

**Ad Hoc Police Practices Review Commission
Communication Subcommittee
May 26, 2015, 7:30PM
Room 232, Fairfax County Government Center**

Subcommittee members present:

Eric Clingan	Darryl Drevna
Tom Ryan	Patrick Smaldore
Lucy Caldwell	Brennan Murphy
Tim Thompson	Jose Santos
Doug Kay	Merni Fitzgerald
Mary Kimm	Tony Castrilli
Daniela Cockayne	

Ms. Fitzgerald began the meeting by welcoming everyone and thanking the Subcommittee members and the members of the public for attending. She reviewed the proposed agenda and the scope of work for the communications subcommittee. Ms. Fitzgerald informed the group that the focus of this evening's meeting was the police department's release of information, and specifically, how information is released and how do people have access to it. She then introduced a guest presenter, Captain Edward O'Carroll, the Commander of the Fairfax County Police Department's Public Information Office (PIO).

Captain O'Carroll provided perspective of the police Public Information Office. He began by discussing staffing and advised that there are two current vacancies, a sworn and a civilian position, that are currently in the process of being filled. When all are filled the Office will have a commander, assistant commander, 2 civilian PIO positions and 4 sworn PIO positions that deal with the news media, public communication and information, and the department's social media efforts. The hours of the PIO officer are 7:30AM to 5:00PM, however, the department is looking to adjust staff to expand those hours to enhance outreach and communication to the community. There is an on-call PIO staff member available anytime the office is closed.

Captain O'Carroll stated that the department's PIO has, within the past years, greatly expanded their social media efforts, and this has proven to be very successful. The department now operates a twitter account with over 35,000 followers. The department also maintains the county's police department webpage, has a Facebook page and is about to start up on Instagram. In addition, there is a daily news blog put out by the PIO every day. Captain O'Carroll stated that the PIO realizes communication is the key and that these social media sites are one of the tools that assist in accomplishing this. Captain O'Carroll provided the subcommittee with a copy of the links to all of the various social media sites used by the department as well as the number of hits or followers each site has.

Captain O'Carroll spoke about the escaped prisoner at Fairfax Hospital that occurred on March 31, 2015, and the PIO efforts in dealing with this situation which are credited in part, with the eventual apprehension of the suspect. Captain O'Carroll pointed out the success in using twitter and the site Periscope during this event and the constant updates to the community.

Captain O'Carroll explained the challenges of putting out timely information, especially in this era of social media where the demand for instant information exists. In the police department, the information released must be accurate and verified and this vetting of information takes time. The

consequences of putting out inaccurate information are significant. PIO will at times put information out on a Friday near the close of business day, but this is not an effort to hide any story, but rather the new philosophy of putting the information out when it is ready to go out, and at times the release is ready near the end of the day. Rather than hold it to the next day, the decision is now to put it out.

Captain O'Carroll explained that maintaining a constant presence on social media is a capacity issue and that when major events happen the PIO is stretched to its limits. They do partner with other county agencies (OPA specifically) for assistance, as well as other police departments when necessary, and our PIO staff provides the same service to them when requested.

Captain O'Carroll explained that the FOIA responsibility for the police department rests in the Internal Affairs Bureau and not in the PIO.

Captain O'Carroll also explained that the PIO reports directly to the Deputy Chief of Administration (Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Ryan) and that they meet every day to discuss PIO issues and are in constant contact after hours when critical events happen that involve a PIO response. He also stated that he has a direct connection to the Chief of Police by virtue of his position and meets regularly with the Chief to discuss public information issues on cases and events.

Captain O'Carroll provided a document that illustrated the flow of information in terms of information release to county leaders, the Chief of Police and police department senior staff, and the public when a critical incident occurs. He reviewed this document with the committee and explained the information flow process.

Captain O'Carroll stated that the goal of the PIO and the police department is to put out more information than has been done in the past and to use the tools at their disposal to do so.

At this point, Ms. Fitzgerald opened the floor to questions from the members of the subcommittee. Answers to the questions were provided by Captain O'Carroll and Lieutenant Colonel Ryan.

Subcommittee questions:

Mr. Clingan – Does PIO use Fairfax alerts and are notifications to the public made on cell phone?
Yes. The issue has been the timing of their use as Reverse 911 has prompted complaints from people who said they found the time of the alert at night a nuisance. However, overall reaction has been favorable. The Department is going to the Fairfax Alert system which would involve the public signing up for the alerts which should improve this process greatly.

Mr. Santos – What really has changed in PIO from last year?
A commitment from the Department to being more transparent and for the PIO to provide more information in their releases on critical cases, to include officer involved shootings. There is also much more cooperation with the Office of Public Affairs than in the past, and a greater use of social media, to include twitter and the blog to provide community information and interaction. It was pointed out that the media releases provided by the department regarding the investigation of the recent in-custody death of an inmate at the Fairfax County Adult Detention Center is a model that the PIO will continue to produce.

Mr. Drevna – Is there pushback from detectives in the department regarding the release of information?

The primary concern of the detective working the case is the successful presentation of the case in court, and they are very protective of the case and vigilant for anything that can inhibit or jeopardize its successful presentation in court. They owe it to the victims, the suspect, and the community to present the case in an unbiased and protected manner. The detectives are always consulted and have input to the release so that nothing is released that would harm their case, and they are much more understanding of the need for public information release than they have been in the past. Sometimes there are disagreements between what should or can be released, and at these times intense discussion and compromise occurs. PIO staff has an outstanding relationship with other department entities.

Mr. Kay – It would be helpful if PIO could release information on cold cases or critical incident cases from prior years so that the community will know what happened in those cases.
This is something that PIO would be willing to do and will explore.

Mr. Kay – It would be helpful if more information was provided on police shootings, to include those that are closed.
Colonel Roessler is preparing to post on the department web page for public view a summary/synopsis of all police shootings and PIO has been tasked with this effort. In addition, at the conclusion of every police shooting in the future, PIO will release a detailed summary of the incident for the public.

Ms. Kimm – Remarked that at one time the media was permitted to look through incident reports but that technology with online reporting has changed that. She stated that this has inhibited the ability to get information from the department on incidents that may not be critical but which the public cares about.
PIO is always available and willing to assist any media member or community member who calls their office looking for information. Captain O’Carroll emphasized that they should always feel free to call and that they will be assisted in getting the information they are seeking when possible.

Mr. Smaldore – Concerned that the department does not release quarterly crime stats and other data and statistical information on a more regular basis that homeowner associations and neighborhood groups and other members of the community can use to assess issues in their communities. He also stated that the district police stations are not providing the necessary public information for the community on a regular or consistent or satisfactory basis.
The department will explore releasing data more regularly and explore how district stations can be more responsive.

Ms. Cockayne – Any thought of having a PIO officer at each district station?
The department would like to do this and one station tried it with positive results, however, there are 8 district stations and it is currently a staffing and budget issue that precludes this. Similarly, while PIO would prefer to be a 24 hour, 7 day a week operation, the current staffing levels do not accommodate this and the projected staffing levels to provide this service is a budget issue.

Ms. Cockayne – Does the department ever deliberately or intentionally put false information out or knowingly release false information?
No.

Mr. Murphy – In regards to critical incidents and release of information, it is important that the policy regarding this changes to reflect the commitment to transparency.

The department agrees and policies regarding the release of information are currently being re-written and updated.

Mr. Thompson – Does OPA ever take over a case from the police department’s PIO?

Yes. It is rare but they have, with the Geer case being an example of this because of the different county agencies involved. The police department and the county OPA have a very professional and good working relationship with each other.

Mr. Santos – In regard to recent release of the in car video from the Master’s police shooting, what were the issues that changed that allowed for that to be released?

Colonel Roessler, as a result of a request from the Ad Hoc Commission, decided to release the video. In the interest of transparency to the community and after ensuring all criminal and civil proceedings had been concluded, he exercised his authority as Chief of Police and directed that the video be released. Consideration will be provided to future requests using similar criteria.

Mr. Kay – Could the police department obtain software to redact confidential information from police reports so that this could be done in an efficient manner whereby they could then be released to the public?

The police department will explore this.

Mr. Thompson – Asked who managed the in car video and body worn camera programs?

Resource Management Bureau manages the in car video and the department does not currently have body worn cameras.

Ms. Kimm – The department should release more information to the public beyond just critical incidents. The My Neighborhood Crime Mapping program doesn’t really provide the necessary information for community members to know what has occurred in their neighborhood or why the police cruisers were on their street. This is the information that people need and want. The department should also look at releasing information on a regular basis such as when a police cruiser crash occurs.

The department will explore this.

Statements of subcommittee members during round table:

Mr. Murphy – The Chief of Police and the County Executive sign off on the department general orders and SOPs. He requests at a future meeting the discussion of the decision tree as to how the review and approval of the general orders and SOPs occurs.

Mr. Murphy – Would like to hear information regarding what officers and detectives in the department think about the manner in which the release of information in critical incidents, to include police shootings, has been handled by the department.

Mr. Kay – Recommendations of the subcommittee should narrow the scope of the recommendations to 6 or less and to make them meaningful so they don’t get watered down or lost in sheer numbers. He emphasizes quality of the recommendations over quantity.

Potential Recommendations:

Calls for service involving individuals with mental illness should be reported in terms of numbers so that the public understands the scope of the problem. Mental health calls should also be reported on the daily blog.

PIO staff should be assigned to each district station.

More information released with some substance or detail to the release concerning incidents that occur in neighborhoods that are not critical in nature. More effort should be devoted to getting the day to day information of police activity out to the public.

Quarterly crime reports should be posted for the community to view.

The department needs to develop a policy statement regarding release of information for critical events. This would include the relationship with OPA and the hand off to them in certain situations.

The department should develop a cold case PIO practice of releasing information on cases that are no longer active or closed.

More specificity and detail in crime stats and information that is released by the district stations.

Align Fairfax County with release of information laws that govern most states.

The minutes from the prior meeting were approved by subcommittee vote with one amendment (Brennan Murphy was in attendance at the May 11, 2015 meeting) and Ms. Fitzgerald ended the meeting by reminding everyone that the next meeting of the communication subcommittee would involve a review of cases from other jurisdictions and the reports and information that was released in those cases.

Ms. Fitzgerald then adjourned the meeting.

Meeting notes were taken by Lieutenant Colonel Thomas Ryan.