

# Office of Public Affairs

**Mission** To lead coordinated communications and customer service from a countywide perspective that connects our residents with information about their government's services, operations, and policies. To increase public awareness of hazards and to communicate appropriate actions to take before, during and after emergencies. To ensure clear, open, and timely communications to and from employees in order to maintain an informed and motivated workforce.

**Focus** The Office of Public Affairs (OPA) provides essential information to the public, elected and appointed officials, County agencies and the media concerning County programs and services and is the central communications office for the County. The Director serves as the County media spokesperson, and as a liaison with the County Executive and the Board of Supervisors. OPA also manages countywide compliance with the Virginia Freedom of Information Act (VFOIA) and language access.

OPA coordinates a comprehensive, centralized public affairs program for the County and provides communications consulting to other agencies. Employee internal communications, countywide web content management, social media, customer service and emergency communications are also part of the agency's critical functions.

OPA focuses on three main areas of communication: external, employee and emergency. This structure facilitates the best use of OPA staffing to address the following strategic issues: enhancing access to information both internally and externally; improving crisis and emergency communications; publishing content through numerous tools and engaging the public; providing information proactively to the media; and delivering communication consulting to agencies without public information officers, as well as supporting those agencies with communications staff. Strategies to address these critical issues include increasing collaboration with agencies, enhancing information on the County's intranet and internet, and continuing to explore tools for reaching diverse audiences.

OPA remains proactive in anticipating the needs of the public and media by providing timely information. In addition to managing the content on the County's website at [www.fairfaxcounty.gov](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov), OPA oversees the use of several social media sites, including Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Instagram, Nextdoor and Flickr, allowing direct communication with the public. The reach through these tools has grown exponentially over the past few years and enables the amplification of a common message through multiple channels.

OPA is also responsible for coordinating countywide compliance with the Virginia Freedom of Information Act (VFOIA), promoting the County's commitment to transparency, improving the efficiency of the VFOIA response process, monitoring requests, and enhancing accountability. Strategies to address these goals include ensuring agency compliance with a countywide FOIA policy, VFOIA and other state and federal records laws; providing quarterly training to County employees; ensuring open and collaborative communication with designated agency points of contact; and administering a centralized system to track all FOIA requests.

## **External Communications**

OPA provides critical leadership in communicating with many external audiences about important issues, deadlines, and events, including COVID-19 in FY 2020 and FY 2021. This includes serving County residents, the business community, nonprofits, faith communities, media, and many other key groups by sharing relevant, timely and actionable information through the following tools:

- [www.fairfaxcounty.gov](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov)
- NewsCenter

- NewsWire
- Facebook
- Twitter
- Instagram
- Nextdoor
- YouTube
- Flickr
- SlideShare
- Surveys
- Media
- 703-FAIRFAX Phone and Email Customer Service
- Mobile Apps
- Podcasts, Internet Radio, Spanish Language Radio and SoundCloud
- Email Newsletters
- Printed Materials

All the platforms listed above were used in some way to share and support COVID-19 information. Many lessons were learned, and the County's use of these tools has been adjusted.

### **NewsCenter**

In FY 2020, OPA continued to operate its successful Fairfax County Government NewsCenter platform, which serves as the central focal point for publishing news for residents. OPA's vision for NewsCenter is simple: to selectively package, promote and publish relevant, timely and actionable audience-focused information for the community. Most of the content focuses on the needs of residents and what is practical in their daily lives. A new NewsCenter was unveiled in FY 2021. NewsCenter has been recognized with several awards, including a Governor's Technology Award and a National Association of Counties Achievement Award.

### **Social Media**

OPA continues its social media publishing and oversight role, approving new accounts, analyzing metrics from all County accounts, setting standards, and working in partnership with more than 80 social media publishers across the County. This role is essential as social media tools constantly evolve and change. A continued area of focus in FY 2020 was addressing legal issues related to official social media accounts. The law is generally years behind where society is, so courts are just starting to issue rulings that impact the County in many ways. OPA has worked closely with the Office of the County Attorney and the Board of Supervisors to address these new legal requirements for official social media accounts.

COVID-19 dominated the second half of FY 2020 on social media, according to the metrics. For example, on Facebook, the County set a record with the most total impressions for all accounts ever in 12 years of using social media. By engaging the public every day in answering questions and providing information, OPA enables Fairfax County residents to better understand how their government works and the services it provides.

### **County Website**

OPA continues its work to support the County's new web site in many ways, including key pages, setting content policy, metrics tracking, accessibility support, usability testing, consultation with agencies, and working with DIT to plan the next phases and features of fairfaxcounty.gov.

## Digital Team

Within external communications, OPA's digital team will continue its focus on the following areas:

- Developing policies and governance for the website and social media
- Providing strategic and tactical counsel
- Training web and social media publishers
- Maintaining a suite of metrics
- Enhancing capabilities during emergencies and public health crises

## Customer Service

OPA's customer service team strives to exceed expectations in serving County residents. The team often serves as a bridge, linking residents to the appropriate agency to assist them with their needs. The customer service team takes ownership of residents' unique situations and works on their behalf to connect them with the services and programs they need. This includes speaking with numerous agencies to find the correct entity to address the resident's questions or concerns.

The customer service team assists the public through the following channels:

- 703-Fairfax (324-7329) Telephone Line
- 703-Fairfax (324-7329) Voice Mailbox
- 703-Fairfax Email Inbox
- Customer Service Center located inside the Government Center Building

Additional functions handled by the customer service team include:

- **Homeowners Association List** – OPA maintains a list of more than 2,400 Community and Homeowners Associations, which 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.
- **Customer Relationship Management (CRM)** – The customer service staff updates and maintains the CRM, 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, which provides podiums, sound systems, cameras, and accessories to agencies for various events like groundbreakings and ribbon-cuttings.
- **Telework Space** – The customer service team created a small workspace behind the Information Desk and monitors and maintains this space for County employee use. The space was established in response to numerous requests from County employees who do not work at the Government Center but may be on-site for training and meetings, who need access to a small workspace to check email, return phone calls, etc. Since its creation in March 2015, the telework space has accommodated more than 30 County employees.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the customer service team partnered with the Department of Information Technology to create an all-virtual contact center, which enables residents to remain connected with their government through a global pandemic and allows staff to work safely from home.

	FY 2019	FY 2020	% Difference
<b>703-Fairfax Calls</b>	22,072	34,837	58 percent increase
<b>703-Fairfax Voicemails</b>	3,183	3,519	11 percent increase
<b>Information Desk Walk-ups</b>	17,794	12,857	28 percent decrease
<b>703-Fairfax Emails</b>	5,777	6,332	10 percent increase

**Employee Communications**

OPA provides the central point of coordination for countywide internal communications, supporting individual agency communications needs, providing strategic consultation and managing executive communications to employees. The agency plays a key role in helping agencies develop and amplify important information for the workforce. OPA also coordinates and implements communications plans and strategies for major county priorities.

In the first half of the fiscal year, the agency’s major internal focus was on preparing for the transition to a cloud-based intranet on the SharePoint platform. The new FairfaxNet provides enhanced functionality including improved collaboration and integration with other County tools, is accessible to employees on and off the network and is mobile-friendly. The new system launched in early 2020. Just over a month later, the pandemic abruptly changed the way many County employees work, and the new FairfaxNet became an even more important tool for remote workers, and for all employees as a platform for vital information.

In the initial stages of the pandemic, OPA developed a coronavirus information site for employees on FairfaxNet, including forms, instructions, HR information, updates, guidance on technology (teleworking, etc.), facilities, travel, purchasing and equipment, among other considerations. The site has received more than 160,000 visits from more than 10,000 individual employees since its launch in March 2020. OPA also worked closely with its HR and OEM partners to develop a new employee alert COVID-19 category for text and email updates, facilitated mobile and non-network access to the county intranet, and collaborated in the development and distribution of COVID-19 executive communications.

NewsLink, the daily email newsletter, continues to be distributed to more than 12,000 employees each workday and includes essential information on everything from training to Open Enrollment. It became an even more important source of information in the context of the pandemic. OPA also maintains a countywide calendar of key dates and events for employees through FairfaxNet. With almost all trainings and events transitioning to a virtual environment, the countywide calendar provides easy access to these online offerings.

In addition to the launch of the new FairfaxNet, major internal projects in the past year include the development of a board request tracker – a tool on the SharePoint platform that offers a central repository for tracking requests from the Board of Supervisors, including agency and staff person assigned, status and outcome. The tracker also provides request notification to agency leadership and assigned staff. The tracker is available as a resource to all county staff.

Additionally, OPA offers guidance and training on internal communications, including to agencies eliminating internal print communications tools and maximizing use of the County intranet. Blogs remain a popular tool, improving efficiency and reach of agency communications.

OPA will continue to implement and coordinate additional products and tools for internal communications, reflecting the attributes of a high-performance 21st century workforce.

### **Emergency Communications**

As required by the Fairfax County Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), OPA coordinates and disseminates all emergency information related to major incidents affecting more than two County agencies. Accordingly, OPA continues to recognize emergency communications as one of its major lines of business and the need for continued emphasis on emergency communications and dissemination of emergency information to the public, Board of Supervisors, County employees, and other partner agencies and stakeholders, including the media.

During activations of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), OPA staff are key players in the incident command organizational structure, serving as the EOC Command and General Staff Public Information Officer (PIO), while the Director of OPA serves on the Senior Policy Group of key County leadership. Additional OPA staff serve in the Joint Information Center (JIC) as assistant PIOs, creating and disseminating all emergency-related content during an EOC activation. OPA opens the County's JIC, which serves as the central clearinghouse for emergency information, whenever the EOC is activated above a monitoring level.

The increased use of communication tools and the changing way residents receive information means the OPA must recognize and adapt to be able to effectively distribute emergency news and information to various audiences and stakeholders. As such, OPA uses multiple communication tools and channels. These tools include the emergency blog, ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/emergency/blog](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/emergency/blog)); the County's Web site; Facebook; Twitter (both County and agency-specific accounts); YouTube; Instagram; Nextdoor; Flickr; SoundCloud; emails, text and pager messages from Fairfax Alerts and the Emergency Alert Network (EAN); Fairfax County Government Radio online ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/radio](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/radio)); podcasts; the emergency information hotline and internal hotline numbers for County employees; video (in addition to YouTube, OPA utilizes video online and on Channel 16); media interviews; the County mobile app; regional websites such as [www.ReadyNOVA.org](http://www.ReadyNOVA.org); conference calls; and Ask Fairfax online chats.

OPA does not rely on the emergency information blog as the sole communications tool to reach the public. OPA uses a variety of methods to reach county residents who receive their information across varied channels, including social media, traditional media, etc.

In addition to emergency communications and response, OPA continues its involvement in planning County tabletop and functional exercises to ensure smooth operations during actual emergencies. For example, in FY 2019, OPA participated in the regional Capital Fortitude exercise, a health-related scenario of an anthrax attack. OPA staff participated on the exercise planning team, as well as in the exercise simulation cell (Sim Cell) and Emergency Operations Center for the multiday event.

### **Virginia Freedom of Information Act**

OPA enhances public access to County information and public records through the countywide FOIA program. The countywide FOIA officer serves as Fairfax County's main point of contact for FOIA requests and coordinates the County's compliance with VFOIA, providing strategy and direction to agencies on how to efficiently respond to the growing volume and complexity of FOIA requests.

The goals of the countywide FOIA program are to: 1) coordinate compliance with VFOIA, 2) promote the County's commitment to transparency, 3) improve the efficiency of the FOIA response process, and 4) enhance monitoring and accountability of FOIA requests.

In furthering our strategic goals, training and FOIA metrics demonstrate the County's continued commitment to improving FOIA compliance and the FOIA response process. The countywide FOIA program trained over 450 County employees on FOIA compliance in FY 2020. In addition to training, to measure performance of the countywide FOIA program and the overall countywide FOIA response

process, FOIA request data is captured by all County agencies, and regularly analyzed to determine the volume and impact of FOIA countywide. The countywide FOIA program publishes annual metrics on the countywide impact of FOIA requests and FOIA fees. Recent data captured in the FY 2020 annual report includes:

- Total FOIA requests: 11,762
- Average countywide FOIA response time: 2 business days
- Total FOIA fees assessed: \$94,253
- Total FOIA fee waivers: 6,479

This data is critical to furthering the goals of the countywide FOIA program and guides our strategic direction on improving the countywide FOIA response process for both County staff and FOIA requesters.

## Pandemic Response and Impact

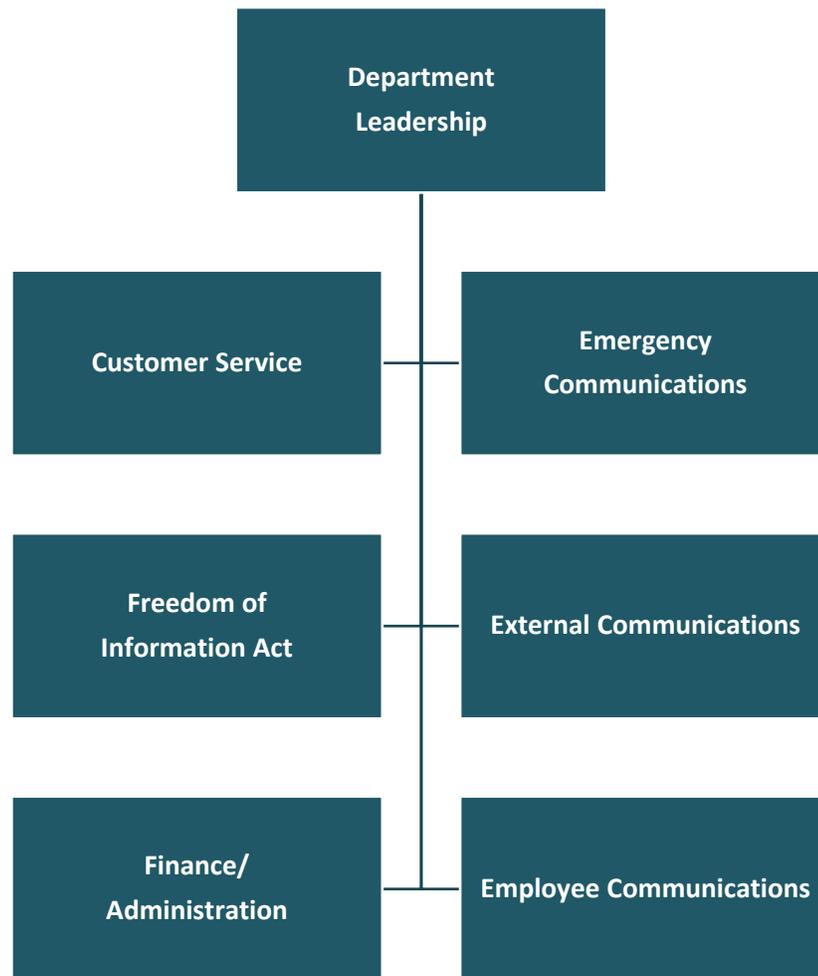
OPA began coordinating COVID-19 communications during the first week of March 2020 and activated its Joint Information Center (JIC) on March 13. Initially located at the Health Department, with support from other County PIOs, the JIC went virtual in early April. The agency also set up a dedicated page on the County public web site ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/covid19](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/covid19)) in mid-March to provide one central location for COVID-19 related information from the County. The web site includes data; health and safety information; assistance and support for the business community; guidance on donating and volunteering; and a language portal which provides translated documents, video and audio in Spanish, Vietnamese, Korean, Chinese, Arabic, Urdu, Farsi, American Sign Language, and others. Additionally, the County's Emergency Blog has pushed out information to subscribers and others on key components of the County's response. OPA worked with the Office of Emergency Management to create COVID-19 text alert features in both English and Spanish, which allowed users to subscribe for regular text updates. County social channels have been an extremely effective tool for sharing County information about the pandemic. In addition to leading countywide external communications, OPA has supported the Health Department in all facets of its communications efforts, including a countywide mailing, message coordination and a paid media campaign.

Internally, OPA developed a coronavirus information section for the employees' site on the County intranet, including forms, instructions and other Human Resources information, updates, and guidance on technology (i.e., teleworking), facilities, travel, purchasing and equipment, among other considerations. OPA has also worked with its HR and OEM partners to develop a new employee alert COVID-19 category for text and email updates, facilitated mobile, and non-network access to the County intranet, and collaborated in the development and distribution of executive communications.

The FOIA team is responding to an increase in requests since the start of the pandemic and has assisted the County Attorney's Office and the Office of Clerk Services regarding evolving issues around public meetings as well as Boards, Authorities, and Committees (BACs) in the context of the pandemic. The customer service team continues to assist members of the public via phone and email. Both teams are primarily working remotely.

OPA anticipates continuing to respond to the extensive public and internal communications, FOIA and customer service needs associated with the pandemic for the foreseeable future.

## Organizational Chart



## Budget and Staff Resources

Category	FY 2020 Actual	FY 2021 Adopted	FY 2021 Revised	FY 2022 Advertised	FY 2022 Adopted
<b>FUNDING</b>					
<b>Expenditures:</b>					
Personnel Services	\$1,744,300	\$1,882,433	\$1,902,433	\$1,882,433	\$1,901,244
Operating Expenses	222,356	147,501	153,534	147,501	147,501
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$1,966,656</b>	<b>\$2,029,934</b>	<b>\$2,055,967</b>	<b>\$2,029,934</b>	<b>\$2,048,745</b>
Less:					
Recovered Costs	(\$213,322)	(\$239,882)	(\$239,882)	(\$239,882)	(\$239,882)
<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>\$1,753,334</b>	<b>\$1,790,052</b>	<b>\$1,816,085</b>	<b>\$1,790,052</b>	<b>\$1,808,863</b>
<b>AUTHORIZED POSITIONS/FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT (FTE)</b>					
Regular	21 / 21	21 / 21	22 / 22	22 / 22	22 / 22

**FY 2022  
Funding  
Adjustments**

The following funding adjustments from the FY 2021 Adopted Budget Plan are necessary to support the FY 2022 program. Included are all adjustments recommended by the County Executive that were approved by the Board of Supervisors, as well as any additional Board of Supervisors' actions, as approved in the adoption of the Budget on May 4, 2021.

**Employee Compensation** **\$18,811**  
An increase of \$18,811 in Personnel Services is included for a 1.00 percent market rate adjustment (MRA) for all employees effective July 2021.

**Changes to  
FY 2021  
Adopted  
Budget Plan**

The following funding adjustments reflect all approved changes in the FY 2021 Revised Budget Plan since passage of the FY 2021 Adopted Budget Plan. Included are all adjustments made as part of the FY 2020 Carryover Review, FY 2021 Mid-Year Review, FY 2021 Third Quarter Review, and all other approved changes through April 30, 2021.

**Carryover Adjustments** **\$6,033**  
As part of the FY 2020 Carryover Review, the Board of Supervisors approved encumbered funding of \$6,033 in Operating Expenses associated with utility payments and expenses for communications and media services.

**Position Adjustments** **\$0**  
In order to better align staff and workload requirements, the County Executive approved the redirection of 1/1.0 FTE position to OPA to coordinate language access services in FY 2021.

**Third Quarter Adjustments** **\$20,000**  
As part of the FY 2021 Third Quarter Review, the Board of Supervisors approved funding of \$20,000 in Personnel Services for a one-time compensation adjustment of \$1,000 for merit employees and \$500 for non-merit employees paid in May 2021.

**Position Detail**

The FY 2022 Adopted Budget Plan includes the following positions:

OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS – 22 Positions			
1	Director	5	Information Officers III
1	Assistant Director	2	Information Officers II
1	Management Analyst IV	2	Information Officers I
2	Management Analysts II	1	Administrative Assistant V
1	Communications Specialist I	2	Administrative Assistants IV
2	Information Officers IV	1	Administrative Assistant III
1	Public Safety Information Officer IV		

## Performance Measurement Results

OPA’s platforms to deliver information continue to meet the public’s changing expectations. From NewsCenter, a countywide news and engagement website, to social media tools such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Nextdoor, Flickr and SlideShare, OPA strives to provide a variety of means for the public and the media to receive County-related information and engage with their local government.

The County’s main Facebook account is currently used as a performance measurement indicator to track the growth in use of that predominant social media tool for customers – the public and the media – to obtain important information about Fairfax County. Major changes by Facebook in recent years led to an overall decline in impressions across all accounts during FY 2018 and FY 2019. However, COVID-19 content once again reasserted Facebook as a significant platform to share information with the community as FY 2020 broke 12 years of Facebook metrics records for the County.

Facebook remains a critical platform for the County’s 20+ accounts to share information and OPA will continue publishing content to the main account and provide oversight to all accounts.

The efficiency of Facebook reach per dedicated FTE increased as OPA redirected resources from Facebook (from 2.5 FTE to 1.5 FTE) in order to staff other essential communication tools such as Nextdoor, Instagram, and the County website.

Indicator	FY 2018 Actual	FY 2019 Actual	FY 2020 Estimate	FY 2020 Actual	FY 2021 Estimate	FY 2022 Estimate
Percent change in Facebook reach (main account)	(23.1%)	(9.9%)	(0.9%)	98.1%	20.0%	20.0%

A complete list of performance measures can be viewed at <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/budget/fy-2022-adopted-performance-measures-pm>