

LOB #41:

## **EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS AND PLANNING**

### **Purpose**

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

Emergency communications encompass:

- Crisis Communications – Planning appropriate actions and coordinating the dissemination of information in response to high-profile or sensitive issues such as on-the-job employee death or employee actions that result in criminal charges.
- Risk Communications – Providing the public with information that reduces anxiety and fear and also provides suggestions for planning that will assist in responding to an emergency event (or pending crisis). Risk communications are intended to do no harm to the current situation, ease public concern and provide guidance on how to respond to the situation.
- Emergency Situations – Predicted or actual events that have the potential to affect the safety, health and welfare of the population such as drinking water contamination or widespread exposure to infectious disease or hazardous materials.
- Staff Support in Emergency Events – Consulting with other agencies to assist in planning actions and collecting, analyzing and disseminating key information to residents, employees and media during emergency or critical incidents.
- Weather Alerts – Predicted or actual weather events such as hurricanes, tornadoes, derechos, severe snow or ice, or other hazardous weather conditions affecting County residents.

### **Description**

OPA is the lead agency in providing emergency public information to Fairfax County residents and businesses as well as County employees. According to the Fairfax County Emergency Operations Plan, this responsibility is defined as Emergency Support Function (ESF) 15: External Affairs. As the lead agency for ESF 15, OPA's mission is:

*“To monitor and provide timely and accurate information to the public, media, private sector, and Fairfax County elected officials and employees during emergencies or threatened emergencies and to provide protective action guidance as appropriate to save lives and protect property.”*

The Emergency Operations Plan also states that “when three or more County agencies are involved in emergency operations, the Office of Public Affairs, as the coordinating agency of ESF 15, will serve as the primary point-of-contact for the release of information to the media and public, and the monitoring and engagement between the County and its various stakeholders.”

In the event of a mass fatality incident (as detailed in the Fairfax County Emergency Operations Plan), ESF 15 also provides support to the Family Assistance Center to include family and media briefings, website and emergency blog postings, news releases and other public information efforts, as well as facilitates communications with family members. OPA is also involved and assists in delivering public information when the Office of Emergency Management establishes Service Information Centers (SICs) in response to emergency events.

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During activations of the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), OPA staff are key players in the EOC organizational structure, serving as the EOC Command and General Staff Public Information Officer (PIO), while the Director of OPA serves in 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 activates the County's JIC, which serves as the central clearinghouse for emergency information distribution, whenever the EOC is activated.

The emergency information blog ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/emergency/blog](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/emergency/blog)) and continued use of social media tools confirm the changing world that government communicators must recognize and adapt to in order to distribute emergency news and information to our various audiences and stakeholders. To that end, OPA uses multiple communication tools and channels. These tools include the blog and County website; Facebook and Twitter (both County and agency-specific accounts); YouTube; SoundCloud; emails, text and pager messages from Fairfax Alerts, which replaced the Community Emergency Alert Network (CEAN) in the summer of 2014, and for employees, the Employee Alert Network (EAN); Fairfax County Government Radio ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/radio](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/radio)); the emergency information hotline as well as internal hotline numbers for County employees; Flickr; RSS news feeds; video (in addition to YouTube, OPA utilizes video online and on Channel 16); media interviews; the County app; regional websites (such as [www.capitalregionupdates.gov](http://www.capitalregionupdates.gov)); conference calls; and Ask Fairfax online chats to communicate with target audiences.

Other responsibilities include the following:

### **County Spokesperson**

The Director of OPA serves as the County's spokesperson on a day-to-day basis. During emergencies, the OPA Director can also serve in this role or depending on the level of the incident, may relinquish that role and provide support and guidance for either the Chairman of the Board of Supervisors or the County Executive (or designee). During emergency events, the OPA Director also serves as a member of the County's Emergency Management Team, consulting with the County Executive and senior management to assist in planning the County's emergency response. The OPA Director is on call 24/7 to respond to emergencies and handle media inquiries.

### **Emergency Information Officer**

During emergencies, the OPA Emergency Information Officer (Public Safety Information Officer IV) serves as operations lead for OPA staff in the response to the incident. This position also supports emergency planning functions for the agency and County, as well as provides support to the OPA Director, Chairman's Office, County Executive and other agencies in responding to emergency incidents.

### **OPA Staff**

Classified as "essential personnel" during times of crisis, OPA staff are available and prepared to respond to emergencies 24 hours a day. Each week, OPA assembles a "Red/Blue" team staffing plan with every member of the agency assigned to an emergency role for a 12-hour shift to ensure that the public affairs function can be staffed during a prolonged emergency event. OPA staff know their roles and responsibilities for emergency communications on a weekly basis and are expected to respond if necessary.

### **NIMS and ICS**

All OPA staff are trained in basic National Incident Management System (NIMS) and Incident Management System (ICS) courses – ICS 100, ICS 200, ICS 700 and ICS 800. Some OPA staff, including the Emergency Information Officer and other senior-level staff, have also been trained in higher level courses such as ICS 232: Effective Communication; ICS 300: Intermediate ICS for Expanding Incidents; and ICS 400: Advanced ICS for Command and General Staff, Complex Incidents and Multiagency Coordination System (MACS).

### **WebEOC**

During emergencies, OPA uses the WebEOC software, as does every other County agency, for incident management tracking and resource requests. All OPA staff are trained in WebEOC and are capable of filling WebEOC/admin positions in the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), Alternate Emergency Operations Center (AEOC), the Emergency Line Call Center or the OPA Operations Center.

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## **Emergency Planning and Exercises**

The agency's Emergency Information Officer serves on numerous countywide efforts in the area of emergency preparedness as well as emergency planning and exercise groups. OPA, due to its lead role in coordinating emergency communications for the County, is one of the few County agencies that is most often involved in emergency exercises, real-world events and activation of the EOC. OPA serves on the countywide Continuity of Operations Planning (COOP) Committee, is a member of the County's Emergency Management Coordinating Committee (EMCC) and most recently, OPA's Deputy Director served as liaison to the 2015 World Police and Fire Games. The Emergency Information Officer and other OPA staff as necessary are involved in all County tabletop and functional exercises – including exercise planning for most exercises – such as recent exercises for the World Police and Fire Games and the Virginia Emergency Response Team Exercise (VERTEX).

## **Emergency Support Function (ESF) 15: External Affairs**

As outlined in the Fairfax County Emergency Operations Plan, OPA is responsible for ESF 15: External Affairs, which includes supervising the dissemination of emergency public information, coordinating and disseminating news releases, serving as the lead spokesperson for release of information to the public and the media, and supervising operation of the Fairfax County Government Emergency Information line (to control rumors and ensure accurate information is available). In addition, OPA has and continues to serve in a leadership role on the regional R-ESF 15 committee.

ESF 15 encompasses the full range of external affairs functions including the following:

- **Public information** includes providing incident-related information through the media and other sources to individuals, families, businesses and industries directly or indirectly affected by the incident;
- **Community relations activities** include identifying and communicating with community leaders, e.g., grass roots, political, religious, business, labor and ethnic, as well as neighborhood advocacy groups to ensure a rapid dissemination of information, identify unmet needs and establish an ongoing dialogue and information exchange; and
- **Government affairs** includes establishing and maintaining contact with members of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors and legislative offices representing the affected areas to provide information about the incident and the status of response and recovery activities. It also includes coordinating responses to inquiries from the Board of Supervisors and other elected officials.

## **PIO Corps**

A component of ESF 15 is the County PIO Corps, comprised of all County government public information officers and communication specialists. As the lead for ESF 15: External Affairs, OPA must perform numerous functions during an emergency event or activation of the EOC including:

- Staffing the Joint Information Center (JIC)
- Staffing and/or providing support to field PIOs at multiple locations
- Coordinating messaging across numerous communication platforms, such as Twitter, Facebook, web pages, video, audio, etc.
- Staffing and supervising call-takers for the Emergency Information Line (if activated)

Due to the multitude of responsibilities and the small number of OPA staff, the OPA Director can assign any County PIO to work an emergency incident. The PIO remains the employee of his/her agency, but for the duration of the event, is assigned to emergency communications functions as part of the PIO Corps as directed by the OPA Director.

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## **Emergency Communication Tools**

During Emergency Operations Center (EOC) activations, the Office of Public Affairs opens a Joint Information Center (JIC). The JIC is a physical location – adjacent to the EOC – where OPA communicators and PIOs from various agencies and disciplines (both County and regional) gather to develop messages, talking points and news releases, as well as coordinate emergency communication efforts to contribute to a positive outcome.

If an emergency event includes adjacent jurisdictions or involves the National Capital Region, a regional Joint Information Center may also be established, most often within the jurisdiction where the incident has occurred. OPA may be required to staff such a regional JIC if established. OPA also staffs and currently manages the region's virtual JIC, Capital Region Updates ([www.capitalregionupdates.gov](http://www.capitalregionupdates.gov)) that provides regional news, information and situational awareness for NCR residents and stakeholders.

OPA disseminates emergency information to various audiences using the tools listed below. A more detailed description and the benefits of each follows in the next section.

- Social Media
- Media Outlets
- Emergency Information Blog
- County Website
- Fairfax County Government Radio
- Fairfax Alerts
- Employee Alert Network (EAN)
- 324-SNOW (7669), 246-SNOW (7669) and 87-SNOW-FFX1 (1-877-669-3391)
- RSS Feeds
- Channel 16
- Emergency Information Line
- Medical Needs/Social Needs Registry
- Health and Safety Podcast
- 703-FAIRFAX (324-7329)
- ESF 15 Business/Nonprofit Update
- News Conferences
- Community Meetings
- Door-to-Door Contact (including flyers)

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

## **Benefits**

**Social Media** – Increasingly, County residents and others are relying on social media such as Twitter and Facebook for news and information, especially during times of crisis. OPA employees are trained in the use of social media and rely on this outlet as a primary way to communicate emergency information quickly to residents as well as the traditional media outlets that follow the County's social media accounts.

**Media Outlets** – A major role of OPA is to distribute emergency communications to the media which becomes a partner to the County in broadcasting life safety and property conservation messages to residents and businesses. OPA maintains media databases and contact information on redundant systems to maintain the ability to contact the media during an emergency. OPA sends news releases, media advisories

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and photo releases, as well as schedules media briefings and news conferences as needed during an emergency.

**Emergency Information Blog** – The blog is the primary online platform used for both preparedness information before and news during an emergency event. Information published on the emergency blog is also repurposed and published on social media sites. ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/emergency/blog](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/emergency/blog))

**County Website** – The web is one of the first places a “wired” community such as Fairfax County turns to for information. In addition to a specific Emergency Information page ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/emergency/](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/emergency/)), OPA posts emergency communications to the home page of the County website during severe weather events and other emergencies. From this home page announcement, web visitors have the opportunity to click to another more detailed page about the current situation that features detailed information, where to find assistance, numbers to call, etc.

**Fairfax County Government Radio** – Following Hurricane Isabel, the County learned that commercial radio outlets simply could not broadcast the amount and depth of information our residents needed and since this area’s media serve the National Capital Region, which includes Northern Virginia, the District of Columbia and Southern Maryland, many jurisdictions had competing messages that caused confusion for residents. Subsequently, OPA developed an internet radio station ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/radio/](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/radio/)) that broadcasts 24/7 where OPA has the capability to tailor messages especially for Fairfax County residents. In addition, those without a computer can call 571-350-2160 to listen to the online stream (station) via telephone.

**Fairfax Alerts** – This network delivers important emergency alerts, notifications and updates during a major crisis or emergency, in addition to day-to-day notices about severe weather and traffic. Messages are delivered to email accounts, cellphones, text pagers and wireless devices. In addition, this tool can be used for non-emergency messages; e.g., residents can sign up to receive alerts about tax due dates, etc. ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/alerts](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/alerts)).

**Employee Alert Network (EAN)** – Similar to Fairfax Alerts, this is the County’s internal alerting and communication tool for providing emergency alerts to County employees.

**324-SNOW (7669), 246-SNOW (7669) and 87-SNOW-FFX1 (1-877-669-3391)** – When snow/ice or other emergency events occur, the County’s workforce, a number of whom travel to Fairfax County from outlying jurisdictions, need timely information on County closures or delayed openings. These dedicated telephone lines feature automated messages that are recorded by OPA staff to provide emergency communications to County employees.

**RSS Feeds** – RSS, which stands for “Really Simple Syndication,” is a way to publish frequently-updated content such as news headlines, podcasts or online blogs, making it possible to keep up with information in an automated manner that’s easier than checking websites manually. County residents, media, businesses, nonprofits and other interested audiences can sign up to receive the feeds automatically. This is especially useful during an emergency such as a severe weather event where conditions change rapidly.

**Channel 16** – OPA uses the County government’s Channel 16 to disseminate emergency information through “crawl” messages that scroll across the television screen. OPA also has the ability in a severe emergency situation to broadcast a full screen of life safety information to Channel 16 viewers.

**Emergency Information Line** – The County’s Emergency Information Line (703-817-7771) features three pre-recorded emergency preparedness messages callers can listen to. During an incident, the welcome message includes updates on the situation with instructions and information. The line is answered during normal business hours (8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) and during an emergency situation where it is staffed at the McConnell Public Safety and Transportation Operations Center (MPSTOC). Call-takers, typically Police or Fire and Rescue recruits or other staff, augment OPA staff in providing emergency information to residents through 20 telephone lines for incoming calls.



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**Medical Needs/Social Needs Registry** – The County’s website contains an online registration area where individuals with medical needs and organizations serving people with social needs can pre-identify themselves so the County can communicate with them during an emergency. OPA was part of the committee that created this registry and also developed the communication plan when this service was launched in 2007.

**Health and Safety Podcast** – This tool is designed to provide emergency preparedness information but can also be used during an emergency incident. The podcast is produced on average twice monthly and features various emergency preparedness news and information from the Office of Emergency Management, Police Department, Fire and Rescue Department, Sheriff’s Office and the Health Department. The OPA Emergency Information Officer writes and records this podcast which can be listened to via the County’s website or downloaded and listened to on a portable device such as an iPod. ([www.fairfaxcounty.gov/podcasts/health-and-safety.htm](http://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/podcasts/health-and-safety.htm))

**703-Fairfax (324-7329)** – This day-to-day information and referral line, staffed by OPA, is also used during emergency events. Depending on the time of the incident or emergency, the line will either be staffed (8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) or feature a recorded message with emergency information and resources residents can use to get more details.

**ESF 15 Business/Nonprofit Update** – OPA created and maintains a list of business and nonprofit organization contacts throughout the County and produces a monthly email newsletter – the ESF 15 Business/Nonprofit Update. This newsletter includes information of interest for ESF 15, as well as articles of interest from national media, upcoming training, and a section featuring emergency preparedness information and news.

**News Conferences** – Another important tool OPA uses during crises is news conferences. These allow key County leadership to address multiple media outlets simultaneously. While often conducted at MPSTOC, news conferences are also held onsite at event locations and coordinated with PIOs on the scene.

**Community Meetings** – An important part of healing within a community is the ability for residents to come together and hear the latest news about an incident affecting their neighborhood. As ESF 15 lead, OPA is responsible for organizing these events. This includes ensuring representatives from all related County agencies are present, coordinating the meeting location and time with the Chairman and/or the Supervisor of the magisterial district in which the emergency occurred, publicizing the event, scheduling transportation services as needed, working with the media covering the event, etc.

**Door-to-Door Contact (including flyers)** – Many times, the most effective way of communicating with a targeted geographic area is the door-to-door delivery of news and information to County residents. This is done due to the immediacy of a situation or to address language barriers. OPA coordinates production of the message and then works with public safety agencies – most often the Fire and Rescue Department and the Police Department – to walk through a neighborhood to deliver critical life safety/property conservation messages house-by-house. The most common example of this is in the Belleview, Huntington and New Alexandria areas when flooding is anticipated.

### Mandates

While not mandated by the federal or state governments, the Office of Public Affairs, according to the Fairfax County Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) is directed to coordinate communications “when three or more County agencies are involved in emergency operations.” The EOP states that OPA, as the coordinating agency of ESF 15, will “serve as the primary point-of-contact for the release of information to the media and public, and the monitoring and engagement between the County and its various stakeholders.”

## Trends and Challenges

Fairfax County is the most populous county in Virginia, and with a number of Fortune 500 companies located here, major shopping and entertainment venues, and our proximity to nation's capital, potential terrorist threats are a real concern for our public safety agencies. Unfortunately, terror threats by recognized groups and lone wolf attacks are an increasing concern and one Fairfax County needs to be ready to respond to and communicate public safety messages to our residents.

Weather events, however, can have just as much, if not more, effect on our residents as terrorist attacks because of their frequency. From thunderstorms and flooding, extreme heat and cold temperatures, snow and ice, tornadoes and even earthquakes, OPA must be ready to communicate safety information for all types of hazards to our residents and stakeholder organizations, as well as our employees. Weather events also impact travel in the County and region, which is a growing area for communications, as residents constantly want and need to know what roads might be affected by weather events and how they can continue their travels.

The diverse needs of the County's population also bring added challenges to delivering emergency communications. Our residents need to receive information during emergencies – not just in a manner they want to receive it, such as via social media, print, online or by audio or video – but the message must also be tailored to how they can understand it, i.e., in their native language, etc. Additional considerations such as an aging population, computer access and functional needs continue to impact County communications as both populations continue to grow in numbers across the area.

Additionally, the proliferation of communications methods that residents use on a day-to-day basis impacts OPA's ability to deliver timely, actionable and relevant information. These social tools create opportunities for Fairfax County to reach residents where they are – but they also require an increasing amount of time as staff are needed to monitor and respond/engage as appropriate through the various tools.

Many residents rely on social media, especially Twitter and Facebook, for their news and information, foregoing the nightly television news broadcast. Tools such as Pinterest, Instagram, LinkedIn, YouTube, Snapchat, Tumblr, Vine, Google+, Meetup, Ning, Orkut and Badoo (among others) are where many residents choose to go for news and information. And new social tools such as Periscope and Meerkat that allow users to live stream video – either officially by Fairfax County or from a bystander at the scene of an emergency – are constantly being developed, adding to the challenge of constantly learning, monitoring and publishing to these channels.

Radio is increasingly important as more and more residents are in their cars or on public transportation going to and from work, listening via streaming audio services and radio station apps. OPA recently developed a 24/7 Internet stream to provide news and information to residents on a day-to-day basis, as well as provide critical life safety news during times of crisis. Radio, as well as visual communications – photos and video – will continue to increase in importance, as well as continue to impact the workload of OPA staff.

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## Resources

Category	FY 2014 Actual	FY 2015 Actual	FY 2016 Adopted
<b>LOB #41: Emergency Communications and Planning</b>			
<b>FUNDING</b>			
<b>Expenditures:</b>			
Compensation	\$136,745	\$127,693	\$135,454
Operating Expenses	11,796	12,960	11,150
Work Performed for Others	(49,117)	(50,017)	(46,177)
<b>Total Expenditures</b>	<b>\$99,424</b>	<b>\$90,636</b>	<b>\$100,427</b>
General Fund Revenue	\$0	\$0	\$0
Net Cost/(Savings) to General Fund	\$99,424	\$90,636	\$100,427
<b>POSITIONS</b>			
Authorized Positions/Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs)			
<b>Positions:</b>			
Regular	2 / 1.8	2 / 1.8	2 / 1.7
<b>Total Positions</b>	<b>2 / 1.8</b>	<b>2 / 1.8</b>	<b>2 / 1.7</b>



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## Metrics

Metric Indicator	FY 2013 Actual	FY 2014 Actual	FY 2015 Actual	FY 2016 Estimate	FY 2017 Estimate
Emergency Information Blog views	648,125	499,967	349,977	367,476	385,850
Fairfax Internet Radio - total number of listeners	NA	NA	1,730	1,817	1,907
Fairfax Internet Radio - total number of listening hours	NA	NA	8,342	8,760	9,197
Emergency Preparedness Outreach Newsletter	12	12	12	12	12

Some of the measurements for emergency communications depend on outside factors, such as extreme weather or man-made events. For instance, emergency blog views were exceptionally high in fiscal year 2013 due to the Derecho that affected Fairfax County, as well as Tropical Storm Sandy later that year. Fortunately, the County has have been spared from damaging weather events the past few years, which reflects a decrease in blog views.

But while blog views may be averaging out over the past several years, we anticipate the number of listeners and minutes listened to Fairfax County Government Radio (online) to increase as more residents become aware of the service, which can be utilized 24/7 to get Fairfax County news, weather and event information – both during emergencies, as well as on a day-to-day basis. OPA anticipates listenership to increase as more residents adopt the use of mobile technology, listening to the online stream via their smartphones and various listening apps. Additional listenership could be attained if the radio stream was fully incorporated into the County’s current app for smartphones enabling listening through the app versus redirecting to the web page. Increased promotion of the station could also increase listenership.

Remaining steady is the number of “Emergency Preparedness” newsletters produced in cooperation with the Office of Emergency Management since this is a monthly publication. It is also anticipated that the number of staff hours devoted to emergency communications and planning – including everything from early morning snow calls and messaging during inclement weather to emergency communications planning for exercises (tabletop, functional and full-scale) – should remain fairly consistent, barring an extremely difficult winter.