting for the first time."**

**"Being able to engage with people we provide services for but often seldom see in person was awesome."**

**"It was a positive learning experience. I would definitely do it again."**

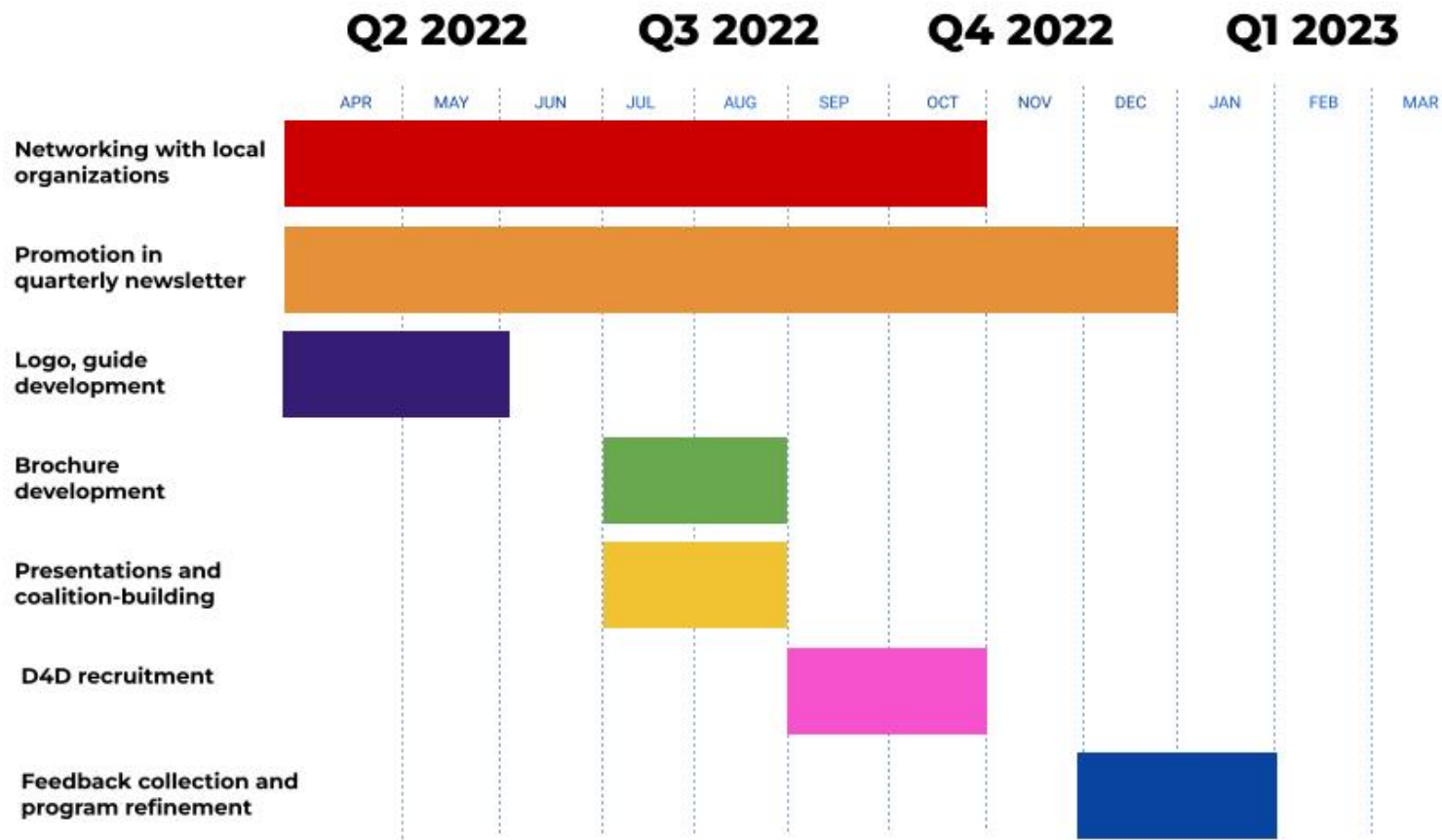
**I enjoyed the process immensely. The people were friendly and committed to the election process. Participating in this program gave me a different perspective regarding elections.**

**I was one of the people bringing the voting machines to the parking lot for people to participate in curbside voting. These people were so thankful for our help and really made me feel appreciated.**

**"...participating in this program gave me confidence to know that the state of SC is committed to election integrity. Once again, I am proud to be a South Carolinian!"**

**"I really enjoyed it! In my everyday role as a County employee I do serve the public good, but rarely in a public-facing capacity. It was very rewarding to have that opportunity."**

# PARTNERSHIPS AT THE POLLS TIMELINE



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Jenny Costa Honeycutt - Vice Chair  
Joe Boykin  
Henry E. Darby  
Larry Kobrovsky  
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## CHARLESTON COUNTY COUNCIL

LONNIE HAMILTON, III PUBLIC SERVICES BUILDING  
4045 BRIDGE VIEW DRIVE  
CHARLESTON, SOUTH CAROLINA  
29405-7464

April 19, 2023

J. Mitchell Graham Award Committee  
South Carolina Association of Counties  
1919 Thurmond Mall  
Columbia, SC 29202

Dear Award Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to express my enthusiastic support for Charleston County's J. Mitchell Graham Award submission, Partnership at the Polls. The Partnership at the Polls project is a collaborative effort highlighting Day for Democracy and Adopt a Polling Location. As the Charleston County Council Chairman, I believe this project is essential in ensuring our elections are conducted smoothly, fairly, and with the utmost integrity.

Day for Democracy is an outstanding program that allows county employees to serve as poll workers and contribute to their communities through public service. As evidenced through our employees' dedication and service, the commitment to ensuring every vote counts is truly inspiring, and I applaud their efforts to give back to their fellow citizens.

Adopt a Polling Location is another important partnership program included in this application. This program brings together community organizations to serve as poll managers. By serving their local community, organizations highlight their commitment to free and fair elections while also raising funds for the organization.

Together, Day for Democracy and Adopt a Polling Location provide an essential service to our county, and I am proud of those who participated. The innovation behind these Partnership at the Polls initiatives displays Charleston County's commitment to excellence every day, as well as professionalism and efficiency on Election Day.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Herbert R. Sass, III". The signature is stylized and includes a long horizontal flourish extending to the right.

Herbert R. Sass, III  
Chairman  
Charleston County Council