

Citizens Academy coming soon



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Suffolk residents can learn to be more effective citizens – safer against crime, and with a better grasp on how their city operates – by registering for free classes that start this February.

The Suffolk Commonwealth's Attorney's Office will hold its seventh annual Citizens Academy. The first class will be on Feb. 28. The four-week program will be held every Tuesday and Thursday from 6 to 7:30 p.m. in the Godwin Courts Building on North Main Street.

Participants will be taught the mission, policies and day-to-day operations of the Commonwealth's Attorney's Office, along with the city's other four constitutional offices – Clerk of the Circuit Court, Commissioner of the Revenue, Sheriff's Office and Treasurer's Office.

"They need to know exactly what it is we do and how we go about it, and that's exactly what we're going to teach them," said Commonwealth's Attorney C. Phillips Ferguson.

Citizens will become more aware of the realities of criminal cases, such as drug offenses and domestic violence. Ferguson said the curriculum is tweaked each year based on feedback from the citizens themselves.

For example, one class this year will have an even bigger focus on domestic violence.

'We get a lot of questions on that,' Ferguson said.

More than a dozen uniquely qualified speakers are on the agenda for this program, including Sheriff E.C. Harris, Clerk of Circuit Court Randy Carter, Treasurer Ronald H. Williams and Commissioner of the Revenue Susan Draper. Each will explain how their respective departments are run and answer questions from the class.

According to Ferguson, last year's Citizens Academy had 56 attendees, the most yet for the academy. He said the classes are part of his office's efforts to empower citizens young and old with education and awareness.

"If they're willing to put in the time, I promise you, they will come out of here with way more knowledge than when they first went in," he said.

The program will conclude on March 28 with a graduation and reception. Classes run from 6 to 7:30 p.m. in the third-floor jury room in the courthouse, located at 150 N. Main St.

Every citizen must apply to join the academy and also agree to a background check. Applicants are approved on a case-by-case basis, depending on their background check results.

The deadline to submit applications is Feb. 15. Visit suffolkva.us/204/Commonwealths-Attorney (<http://suffolkva.us/204/Commonwealths-Attorney>) to fill out the application and find out more information, or contact Community Outreach Coordinator Joan Turner at 514-4379.
