

Fire and Rescue Department

LOB #224:

LIFE SAFETY EDUCATION, PUBLIC INFORMATION AND COMMUNITY OUTREACH

Purpose

The Public Affairs and Life Safety Education Division provides public affairs support for the department and fire and life safety educational programs to high-risk populations, including preschoolers, school-age children, latch-key children, juvenile fire setters, older adults and culturally diverse groups.

Community outreach is a core value and an integral part of the overall organizational mission. Firefighters and staff continually reach out to the community and its residents through daily activities and reoccurring community events. Two of the largest outreach efforts (Safety in our Community (SIOC) and Wellness in our Community (WIOC)) have proved highly successful since implementation in FY 2013. Other community outreach efforts serve the most under privileged members of the community though the annual school backpack and school supply giveaway, new winter coat giveaway, and Toys for Tots program to name a few.

Description

Personnel serve as department spokespersons during emergency incidents, special events and respond to routine queries from media and residents. Education and information is disseminated through videos, public service announcements, social media, planned media events and feature presentations on Fairfax County's cable Television Channel 16. Staff coordinates external publications for the department and manages FRD's homepage and overall website content.

Life safety programs educate more than 23,000 preschoolers, 9,000 school-aged children and 7,500 older adults. Approximately 65 juveniles are reached annually through the juvenile fire setters program. Education is also carried out through community events including Fire Prevention Open House, summer safety Olympics, and a semi-annual smoke alarm initiative for residents needing assistance with smoke alarms.

SOIC and WIOC initiatives include firefighters going door to door in neighborhoods checking and installing working smoke alarms. While there, information on seasonal fire and life safety tips are provided.

Benefits

The goal of the Life Safety section is to reduce the risk of injury and loss due to fire through education and enforcement. A primary focus of fire safety education is directed towards children. Working with schools, FRD provides numerous children with the knowledge to help keep them safe in the event of a fire.

Community outreach efforts benefit both the community and FRD staff. Firefighters are given the opportunity to engage with the community they serve, making life saving improvements prior to an emergency event. Residents benefit through proactive efforts to make their homes safer in case of a fire emergency. There have already been several incidents where a fire occurred and the residents of the home were safely evacuated due to early notification by a smoke detection system installed by members of FRD.

Immediate posting of news and information directly to the community (either through web content or social media) is a clear benefit as it allows residents to rely on County government as a direct source of information. By publishing, coordinating and facilitating web content/social media, the Public Information Office ensures the digital presence of the department is expressed with clarity and purpose.

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Mandates

While this LOB is not mandated, if the County publishes material to the FairfaxCounty.gov website, it must be in compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessibility requirements.

Trends and Challenges

Reaching the most at risk populations with life safety education continues to be the most difficult challenge. As the County continues to grow, specifically the young and elderly population, staff levels remain stagnant resulting in challenges for increased program delivery.

Public Information delivery continues to evolve as technology enhancements are made. Not only is information now consumed more via online versus paper form, there are also fundamental changes to how people consume information online – primarily through use of a mobile device. According to recent research, mobile device web/app browsing exceeds visiting a website on a “traditional desktop” computer. This trend poses a challenge to information creators, who must think “mobile first” meaning - webpages designed for mobile devices and transactions that can be easily accomplished on a mobile device. FRD PIO staff will have to work closely with FRD divisions to educate them on “mobile-first information presentation” when developing information for social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook and blogs.

Resources

Category	FY 2014 Actual	FY 2015 Actual	FY 2016 Adopted
LOB #224: Life Safety Education, Public Information and Community Outreach			
FUNDING			
<u>Expenditures:</u>			
Compensation	\$369,369	\$401,473	\$354,638
Operating Expenses	182,252	67,954	53,763
Total Expenditures	\$551,621	\$469,427	\$408,401
General Fund Revenue	\$0	\$32	\$0
Net Cost/(Savings) to General Fund	\$551,621	\$469,395	\$408,401
POSITIONS			
Authorized Positions/Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs)			
<u>Positions:</u>			
Regular	5 / 5	5 / 5	5 / 5
Total Positions	5 / 5	5 / 5	5 / 5

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Metrics

Metric Indicator	FY 2013 Actual	FY 2014 Actual	FY 2015 Actual	FY 2016 Estimate	FY 2017 Estimate
Number of preschool and kindergarten students educated	22,371	26,223	23,260	25,000	25,000
Number of senior citizens educated	8,545	9,479	7,810	9,000	9,000
Number of individuals reached through Facebook	234,000	700,000	3.2M	3.5M	3.8M
Number of individuals reached through Twitter	NA	110,000	1.1M	1.2M	1.3M
Number of families benefiting from community outreach programs at Title 1 Schools - K-12	7,400	8,200	9,000	9,500	10,000

In FY 2016, the department's Public Affairs/Life Safety Education program anticipates serving 25,000 preschool and kindergarten students and 9,000 older adults in an effort to eradicate fire deaths and burn injuries within these high risk populations. While the opportunity to provide education for pre-school children and older adults continues to rise exponentially with the growing population, staff levels remain stagnant resulting in challenges for increased program delivery.

Fairfax County has determined the best metric to use for measuring the performance of social media is the total "reach" of the messages shared. Simply stated, this is the number of times people actively view FRD posted messages.

Social media content is produced and pushed out on two major social media platforms – Facebook and Twitter. Social media allows the department to publish, engage, and provide customer information on emergencies, key events, consumer recalls, and fire and life safety information.

The ability to immediately publish information directly to the community through social media is a benefit to the public for two specific reasons:

Enhances Direct Communication

This line of communication is important in good times and bad. In good times it's important to inform the public about what is done on a daily basis to keep them safe. In bad times, it's important to be able to structure a direct message to the public about the situation. No longer do fire departments have to rely on traditional news media to communicate with the people they serve – they can do it straight through social media and are able to better control the message.

Builds Goodwill within Community

Social media presents fire departments an opportunity that they've never had before - the ability to communicate directly with the public and the people served. It builds on good will and is an excellent forum to inform those served about what FRD does to protect them.

The growth of social media has continued at a brisk pace since its inception. Growth should continue as long as relevant and value-added content is produced and shared. Growth of followers, likes, and engagement volume will depend on the tempo of emergency information in a given day or period. A key ingredient for success is consistency in producing content and pushing it out. Social media is relatively new and should see moderate growth annually as content increases. Lack of staffing to increase content and overall capacity will be a prime factor in holding overall performance.

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The department provides a number of community outreach programs geared to benefiting children attending Title 1 schools.

Backpack drive collects and distributes backpacks filled with school supplies for children who otherwise would not have them.

Kids Cuts provide children haircuts to kids in need prior to the start of the school year.

Operation Warm collects and distributes winter coats to kids without in order to keep the children warm during the winter.

Christmas toy drive collects funds from the community to purchase and distribute toys to needy children for the holidays.

Each year the department works to collect additional donations in order to expand the programs and reach more families.