Case Study Title: **Community Building: A 21st Century Infrastructure for Civic Engagement**

Case Study Category: **Performance Excellence or Organizational Wellness** **or** **Communications**

* Jurisdiction Name: Arlington County
* Jurisdiction Population: 212,900
* City/County Manager Name: Barbara Donnellan
* Would you like the application to be considered for an Innovation Award? (eligible to Alliance member jurisdictions only) Yes
* Would you like the application to be considered for our Rapid Fire Session? Yes
* Project Leader (Primary Contact for case study notification)
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**Intent of the Project/Program/Service**

Launched by the County Board in January 2012, PLACE (Participation, Leadership and Civic Engagement) sought to update The Arlington Way for the 21st century by engaging all community voices – residents, businesses, civic organizations, commissions, Board and County staff – to achieve County’s vision. In January 2012, Arlington County Board Chair Mary Hynes, with the support of her colleagues on the County Board, set as goals for PLACE:

* **Expand participation** in important County decision-making processes.
* **Train** both interested members of the public and staff in those processes.
* **Improve** the quality of County government’s processes and set realistic expectations for broader participation in our decision-making.

**Innovation Characteristics**

County Manager Barbara Donnellan was a full partner with the County Board in PLACE. As the County’s chief executive officer, Donnellan focused on civic engagement as one of her top priorities in 2012. She introduced intensive training for County executive leadership and staff and committed to developing criteria for including civic engagement in staff performance reviews where appropriate. Donnellan made clear that robust, effective, constructive public participation was an expectation for County staff.

**Applicable Results and Real World Practicality**

Arlington’s civic infrastructure is rooted in the belief that good ideas can come from anywhere; that collaboration among residents, businesses, civic organizations and County government typically leads to better results than any one working alone; and that strategic decisions are more likely to stand the test of time when developed through robust, creative, respectful civic conversations.

This belief, known for more than 60 years as the “Arlington Way,” has been an essential building block in Arlington’s long-term success and attractiveness to a diversity of newcomers. It has served the community uncommonly well, helping us address problems and take advantage of opportunities. And it has always been a work in progress, open to evaluation and improvement. As long- time community activist Melinda Patrician has observed about community process: “Don’t get your back up if you have to back up.”

How do we allow for change and diversity of opinion in public process and preserve and honor what we know of the character of our community? The formula is simple enough: the more community members invest in the life of their community – through personal networks, adherence to behavioral norms and engagement that is sustained by mutual trust – the richer and the more productive the community and the greater the likelihood of representative democracy. Participation can be both formal and informal, is voluntary and includes everything from voting, attending County Board hearings and serving on a Board-appointed commission to becoming a Master Gardener, cooking for neighborhood block parties, commenting on a civic association listserv, swiping credit cards at the Friends of the Library book sale, entering a prized jar of pickles in the County fair and joining parent-child play groups.

The challenge for local government is to ensure the right people are having the right conversations at the right time. Our hope is that with a reinvigorated “Arlington Way” recalibrated to our changing times, we can continue to bring out the best in one another.