

Consumer Complaint Outlet Assists Associations in Fairfax County

Other local jurisdictions provide similar services

By Michelle Thompson

The Fairfax County Consumer Affairs Branch of the Department of Cable Communications and Consumer Protection assists consumers by providing advice and guidance on consumer issues, mediating complaints, developing and distributing educational publications and resources, and providing educational training and outreach.

Consumers may file a complaint on line, by mail or by visiting the office and completing a complaint form. The complaint must be specific to a consumer business or landlord tenant transaction that occurred in Fairfax County. When a consumer files a complaint, an investigator is assigned to the case. The investigator mediates the complaint with the business or landlord with the intent of negotiating a resolution that is satisfactory to both parties.

The mediation process is strictly voluntary. The Complainant (consumer) submits a summary of the complaint and provides supporting documentation. The information is sent to the Respondent (business or landlord) along with a requested resolution. The Consumer Affairs Branch facilitates the communication between the two parties to reach a mutually agreeable resolution. The Consumer Affairs Branch also offers voluntary arbitration for resolving disputes. Both parties also have the option to pursue their claim in court.

Consumers may also contact the office to speak with an Investigator of the Day for advice or general guidance on any consumer issue. If the consumer issue falls within the scope of the Branch's authority to mediate, the Investigator of the Day provides instruction on how to file a complaint with our office. When the issue falls outside of the Branch's authority, the Investigator of the Day provides the appropriate contact information for the local, state, or federal entity that addresses the concern. Investigators are knowledgeable in consumer matters and have developed working relationships with a number of other organizations that seek to assist consumers in understanding their rights.

The Consumer Affairs Branch has an extensive educational outreach program that includes presentations, television programs, a quarterly newsletter, podcasts, and tip sheets. Educational seminar topics consist of *Protecting Your Privacy, Avoiding Identity Theft; Understanding Credit and Credit Reports, Accessing Resources for Avoiding Foreclosure; Hiring a Home Improvement Contractor, and Steering Clear of Frauds and Scams*. The quarterly electronic newsletter, *The Informed Consumer*, features articles about current consumer issues. *The Informed Consumer* podcast discusses Door to Door Scams, Solicitors, and the Virginia Home Solicitation Sales Act. The *Consumer Tip Sheets* offers quick facts on a multitude of consumer topics. In addition, the Consumer Affairs Branch works with Fairfax County Government Channel 16 to produce the educational television program, *Consumer Focus*.

The Fairfax County Consumer Affairs Branch offers a unique resource specifically to leaders and members of common interest communities - the Fairfax County Homeowner and Condominium Association Liaison. The position is not a full time position, but a role played by a Consumer Affairs Investigator, in addition to providing advice on consumer issues; mediating complaints, and conducting educational and outreach seminars. The Investigator responds to questions and concerns from members and volunteer leaders of common interest communities and the general public. The Consumer Affairs Branch does not have the authority to mediate complaints from owners about their homeowner or condominium association governing boards, but seeks to keep the common interest community educated and informed by producing educational publications and programs.

The Branch publishes several publications and resources for the common interest community. The *Informed Consumer* electronic newsletter features articles that highlight recent laws, educational opportunities and topics of interest to homeowner and condominium association members and leaders. *The Common Interest Community Association Frequently Asked Questions* resource sheet provides answers to questions about the requirements under the Virginia Property Owners' Association Act and the Virginia Condominium Act and links individuals directly to the Legislative Information System and the applicable laws governing common interest communities. *The Fairfax County Community Association Manual* provides information and guidance on the day to day operations of community associations. The *2009 Fairfax County Community Supplement Guide* introduced the Common Interest Community Board, the Common Interest Community Ombudsman and summarized the legislative changes that have been enacted over the years. The publication is an interactive document linking readers directly to the law and other resources.

The Liaison works with Fairfax County Government Channel 16 to produce the live educational call-in television program, *Your Community, Your Call*. Featured guests include attorneys, common interest community managers, certified public accountants and insurance professionals that serve the common interest community. Viewers can watch the program on television or view the live video streaming on their computer. The audience participates by calling into the studio during the live broadcast or by sending in emails. The exchange makes for a lively conversation and it is an opportunity for the Consumer Affairs Branch to bring timely and current information to the common interest community. *Your Community, Your Call* replays on Fairfax County Government Channel 16 every Monday night at 8 p.m.

Last year, in an effort to bring the community timely legislative information, the Consumer Affairs Branch collaborated with the Washington Metropolitan Chapter Community Association Institute's Virginia Legislative Committee to bring the *House Bill 516 – One Year Later* panel discussion to the Fairfax County Government Center. The Consumer Affairs Branch is looking forward to similar collaborations in the future.

If you have consumer concerns, please contact the Fairfax County Consumer Affairs Branch at 703-222-8435, TTY 711, or consumer@fairfaxcounty.gov.
today!

This article was contributed by Michelle L. Thompson, who currently serves as the Fairfax County Homeowner and Condominium Liaison. You can reach her directly at 703-324-3218 or michelle.thompson@fairfaxcounty.gov.