

Office of Public Affairs

LOB #39:

MEDIA RELATIONS

Purpose

The Fairfax County Office of Public Affairs (OPA) handles media relations for the County 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The OPA director is the primary County spokesperson to the media. Media relations demand a significant time investment from OPA developing media relations strategies, message development, contact and follow-up.

Today's media expects constant response including weekends and holidays. OPA also monitors and responds extensively to the media through multiple social media channels such as Facebook and Twitter.

Due to our proximity to the nation's capital, OPA regularly provides information to local, regional, national and international media outlets. For this reason, media relations demand a considerable time investment from the Office of Public Affairs.

Description

There are 2/1.70 FTE positions associated with this line of business.

OPA approaches media relations in two ways: proactive and reactive. Every effort is made to proactively tell the County's positive stories and to make use of traditional, social and specialized media to provide residents with information on programs, services and initiatives.

Outreach to traditional media includes pitching stories to newspapers, radio stations, television stations and blogs. Reaching out to social media includes targeting messages toward Twitter, Facebook, blogs and discussion forums. Outreach to specialized media, such as trade publications, allows the County to promote stories in narrowly focused outlets that help reach a particular target audience.

The following activities are designed to building strong media relations:

Media Spokesperson

The Director of OPA serves as County spokesperson for the County with OPA staff filling this role in his absence. The office responds to an average of 50 media calls each month, which require an average of nearly 20 minutes each to complete. All non-OPA communicators in the County have a dotted-line reporting relationship with the OPA Director. In the event that there is an incident involving more than two County agencies, OPA takes the lead in coordinating communications.

Communications Policies and Procedures

OPA writes or revises policies and procedures to reflect changing priorities. The main objective is to ensure that countywide communications reflect the County's strategic priorities and the "common message, many voices" philosophy.

Media Database

OPA maintains a current list of more than 150 reporters and media outlets. This list is shared with other County agencies to ensure that information is disseminated to the same audience throughout Fairfax County.

Proactive Media Contacts

OPA researches, writes, edits and distributes NewsWire and social media posts to print, broadcast and online media to inform them of County events and issues. The information is also posted online with a "Really Simple Syndication" (RSS) feed to allow the public immediate access to the news as well. OPA also pitches stories proactively through email and telephone to individual reporters on various topics.

Office of Public Affairs

FOIA Meeting Schedule

OPA prepares and distributes a weekly FOIA meeting notice to media, as mandated by Virginia Code §§ 2.2-3707 through 3708 and 3714 requiring publishing notices of public meetings. The notice highlights all County meetings where more than two members of the Board of Supervisors may be present.

FOIA Requests

OPA coordinates responses to all FOIA requests from the media, as mandated by Virginia Code §§ 2.2-3700, 3701, 3702, 3703, 3703.1, 3704, 3705.1, 3705.2, 3705.3, 3705.4, 3705.5, 3705.6, 3705.7, 3705.8, 3706 and 3714.

24/7 Media Contacts System

OPA ensures its availability to the media through an on-call system, which provides the media with access to the OPA Director or designated staff member 24 hours a day/seven days a week. The system allows the caller to leave a message and someone responds as soon as possible.

Media Satisfaction Survey

To gauge the quality of its media relations efforts, OPA surveys media representatives in order to obtain their feedback on the effectiveness of OPA's efforts as well as to determine any area of media relations that needs improvement.

News Conferences/Media Events

OPA provides support to the Board of Supervisors and County agencies to plan news conferences, media conferences and ceremonies such as the inauguration ceremony for newly elected Board members or other elected officials. An example of a high-profile event is the annual news conference with the County Executive and other senior managers on the proposed budget.

Social Media

OPA monitors online media outlets, such as blogs and discussion forums, to stay up-to-date on the pulse of the Fairfax County community. This media provides the County with instant feedback on current topics and allows the County to respond in a timely and effective manner when necessary. OPA also created a social media policy outlining how County agencies can utilize social media, including blogs, discussion forums, social networking sites, photo-sharing websites, video-sharing websites, wikis, virtual reality, podcasts and RSS feeds.

Benefits

Developing and maintaining a strong relationship with the media enables Fairfax County to share news, information and messages proactively, as well as respond quickly with information when needed. An effective relationship with the media also helps the Office of Public Affairs react quickly to developing stories and/or correct information on social media. This benefits our community and helps the public be more informed, especially during an emergency.

Strong relationships with the media also build credibility and integrity, and establish knowledgeable connections between the government, media and the public. Having a lead communications agency ensures that messages reflect the County's strategic priorities, that OPA is open and transparent, and speaks with one consistent voice. OPA places strong emphasis on the "common message, many voices" strategy.

OPA also works extensively with all County agencies, setting policy and providing guidance for developing media strategies and message development. OPA regularly connects with each agency to make sure responses are rapid, transparent and provide updated information. Most importantly, OPA must ensure all agencies are communicating the same message.

Office of Public Affairs

Mandates

OPA coordinates responses to all Virginia Freedom of Information Act (VFOIA) requests from the media as mandated by Virginia Code §§ 2.2-3700, 3701, 3702, 3703, 3703.1, 3704, 3705.1, 3705.2, 3705.3, 3705.4, 3705.5, 3705.6, 3705.7, 3705.8, 3706 and 3714.

In addition, OPA prepares and distributes a weekly FOIA meeting notice to media, as mandated by Virginia Code §§ 2.2-3707 through 3708 and 3714 requiring publishing notices of public meetings.

Trends and Challenges

The Office of Public Affairs now operates in a 24/7 environment where information is shared instantly via social media. OPA provides news to the media and the public via social media at all times of the day, every day.

Also, partially due to cutbacks in traditional media as well as the availability of technology, many more people now publish news via blogs, websites and social media so OPA constantly works with multiple smaller news sites and must respond to them the same way as large media outlets.

In addition, almost everyone has access to mobile phones. As a result, pictures and video can be shot by anyone and turned into news. OPA faces the challenges of continuing to evolve and respond to this new age of news gathering.

Resources

Category	FY 2014 Actual	FY 2015 Actual	FY 2016 Adopted
LOB #39: Media Relations			
FUNDING			
<u>Expenditures:</u>			
Compensation	\$136,745	\$127,693	\$135,454
Operating Expenses	11,796	12,960	11,150
Total Expenditures	\$148,541	\$140,653	\$146,604
General Fund Revenue	\$0	\$0	\$0
Net Cost/(Savings) to General Fund	\$148,541	\$140,653	\$146,604
POSITIONS			
Authorized Positions/Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs)			
<u>Positions:</u>			
Regular	2 / 1.8	2 / 1.8	2 / 1.7
Total Positions	2 / 1.8	2 / 1.8	2 / 1.7

Office of Public Affairs

Metrics

Metric Indicator	FY 2013 Actual	FY 2014 Actual	FY 2015 Actual	FY 2016 Estimate	FY 2017 Estimate
General VFOIA requests processed through OPA	NA	115	211	200	200
Media VFOIA requests processed through OPA	NA	9	17	15	15
Responses to media inquiries	396	228	610	500	500
Media satisfaction with OPA services	NA	NA	7.76	8.00	8.50

The trend of increased media requests of in FY 2015 was largely driven by multiple public safety-related issues that generated higher than usual media attention. OPA is now consistently advising the Fairfax County Commonwealth's Attorney, County Attorney, Police Department and Sheriff with media relations strategy development and messaging.

Moving forward, our workload will likely remain the same. A high media interest in police-related issues will continue in near future as this topic has become a national concern. The County also will implement many of the recommendations of the Ad Hoc Police Review Commission in 2015/16, resulting in additional media interest.

In addition, OPA staff will continue to manage a higher level of VFOIA requests related to public safety and other issues that arise. This trend will also continue as OPA helps organize, put into context the information provided and reply to all VFOIA requests received.

Media relations, media response, strategy development and messaging are among OPA's highest priorities and one of our most important Lines of Business. OPA will continue to dedicate the necessary resources to successfully manage media relations at the highest level.