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Flagler County Fire Leadership Academy takes Institute for County Government ‘Best Practices Award’

December 15, 2020 – Flagler County Fire Leadership Academy on December 4 was recognized for receiving the Institute for County Government Best Practices Award for 2020 at the Florida Association of Counties’ Legislative Conference in Jacksonville. The award was presented Monday at the Board of County Commissioners meeting.

Library Director and Legislative Liaison Holly Albanese nominated the program for the award.

“The Fire Leadership Academy immediately came to mind when I read the criteria,” Albanese said. “It saves Flagler County much of the expense of training a new firefighter, it provides a pool of candidates when Fire Rescue needs to hire, and it prepares high school students to enter the workplace upon graduation.”

The requirements stipulate programs demonstrate at least one of the following standards: superior innovation, outstanding achievement, or exceptional delivery of service.

“This program has been lauded as the first of its kind in the nation,” Albanese wrote in the application. “(It) is not only innovative in concept and design, it has provided the knowledge and tools for other counties to follow and quickly implement.”

Retired Fire Chief Don Petito developed the program over a number of years. It launched in January 2017.

“No one could have imagined just how successful the Fire Leadership Academy at Flagler-Palm Coast High School would be when we joined Flagler County in a ceremonial ribbon-cutting in 2017,” said Superintendent Cathy Mittelstadt. “In a short amount of time, we have been able to see the opportunities for our students open up. These are opportunities for education and employment some of these students may have never been able to attain if not for this program.”

Petito fostered partnerships with the Flagler County Public School System, Flagler County Education Foundation, and all local Fire Departments to maximize resources available for the success of the program.
There are currently 50 students enrolled: six from the class of 2021; 14 from the class of 2022; 13 from the class of 2023; and, 17 from the class of 2024.

Ten students graduated from the Fire Academy in 2019 – the first graduating class. Of those, six completed the Florida state exam for Firefighter 2 certification. Three were hired by Flagler County Fire Rescue, and currently enrolled in a program to become paramedics.

The Fire Leadership Academy had 13 graduates in 2020. Six completed Firefighter 2 certification, and a seventh is currently in the exam process. Palm Coast Fire Department hired one of those graduates.

“We’ve also seen how the Fire Leadership Academy has led to additional career pathways in the medical and first responder fields,” Mittelstadt said. “The continued collaboration with Flagler County continues to make this program one which school districts and county governments across Florida hope to emulate.”