

Office of Public Affairs

LOB #38:

CUSTOMER SERVICE

Purpose

The Office of Public Affairs (OPA) is the information connection for Fairfax County government. As with every agency in the County government, this line of business strives to exceed customer service expectations when serving County residents. The primary objective of staff is to respond quickly and accurately to a wide range of information requests from the public over the telephone, face-to-face in the Government Center and by email.

Description

This line of business provides customer service through the following:

- 703-Fairfax (324-7329) Telephone Inbox – For FY 2015, OPA answered **33,250** telephone calls.
- 703-Fairfax Email Inbox – For FY 2015, OPA responded to **5,655** emails.
- Customer Contact Center – OPA staffs the main information desk in the Government Center to answer questions for walk-in visitors. For FY 2015, OPA assisted **23,911** walk-in customers.

The Customer Service Team tracks not only the volume of information requests but also the context. The resulting trend analysis provides insights to the public information officers so issues can be anticipated and addressed in a timely manner.

Additional functions handled by the customer service team include:

- **Homeowners Association List** – OPA maintains a list of more than 1,700 Community and Homeowners Associations. This list is used by County agencies to communicate with residents. OPA also receives telephone calls and emails from the public requesting this contact information.
- **Public Meetings Calendar** – Staff maintains and serves as approver for the Public Meetings Calendar on the County website which lists all public meetings. This meets requirements of the VFOIA to post public meetings.
- **Siebel Customer Management System** – Customer service staff updates and maintains the Siebel database, which is the primary system that the customer service team uses to look up contact information for County agencies, as well as other state and local agencies in order to connect the public with the appropriate organization to assist them.
- **Equipment Loan Program** – OPA maintains a loan program consisting of podiums, sound systems, cameras and accessories that agencies can borrow for various types of events such as ground-breakings and ribbon-cuttings.
- **Telework Space** – OPA created a small work space behind the Information Desk, and monitors and maintains this space for County employees. Customer service staff at the Government Center created this space after receiving a number of requests from County employees who do not work at the Government Center, but may be here for training and meetings, expressed a need to have access to a small workspace to check their email. Since its creation in March 2015, the telework space has accommodated over 30 County employees.

There are 2/2.04 FTE positions associated with this line of business. However, rather than one person, it includes parts of several OPA employees' time. There are two employees who staff the main information desk in the lobby of the Government Center to respond to questions/comments by walk-ins, telephone calls and email. The majority of foreign language requests are for Spanish and one of these employees is a native Spanish speaker. When other languages are required, the agency uses a language line for the necessary

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translation services. However, when those staff are in training or on leave, other OPA staff are required to fill in to provide continuous service to County residents.

Benefits

Direct face-to-face contact with the residents and employees of Fairfax County, non-residents, media and elected officials, allows the customer service staff to provide service with a personal touch. Often callers or those who walk in are frustrated because they might not know how to reach the appropriate agency and perceive that they have been transferred around without getting a resolution. Some are angry if they believe their needs are not being met. It takes well-trained and empathetic staff to de-escalate these types of situations.

The customer service team also often serves as a bridge, linking residents that do not own a computer or cannot navigate the County website, to the appropriate agency that can assist them. Many of these customers are repeat callers. Some are seniors, while others may have language or other challenges. They depend on OPA to be there to help them navigate Fairfax County government.

OPA's customer service team provides value-added assistance to residents by saving their time and assuming ownership of their unique situation by working on their behalf to connect them to the appropriate agency. Many times, a question requires speaking with numerous agencies to find the correct entity to address the question or concern. In those cases, OPA will assist by researching on the client's behalf using the resources that Fairfax County provides.

OPA also has a team member that speaks and writes Spanish fluently. This is a huge benefit to customers since English is a second language for a large segment of the County population.

Mandates

The aspect of the Customer Service LOB that is mandated is associated with responding to Virginia Freedom of Information Act (VFOIA) requests. For the most part, these requests come through the 703Fairfax email inbox but are sometimes received through the 703-Fairfax telephone line. In addition, staff maintains the Public Meetings Calendar on the County website which lists all public meetings to comply with VFOIA requirements.

For FY 2015, OPA received and coordinated 179 VFOIA requests with the appropriate agency to respond.

Trends and Challenges

As the County's population grows, so too do the expectations and demands for services, many of which funnel through the Office of Public Affairs' customer service line of business. Other demographic conditions that drive the workload for this LOB include:

- Demand for services continues to increase, e.g., public assistance, food stamps, housing, etc. Many residents start with OPA's customer service staff to be directed to the appropriate agency or turn to OPA if they have been on hold with the other agencies and/or do not believe their needs are being met.
- The public has high expectations for Fairfax County to respond whether or not it is a County responsibility, e.g., roads maintained by VDOT, trees on private property, etc. These calls cannot be ignored and it is often time-consuming to explain the situation to customers and direct them to the appropriate resources.
- An aging population, many of whom do not use a computer regularly or at all, contact the County to connect them with services they need/want.

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- Budget cuts throughout Fairfax County have impacted service levels, resulting in residents contacting OPA's customer service staff to complain or inquire about some service they believe should be provided and is not, or the delay in providing the service.
- The ever-increasing diversity of the population creates communications challenges as English is a second language for many Fairfax County residents.

Resources

Category	FY 2014 Actual	FY 2015 Actual	FY 2016 Adopted
LOB #38: Customer Service			
FUNDING			
<u>Expenditures:</u>			
Compensation	\$164,095	\$153,232	\$162,545
Operating Expenses	14,155	15,553	13,380
Total Expenditures	\$178,250	\$168,785	\$175,925
General Fund Revenue	\$0	\$0	\$0
Net Cost/(Savings) to General Fund	\$178,250	\$168,785	\$175,925
POSITIONS			
<i>Authorized Positions/Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs)</i>			
<u>Positions:</u>			
Regular	2 / 2.16	2 / 2.16	2 / 2.04
Total Positions	2 / 2.16	2 / 2.16	2 / 2.04

Metrics

Metric Indicator	FY 2013 Actual	FY 2014 Actual	FY 2015 Actual	FY 2016 Estimate	FY 2017 Estimate
Total 703-Fairfax Customer Service interactions handled	45,330	59,652	62,816	65,957	69,255
703-Fairfax telephone calls responded to	NA	NA	33,250	34,913	36,658
Walk-in customers assisted	NA	NA	23,911	25,106	26,362
703-Fairfax emails handled	NA	NA	5,655	5,938	6,235
Total 703-Fairfax Customer Service interactions handled per FTE	22,221	29,241	30,792	32,332	33,949

From FY 2014 to FY 2015, the customer service line of business saw a 5.3 percent increase in the number of telephone calls, walk-in inquiries and emails to the 703-Fairfax telephone line, lobby desk and email inbox. This is the main point of contact for the public to access County information and/or be directed to the agencies that can assist them. This desk is staffed by 2/2.04 FTE from 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Monday-Friday.

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In FY 2015, over 33,000 telephone calls were answered. The customer service staff address a wide range of questions from animals to zoning. In many cases, they transfer the caller to the agency that can assist them. In other situations, they look up the information directly. There are many times when the information is available online but the caller is either not able (doesn't have a computer or doesn't know how to use one or how to navigate the County's website) or isn't willing to look on their own, so Office of Public Affairs staff work to deliver a high level of service by getting them the information they need.

Almost 24,000 walk-ins were served at the Government Center lobby desk in FY 2015. Inquiries can be as simple as directions within the building to other more complex questions such as what they need to do to start a business. Many people come to the Government Center thinking all County programs (and even some non-County ones) are located here. Staff must frequently direct customers to the Fairfax County Courthouse, the Pennino or Herrity Buildings, or even federal or state agencies such as the Social Security Administration's Fairfax office or the Virginia Employment Commission's office.

The 703-Fairfax inbox allows the public to send an email to Fairfax County when it is convenient for them. However, the staff who answer the emails are the same ones who respond to the telephone calls and walk-ins so they must also find time to answer the emails, 5,655 of which were received during FY 2015, during the same work hours Monday-Friday. Consequently they have very high workloads – each FTE handled a total of over 30,000 telephone calls, walk-ins and emails during FY 2015.

There is also a spike in telephone calls, walk-ins and emails during certain times of the year, e.g., when personal property or real estate taxes are due or right before elections. In addition, if agencies such as the Department of Family Services have a backlog in their main line to call for public assistance, callers turn to the County's 703-Fairfax line thinking OPA can get them through to the programs they want. Sometimes staff receive considerable abuse from callers who have not gotten what they want (either because they were not eligible or there is a wait to speak with someone from that agency). Nevertheless, OPA staff continually work to ensure that all customers are served in a timely and courteous manner.

As the County's population increases and as the number of people needing assistance in one way or another also rises, the workload of this small customer service staff can be expected to increase accordingly.