

Lines of Business

LOB #10:

CONSUMER AFFAIRS

Purpose

Consumer Affairs resolves consumer complaints and tenant-landlord disputes through investigation, mediation, and arbitration while protecting Fairfax County consumers from illegal, fraudulent, deceptive, and dangerous practices. Consumer Affairs educates the public on a range of consumer matters, providing resources that help consumers make informed decisions. Consumer outreach activities include educational seminars, *Consumer Affairs Tip Sheets*, *Consumer Podcasts*, the *Consumer Central* Web pages at fairfaxcounty.gov/consumer, Facebook posts, the *Informed Consumer* e-Newsletter, and responses to individual consumer inquiries. Consumer Affairs educates and supports over 2,000 homeowners, condominium, and civic associations on issues relevant to common interest communities.

Description

Consumer Affairs addresses a range of consumer matters and complaints, including home improvements, landscaping, foreclosures, vehicle purchases, cable television, utility service, retail shopping, and tenant-landlord disputes, to protect Fairfax County consumers from illegal, fraudulent, deceptive, and dangerous business practices.

Consumer Affairs investigates and mediates consumer complaints and tenant-landlord disputes. A County consumer who files a complaint with Consumer Affairs is assigned to a Consumer Specialist who works promptly to resolve the complaint to the satisfaction of both parties through mediation, conciliation, or binding arbitration. A *Consumer Specialist of the Day* responds to phone, email, and walk-in inquiries seeking general consumer assistance.

Consumer Affairs conducts educational seminars on consumer trends and topics including identity theft, financial scams, responsible use of credit, retail purchasing, and tenant-landlord responsibilities, providing resources to avoid scams and fraud. Audiences include older adults, students, and faith-based, community, and civic organizations. Consumer Affairs educates consumers by producing *Consumer Affairs Tip Sheets*, *Consumer Podcasts*, the *Consumer Central* Web pages at fairfaxcounty.gov/consumer, Facebook posts, and the *Informed Consumer* e-Newsletter.

Consumer Affairs educates and supports over 2,000 homeowners, condominium, and civic associations. On an annual basis, Consumer Affairs updates and publishes the *Community Association Supplement Guide* with information on current common interest community laws and services. Consumer Affairs hosts the *Your Community, You're Connected* television program shown on Fairfax County Government Channel 16, providing advice and guidance to common interest communities.

Consumer Affairs provides staff support to the Consumer Protection Commission and the Tenant-Landlord Commission.

Department of Cable and Consumer Services

Benefits

Consumer Affairs benefits consumers and businesses in Fairfax County by mediating complaints and avoiding costly court claims. The following table compares FY 2015 Consumer Affairs to other consumer offices in the region:

| | Population | Positions | Complaints | Recovery | Outreach | Budget |
|---------------------------------|------------|-----------|------------|-----------|----------|-------------|
| Fairfax County, VA ¹ | 1,120,875 | 11 | 974 | \$603,127 | 227 | \$452,065 |
| Montgomery County, MD | 1,017,000 | 16 | 1,208 | \$770,000 | 10 | \$2,256,236 |
| Washington, DC | 658,893 | 3 | 365 | N/A | 37 | \$288,000 |
| Howard County, MD | 304,580 | 4 | 282 | \$120,551 | 49 | \$445,787 |

¹ Fairfax County's position total includes 8 positions supported by the General Fund and 3 supported by Fund 40030, Cable Communications.

Maintaining Safe and Caring Communities

Consumer Affairs resolves consumer complaints and tenant-landlord disputes, protecting the property of consumers and the community, and supports the *Maintaining Safe and Caring Communities* County Vision Element. In FY 2015, Consumer Affairs responded to 8,527 case inquiries. Consumer Affairs' FY 2015 mediation and arbitration efforts recovered \$603,127 for consumers.

Connecting People and Places

Consumer Affairs conducts educational outreach, both in-person and via social media, and supports the *Connecting People and Places* County Vision Element. In FY 2015, Consumer Affairs conducted 227 outreach events at government centers, senior centers, schools, homeless shelters, and the Adult Detention Center. Consumer Affairs addressed topics including identity theft, financial scams, responsible use of credit, retail purchasing, and tenant-landlord responsibilities to protect the personal safety and property of consumers. Consumer Affairs' educational initiatives enhance the community's access to information through *Consumer Affairs Tip Sheets*, *Consumer Podcasts*, the *Consumer Central* Web pages at fairfaxcounty.gov/consumer, Facebook posts, and the *Informed Consumer* e-Newsletter. Consumer Affairs works with over 2,000 homeowners, condominium, and civic associations. The annual *Community Association Supplement Guide* provides associations with information on common interest community laws and services. The *Your Community; You're Connected* television program shown on Fairfax County Government Channel 16 provides advice and guidance to common interest communities.

Mandates

The establishment of a local Consumer Affairs office is enabled by [Code of Virginia](#) Ann. Title 15.2, *Counties, Cities and Towns*, Chapter 9, *General Powers and Local Governments*, §15.2-963, *Local offices of consumer affairs; establishments; powers and duties*. Local office of consumer affairs duties are "To serve as a central coordinating agency and clearinghouse for receiving and investigating complaints of illegal, fraudulent, deceptive, or dangerous practices . . . to attempt to resolve complaints received . . . by means of voluntary mediation or arbitration . . . to develop programs of community consumer education and information . . . to maintain records of consumer complaints . . ."

Consumer Affairs representation of consumer interests are set forth in [Fairfax County Code](#) Chapter 10, *Consumer Protection*, Article 2, *Department of Cable and Consumer Services*, §10-2-1-10-2-9. Consumer Affairs duties are to "Receive and investigate complaints. Refer complaints and action thereon. Resolve consumer complaints. Maintain records. Consumer information and education. Represent consumer interests. Analyze consumer problems."

Department of Cable and Consumer Services

Trends and Challenges

Consumer Affairs case inquiries (complaints, advice, and walk-ins) have increased over the last several years. In FY 2013 Consumer Affairs responded to 7,314 case inquiries, 7,678 in FY 2014, and 8,527 in FY 2015. Areas of particular consumer interest include home repair and improvement, identity theft, medical identity theft, retail purchases, and tenant-landlord matters. Consumers are increasingly reporting weather-related property damage and expressing concern about potential contractor fraud and door-to-door solicitation scams. Consumer Affairs' on-line presence assists the public with the complaint submission process, with 84 percent of all complaints filed online in FY 2015. Consumer Affairs expects these trends to continue in the future.

Consumer Affairs' challenges involve the increasing complexity of consumer issues and just-in-time, on-demand requests for information and assistance. The expertise and resources of Consumer Affairs will help ensure an educated and informed community by keeping abreast of issues and providing prompt, responsive service to County consumers.

Resources

| Category | FY 2014 Actual | FY 2015 Actual | FY 2016 Adopted |
|---|------------------|------------------|------------------|
| LOB #10: Consumer Affairs | | | |
| FUNDING | | | |
| <u>Expenditures:</u> | | | |
| Compensation | \$502,406 | \$508,348 | \$432,395 |
| Operating Expenses | 17,125 | 17,473 | 19,670 |
| Total Expenditures | \$519,531 | \$525,821 | \$452,065 |
| General Fund Revenue | \$0 | \$0 | \$0 |
| Net Cost/(Savings) to General Fund | \$519,531 | \$525,821 | \$452,065 |
| POSITIONS | | | |
| Authorized Positions/Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs) | | | |
| <u>Positions:</u> | | | |
| Regular | 8 / 8 | 8 / 8 | 8 / 8 |
| Total Positions | 8 / 8 | 8 / 8 | 8 / 8 |

Department of Cable and Consumer Services

Metrics

| Metric Indicator | FY 2013 Actual | FY 2014 Actual | FY 2015 Actual | FY 2016 Estimate | FY 2017 Estimate |
|--|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Number of case inquiries | 7,314 | 7,678 | 8,527 | 7,980 | 7,980 |
| Percent of case inquiries closed | 98% | 99% | 100% | 98% | 98% |
| Amount recovered for County consumers | \$560,261 | \$410,491 | \$603,127 | \$524,626 | \$524,626 |
| Number of consumer educational seminars conducted | 172 | 224 | 227 | 230 | 230 |
| Number of people attending consumer educational seminars | 5,362 | 6,918 | 7,249 | 7,310 | 7,310 |

Number of case inquiries

In FY 2015, Consumer Affairs responded to 8,527 case inquiries (complaints, advice, walk-ins) including home improvements, landscaping, foreclosures, vehicle purchases, cable television, utility service, retail shopping, and tenant-landlord disputes. Case inquiries have increased approximately 17 percent since FY 2013.

Percent of case inquiries closed

Consumer Affairs responds immediately to case inquiries, obtaining a prompt and acceptable resolution for both parties while closing 100 percent of the case inquiries in FY 2015.

Amount recovered for County consumers

Businesses are increasingly conscious of the impact that social media has on their business and, in an effort to reassure consumers who may resort to negative comments or reviews on social media, appear to be willing to resolve complaints through Consumer Affairs, which contributed to the recovery of \$603,127 for consumers by Consumer Affairs in FY 2015.

Number of consumer educational seminars conducted

In FY 2015, Consumer Affairs conducted 227 educational seminars on consumer trends and topics including identity theft, financial scams, responsible use of credit, retail purchasing, and tenant-landlord responsibilities, providing resources to avoid scams and fraud. The number of educational outreach seminars has increased by 32 percent since FY 2013.

Number of people attending consumer educational seminars

Over 7,200 people attended Consumer Affairs educational seminars in FY 2015, an increase of 35 percent since FY 2013. Audiences include older adults, students, and faith-based, community, and civic organizations.