

# Office of Public Affairs

**Mission** To lead coordinated communications, customer service, language access and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) requests from a countywide perspective that connects County 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 to maintain an informed and motivated workforce.

**Focus** The Office of Public Affairs (OPA) is the central communications office for the County and, as such, provides essential information to the public, elected and appointed officials, County agencies, and the media concerning County programs and services. 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 editorial planning, social media, compliance with the Virginia Freedom of Information Act (VFOIA), language access, and countywide customer service.

OPA coordinates a comprehensive, centralized public affairs program for the County while also providing communications consulting to County agencies. Employee internal communications, countywide web content management, social media, customer service and emergency communications are 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; supporting agencies that do not have their own public information staff; and coordinating with agencies which do have embedded communications staff. Strategies to address these critical issues include increasing collaboration with agencies, enhancing information on the County's intranet and internet websites, and continuing to explore tools for reaching all 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, and Nextdoor. These websites are all utilized to provide direct communication on important County matters to the public. The public reach of these tools has grown exponentially over the past few years enabling 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). OPA monitors incoming VFOIA requests and is committed to continually improving the efficiency of the VFOIA response process to maintain the County's commitment to public transparency. Strategies to implement this commitment include: ensuring agency compliance with countywide FOIA policies, VFOIA laws and policies, and state and federal records laws; providing quarterly training on these laws and policies 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. 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 (English and Spanish)
- Twitter (English and Spanish)
- 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

## **NewsCenter**

In FY 2021, a new NewsCenter was unveiled in partnership with the Department of Information Technology (DIT) ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/news](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/news)). The NewsCenter currently serves as the central focal point for publishing news for residents. OPA's vision for the 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. The NewsCenter has been recognized with several awards, including the Governor's Technology Award and the National Association of Counties Achievement Award.

## **Social Media**

OPA continues its social media publishing role leading daily information dissemination on multiple County platforms reaching the community. OPA also leads the entire County social media program including oversight, 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 2021 was addressing legal issues related to official social media accounts. OPA has worked closely with the Office of the County Attorney and the Board of Supervisors to address new legal requirements for official social media accounts. In FY 2021, OPA successfully completed an updated County social media policy for publishers after working with the Office of Internal Audit (IAO).

## **County Website**

OPA continues its work to support the County website including managing 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](http://fairfaxcounty.gov). In FY 2021, OPA published an updated Website Content Policy for all publishers.

## **Community Engagement**

In FY 2021, OPA took on a leadership role for Inclusive Community Engagement in partnership with One Fairfax and Neighborhood and Community Services (NCS). This work will lead to process improvements, standards, coordination and ensuring a more equitable way for the County to engage the community.

## **Digital Team**

Within external communications, OPA's digital team continues 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 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 groundbreaking 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 need access to a small workspace.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the customer service team partnered with DIT 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. In May 2020, the Customer Service team partnered with the Department of Tax Administration (DTA) and recorded a COVID-19 announcement for 703-Fairfax in Spanish and English. The announcement directed callers to the COVID-19 information line and the Emergency Information Blog for the latest COVID-19 updates.

	FY 2020	FY 2021	% Difference
<b>703-Fairfax Calls</b>	34,837	37,510	8 percent increase
<b>703-Fairfax Voicemails</b>	3,519	7,859	123 percent increase
<b>Information Desk Walk-ups</b>	12,857	8,248	36 percent decrease
<b>703-Fairfax Emails</b>	6,332	4,340	31 percent decrease
<b>Public Meeting Posts</b>	1,566	1,495	5 percent decrease

**Employee Communications**

OPA provides the central point of coordination for countywide internal communications, supporting individual agency communication 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.

COVID-19 communications remained the primary focus of the County’s employee communications program in FY 2021. As the circumstances of the pandemic have continued to evolve, so have the information needs of the workforce serving in varied settings, from remote work to the front lines of customer service. FY 2021 began with the Commonwealth moving into Phase Three of Gov. Ralph Northam’s “Forward Virginia” plan. Capacity limits increased and some employees who had been teleworking or on leave returned to the workplace as the physical provision of services expanded. This was the first significant change of the year and required extensive communications to employees and updates to reference materials including the Fairfax Forward Employee Guide and other online information, as well as direct messaging to employees.

OPA maintains the Coronavirus Information for Employees site, on the County’s intranet, as the central hub of internal COVID-19 communications. The site averages approximately 5,000 unique viewers and between 10,000 and 15,000 views per month, and features content on training, facilities, travel, technology and more, along with regularly updated FAQs covering everything from leave to vaccination requirements.

NewsLink, the daily email newsletter, continues to be distributed to more than 12,000 employees each workday. In addition to essential information on everything from training to Open Enrollment, 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 during COVID-19, the countywide calendar provides easy access to these online offerings.

Major internal projects in the past year have included the development of a video testimony tracker, a tool on the SharePoint platform that facilitates a smooth process for tracking and approving testimonies submitted via video, ensuring playback quality and that each testimony meets the topic guidelines, uses appropriate language, etc. This method of testimony has increased dramatically since the beginning of the pandemic. The tracker provides a streamlined, one-stop system where staff can access and approve videos.

Additionally, OPA offers guidance and training on internal communications, including 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, the media, and other partner agencies and stakeholders.

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 that OPA must continue to 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)); County website; Facebook; Twitter (both County and agency-specific accounts); YouTube; Instagram; Nextdoor; Flickr; SoundCloud; emails, text and pager messages from Fairfax Alerts and the Employee 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 (OPA utilizes video online and on Channel 16); media interviews; the County mobile app; and regional websites such as [www.ReadyNOVA.org](http://www.ReadyNOVA.org).

Emergency blog views/visitors have increased significantly in calendar year 2020 as well as 2021 due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Views and number of visitors to the blog are greatly influenced by emergency events – such as large-scale emergencies like hurricanes, winter weather events, and COVID-19 in 2020 and 2021. The COVID-19 pandemic has brought the highest number of monthly views and visitors to the emergency blog since it was created. During spikes in cases of the virus, such as from March 2020 to May 2020 and from January 2021 to March 2021, the number of views and visitors grew exponentially. The highest number of views ever experienced by the blog was in March 2020 (with 761,932 views and 267,661 visitors) followed by January 2021 (512,062 views and 207,639 visitors).

In addition to the actual number of blog post views, each time an article is published, approximately 7,680 e-mail subscribers and more than 500 blog followers using WordPress receive the article. There is no way to quantify how many of these recipients then share OPA's information with their followers.

OPA continues its involvement on the County's Exercise Planning Team in planning County tabletop and functional exercises to ensure smooth operations during emergencies. OPA staff also participate in countywide exercises, as well as participating in the exercise simulation cell (Sim Cell) and Emergency Operations Center for larger, multi-agency and department-specific events.

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

OPA enhances public access to Fairfax 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, and provides 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. To achieve these goals, the countywide FOIA program provides VFOIA compliance training and FOIA request processing guidance to all Fairfax County agencies, Boards, Authorities, Commissions, and the Board of Supervisors' offices.

COVID-19 brought new challenges to OPA and other County agencies in responding to FOIA requests and conducting public meetings. To ensure the public's access to public information and public meetings were not negatively impacted, the FOIA program provided strategic oversight of new and improved methods by which certain public meetings were conducted, implemented a FOIA fee portal to allow for electronic payment of FOIA fees, maintained average response times, and provided timely guidance on complying with newly adopted changes to VFOIA.

In furthering OPA's strategic goals, the following training and FOIA performance metrics demonstrate the County's continued commitment to improving FOIA compliance and the FOIA response process:

#### *FOIA Trainings Offered*

- 21 training events
- 259 attendees

#### *FOIA Requests*

- Total FOIA requests: 12,840
- FOIA requests managed by OPA: 766
- Total FOIA fees assessed: \$86,758
- Total FOIA fee waivers: 7,934
- Average countywide FOIA response time: 2 business days

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

### **Fairfax County Language Access Strategy**

The County's Language Access Program (LAP) was reestablished in 2020. Fairfax County's efforts to continue developing the county's language access program is an integral part of ensuring Fairfax County is an inclusive county that embodies social equity, race, immigrant integration, and social justice into policies, practices, programs, and budget decisions to create equitable outcomes. This program is key to ensuring the equitable distribution of communication of benefits, services, and resources to all county residents, regardless of their English proficiency. This program aims to serve the 31 percent of county residents with limited English proficiency (LEP) who identify themselves as speaking English "less than very well."

LAP is centered around the three goals of promoting cultural competency, enhancing the efficiency of the County's translation process, and strengthening partnerships to meet the needs of the County's multilingual and cultural communities.

As part of the FY 2023 Adopted Budget Plan, three new language access positions were approved to supplement the one existing position in the OPA. The new Language Access Team will work with multiple county agencies to update the County's language access policy (PM 02-08) and identify Language Access Coordinators in each agency.

In addition, OPA has also led efforts to implement technological and support solutions to staff to provide information in the seven predominant non-English languages spoken in the County (Spanish, Arabic, Farsi, Korean, Vietnamese, Chinese, and Urdu) during the COVID-19 pandemic. In partnership with NCS and the Park Authority, OPA has established a Multilingual Pilot Program and has trained, tested, and validated ten County staff to translate COVID-19 communication into these languages. Since July 2021, there have been 1,304 completed requests, saving taxpayers approximately \$619,812 based on the current translation rate per document with a response time of only 1-2 days.

### **Multilingual Communications**

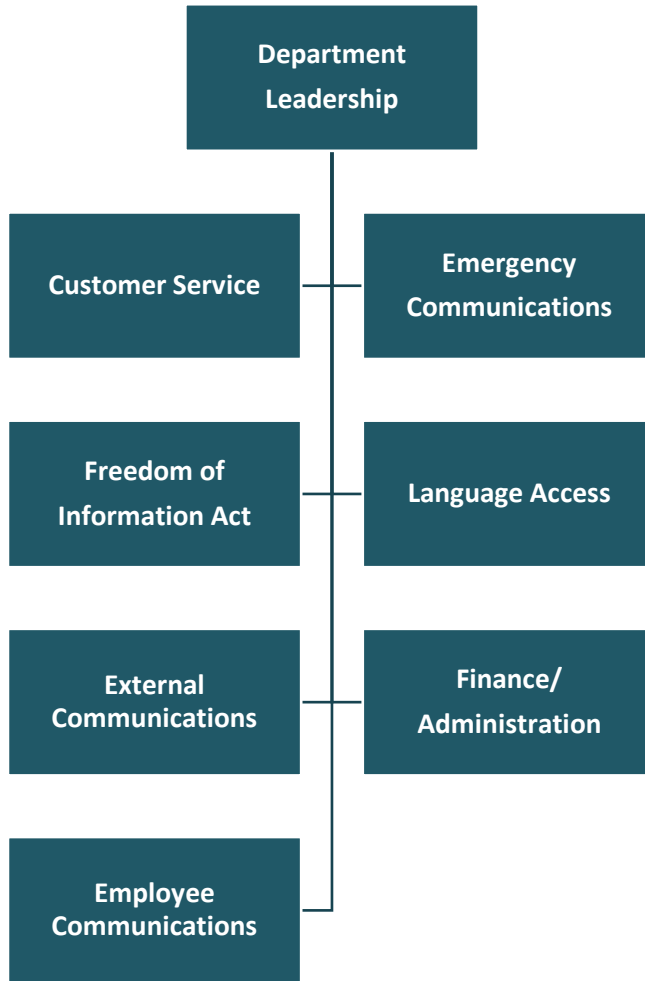
#### **Social media**

OPA created the County's first Spanish language Facebook and Twitter pages in 2020. Content is created and managed by the County's Language and Access Strategy Manager. These pages have quickly become a vital resource for agencies to communicate with the County's growing Spanish-speaking community. During the height of COVID-19 response, OPA created a weekly Facebook live segments and, to date, 31 segments have been broadcasted.

#### **In-Language Media**

The Spanish-language media strategy was established from the start of the Language Access Strategy position. Continued coverage by Spanish-language networks such as Univision, Telemundo, and other such media outlets have become a priority for the county.

## Organizational Chart



## Budget and Staff Resources

Category	FY 2021 Actual	FY 2022 Adopted	FY 2022 Revised	FY 2023 Advertised	FY 2023 Adopted
<b>FUNDING</b>					
<b>Expenditures:</b>					
Personnel Services	\$1,795,494	\$1,901,244	\$2,035,906	\$2,541,273	\$2,541,273
Operating Expenses	146,044	147,501	152,322	357,386	357,386
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$1,941,538</b>	<b>\$2,048,745</b>	<b>\$2,188,228</b>	<b>\$2,898,659</b>	<b>\$2,898,659</b>
Less:					
Recovered Costs	(\$257,725)	(\$239,882)	(\$239,882)	(\$239,882)	(\$239,882)
<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>\$1,683,813</b>	<b>\$1,808,863</b>	<b>\$1,948,346</b>	<b>\$2,658,777</b>	<b>\$2,658,777</b>
<b>AUTHORIZED POSITIONS/FULL-TIME EQUIVALENT (FTE)</b>					
Regular	22 / 22	22 / 22	23 / 23	26 / 26	26 / 26



## FY 2023 Funding Adjustments

*The following funding adjustments from the FY 2022 Adopted Budget Plan are necessary to support the FY 2023 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 10, 2022.*

### **Employee Compensation** **\$113,748**

An increase of \$113,748 in Personnel Services includes \$80,789 for a 4.01 percent market rate adjustment (MRA) for all employees and \$32,959 for performance-based and longevity increases for non-uniformed merit employees, both effective July 2022.

### **Office of Strategy Management for Health and Human Services Realignment** **\$119,483**

An increase of \$119,483 is associated with the realignment of funding and a position as a result of a reorganizational review of Agency 77, Office of Strategy Management for Health and Human Services (OSM), approved as part of the *FY 2021 Carryover Review*. This funding includes \$114,662 in Personnel Services to support the transfer of 1/1.0 FTE position and \$4,821 in Operating Expenses. This reorganization includes the re-envisioning of Health and Human Services strategic policy and planning efforts, previously coordinated by the OSM. Moving forward, this work will continue through a hybrid of centralized cross-system coordination and imbedded corporate agency supports. There is no net impact on the General Fund in terms of funding or positions associated with these changes.

### **Language Access** **\$616,683**

An increase of \$616,683 includes an increase of \$411,619 in Personnel Services and 3/3.0 FTE new positions, as well as \$205,064 in Operating Expenses. The Language Access program will strengthen equitable access to information ensuring effective communication in the most commonly spoken languages in Fairfax County. The Language Access program will provide strategic guidance, collect and analyze data, developing training and implement tools and resources to translate County information ensuring language is not barrier. It should be noted that an increase of \$152,601 in Fringe Benefits is included in Agency 89, Employee Benefits, for a total of \$769,284. For further information on Fringe Benefits, refer to the Agency 89, Employee Benefits, narrative in the Nondepartmental program area of Volume 1.

## Changes to FY 2022 Adopted Budget Plan

*The following funding adjustments reflect all approved changes in the FY 2022 Revised Budget Plan since passage of the FY 2022 Adopted Budget Plan. Included are all adjustments made as part of the FY 2021 Carryover Review, FY 2022 Mid-Year Review, FY 2022 Third Quarter Review, and all other approved changes through April 30, 2022.*

### **Carryover Adjustments** **\$139,483**

As part of the *FY 2021 Carryover Review*, the Board of Supervisors approved funding of \$139,483, including \$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 November 2021; as well as \$119,483 associated with the realignment of 1/1.0 FTE position from Agency 77, Office of Strategy Management for Health and Human Services (OSM) as part of the OSM reorganization.

## Position Detail

The FY 2023 Adopted Budget Plan includes the following positions:

OFFICE OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS – 26 Positions			
1	Director	5	Information Officers III
1	Assistant Director	2	Information Officers II
2	Management Analysts IV [+1]	2	Information Officers I
3	Management Analysts II [+1]	1	Administrative Associate [+1]
1	Communications Specialist IV	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		
+	Denotes New Position(s)		

## Performance Measurement Results

OPA’s platforms deliver information to continue meeting the public’s needs. 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 to engage with their local government.

Facebook remains the primary online information dissemination platform for the County. The County’s main Facebook account is currently used as a performance measurement indicator to track the overall growth in all customers’ social media interaction with Fairfax County. Major changes by Facebook starting in 2018 initially led to an overall decline in impressions during FY 2018 and FY 2019. However, with the onset of COVID-19 in March 2020, Facebook once again reasserted itself as a significant platform to share information with the community as FY 2020’s reach marked the highest annual number of views in the 12 years of Facebook metric records collected by the County. Facebook reach remained at similar levels to FY 2020 as the pandemic continued throughout FY 2021.

It is anticipated that there will be additional growth in the use of Facebook by the community in FY 2022 and FY 2023. OPA plans to redirect resources to create more content for the Facebook page which will drive more engagement with the community. This increased community engagement is expected to lead to additional reach of the Facebook page.

Indicator	FY 2019 Actual	FY 2020 Actual	FY 2021 Estimate	FY 2021 Actual	FY 2022 Estimate	FY 2023 Estimate
Percent change in Facebook reach (main account)	(9.9%)	98.1%	20.0%	(0.3%)	5.3%	20.0%

A complete list of performance measures can be viewed at <https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/budget/fy-2023-adopted-performance-measures-pm>