Fairfax County Government

PROGRAM MANUAL

UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS (UAS)

Date: June 6, 2026

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PROGRAM MANUAL PURPOSE

The purpose of this program manual is to provide a set of operational policies and procedures to promote the safe, effective, efficient, responsible, and lawful operation of the Fairfax County Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) program. This program manual applies to county agencies approved by the board and does not apply to civil use by residents or private businesses or organizations.

This program manual was developed through coordination with multiple participating agencies and stakeholders, the establishment of a UAS Task Force, and community engagement and input. This manual will be considered a living document and will be revised as required due to any legislative, regulatory, or policy revisions, best practices, or any change in the concept of operations.

Important aspects of this manual are the focus on responsible and accountable operations; the safety of the public and UAS flight crews; the protection of individuals' privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties; compliance with all applicable federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and policies; public information; data management; and operational and training requirements.

To demonstrate transparency and maintain community trust the Fairfax County UAS program will provide information about the program on a dedicated county UAS webpage. Community engagement is to be a cornerstone of the program.

All Fairfax County UAS Part 107 certified employees and approved personnel shall adhere to the guidelines in this program manual and any additional participating county agency specific requirements to maintain the highest level of standards, safety, and professionalism while operating a UAS.

MISSION STATEMENT

The Fairfax County UAS program will provide an enhanced level of operational capability, safety, and situational awareness for first responders, approved participating agencies, and decisionmakers by delivering relevant high-quality imagery, data, and customized geospatial solutions using unmanned aircraft in a responsible and transparent manner to maintain the public trust.

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SECTION 1: OVERVIEW

UNMANNED AIRCRAFT SYSTEMS (UAS) PURPOSE

Unmanned Aircraft Systems (UAS) provide enhanced operational capability, safety, and situational awareness for first responders, other staff, affiliated partners, and the community. UAS can operate in many types of environments (natural or manmade), or other critical incidents which might be hazardous to the safety of first responders or others. UAS provides a unique, viable, safe, versatile, supplemental tool for incident commanders and first responders.

APPROVAL FOR COUNTY UAS DEPARTMENTS/AGENCIES

The Board of Supervisors directed that any county department, agency, or authority wanting to operate UAS is required to obtain board approval prior to any UAS operations. Board approval of any program expansion is important to maintain community trust and awareness of other potential UAS use, maintain program integrity, avoid duplication of efforts and resources, leverage policies, expertise, and training, and to incorporate other departments, agencies, or authorities into the same governance, review, and oversight structure.

PUBLIC EDUCATION AND INVOLVEMENT

Transparency and community engagement will continue to be an integral program component, with multiple methods and strategies to not only provide information, but to also continue to seek and allow public comment on the purpose of the program, equipment, capabilities, policies, safety protocols, and safeguards to protect individuals' privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties. To accomplish this the program will:

- Provide public demonstrations to showcase the county's capability and provide public information and education on the UAS program.
- Maintain the UAS webpage.

COUNTY UAS WEBPAGE

A key county principle is to provide transparency and information to the public. As part of a multi-tiered approach to this principle the UAS program will maintain a dedicated county webpage that will provide links to the UAS Program Manual, policies and procedures, and other related information.

Website: https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/uasLink to the Fairfax County UAS website

PUBLIC COMMENT/REQUESTS

Comments, questions, feedback, or suggestions can be sent to the following program email. The program email is monitored by DEMS staff.

Email address: UAS@fairfaxcounty.gov

CONCERNS/COMPLAINTS

If a member of the public has a concern or complaint about the program or a specific flight or UAS operator, that request should be directed to the respective Agency Program Coordinator as needed.

Any complaint that alleges a privacy, civil rights, or civil liberties violation, or other type of complaint, will be handled in accordance with established county or respective agency policy.

PUBLIC/MEDIA INTERACTION DURING OPERATIONS

Flight crew members or other representatives of the UAS program are encouraged to speak with the public and media about the program or the mission provided it is safe, does not interfere with flight operations, or compromise the integrity of any mission. When possible, a safe area for the public or media to assemble and observe will be designated.

The flight crew may request support from other county agencies, such as Police, if needed to establish a safe perimeter and/or request a Public Information Officer (PIO) to respond to assist. Flight crews are to ensure that any sensitive mission information is protected as much as possible.

In the event the public or media wants to fly their own unmanned aircraft near or within an active airspace, flight crews or other support staff may, if necessary, ask them to avoid flight operations in the immediate area due to safety and security concerns, or provide other reasonable mitigation and deconfliction measures, such as assigning perimeter zones or different altitudes, etc. The Pilot in Command (PIC) has the ultimate authority and responsibility to continue or abort any mission if safety, mission effectiveness, or security is compromised.

UAS EQUIPMENT CAPABILITIES

Each of the aircraft used in the UAS program brings a variety of technology and flight capabilities. Enhanced capabilities examples include:

- Operate in environments that are hazardous or potentially hazardous to personnel.
- Provide High-Definition video and photographs.
- Thermal imaging/Forward-Looking Infrared (FLIR).
- Carry an external payload (flotation device, radio, medication, automated external defibrillator (AED).
- Take off and land autonomously.
- Autonomous return to home during loss of signal or reduced battery strength.

PROHIBITED USES

The UAS program and equipment shall not be used for the following:

- As a weapon or otherwise modified to deploy any projectile, chemical agent, or electric shock analogous to that of an electronic control weapon.
- To conduct unauthorized surveillance activities.

- To collect or use data in any manner that would harass, coerce, or discriminate against any person(s) based upon their ethnicity, race, gender, national origin, religion, sexual orientation, or gender identity.
- In violation of the United States Constitution, federal laws or regulations, or the Code of Virginia. When a search warrant is required by law, and no warrant exception exists, flight is prohibited unless authorized by a search warrant signed by a magistrate.
- To intentionally gather intelligence related to First Amendment protected speech, associations, or activity.
- For personal use of any type.
- To intentionally pursue, harass, disturb, or destroy wildlife.

MISSION PROFILES

Listed below are examples of the types of missions for which UAS systems may be deployed. This list is not exhaustive, and other types of missions may be flown provided they follow county and agency policies and are approved by the incident commander or remote Pilot in Command.

- Damage Assessment (natural or man-made event)
    - Structural, flood related, environment, transportation, pipeline breaks, and rail incidents.
    - Enhanced search grids through onboard software.
- Search and Rescue Missions (individuals, aircraft, vehicles, and objects)
    - Search for endangered or critical missing individuals.
    - Provide a large-scale overview of the search area.
    - Identify potential hazards for search teams and vehicles.
    - Allow for limited tracking of search teams in an area.
    - Provide photographic and video capability and analysis.
    - Scene awareness and life safety to identify potential hazards to responders.
- Fire Scene Management
    - Overflight of structure fires (residential and commercial).
    - Aerial management and coordination for large outside fires to help determine the extent of coverage and identify structures, exposures, or other infrastructure that may be impacted.
    - Assist in helping account for personnel on the fire ground.
    - Provide real-time aerial video footage of large-scale incidents.
    - Assist in evaluating hazards, structure integrity, and helping to ensure scene safety.
- Fire/Explosives Investigations
    - Assist fire investigators in assessing and documenting fire scenes for an overall scope of the scene.
    - Provide detailed overhead views of large fire scenes from multiple angles and is safer than placing aerial ladders in multiple locations to get aerial photos. This is time saving and a safety precaution. The UAS can also zoom in or fly in to get extreme close-up photos and distant scene photos.

    - Assist Blasting Enforcement Officer in developing requirements for blast site safety zones for commercial blasting projects.
    - Assist in post blast investigations in locating blast scene radius and areas impacted by an explosion.
- Hazardous Materials
    - Infrared (IR)/Forward-Looking Infrared (FLIR) capabilities of the UAS in tracking flows of hazardous materials on waterways during a hazardous materials incident.
    - Assist with hazard identification and development of safety measures.
    - Provide area reconnaissance information without placing personnel in potentially hazardous locations.
    - Assist in determining hazardous materials involvement.
    - Determine potential run-off/movement of hazardous materials.
    - Ensure the hazardous area is clear of the public.
- Urban Search and Rescue (USAR)
    - Assist with area reconnaissance including urban, suburban, and rural locations.
    - Assist with personnel tracking and accountability in wide area search.
    - Provide real-time aerial video footage of rescue operations including but not limited to:
        - Trench rescue
        - Swift water rescue
        - Structural collapse
- Emergency Plan Development
    - Assist local emergency responders with the development of emergency preplans. Examples are wastewater and freshwater treatment facilities and petroleum tank farms that cover many acres and are adjacent to residential and/or commercial communities and environmentally sensitive areas.
- Infrastructure
    - Assess infrastructure within Fairfax County to inspect or evaluate as needed. This will assist in locating possible critical areas, communities, and sensitive environmental impact areas.
    - Critical infrastructure assessment (bridges, antenna towers, stream, and water management).
- Public Safety
    - Provide aerial mapping support to assist in crash reconstruction.
    - Provide aerial mapping, photographing, and analyzing crime scenes.
    - Provide real-time traffic impact assessment and 3D mapping due to vehicle crashes or significant events (such as road backups/alternate routes of travel, weather, or evacuations).
    - Perimeter security.
- Dive Team Support
    - Reconnaissance of the area for best access points into the water.

    - Potentially identify the location of a missing vehicle/person (shadows, tire marks).
    - Scene awareness to identify potential hazards to responders.
- Geospatial Data Acquisition
    - Orthomosaics.
    - Digital Surface Models.
    - Elevation Surfaces.
    - 3D Point Clouds.

SECTION 2: ADMINISTRATION

UAS STEERING COMMITTEE

Members are made up of representatives from each agency with an approved UAS program. The UAS Steering Committee will:

- Hold regular meetings.
- Make improvements to and review the UAS program, practices, and policies and update the program manual and training materials as needed.
- Review of any applicable federal, state, or local code or regulation amendments or additions to evaluate the need to make any programmatic or training revisions.

UAS PROGRAM MANAGER

Position Requirements

- Current Fairfax County government employee.
- Current Remote Pilot Certificate issued by the FAA with small UAS rating.

Duties

- Member of the UAS Steering Committee.
- Coordinate with the Steering Committee on revisions to the UAS Program Manual.
- Provide updated information to all agency program coordinators.
- Manage the county UAS email account.
- Liaise with FAA, Virginia Public Safety UAS Council, Commonwealth of Virginia Unmanned Aerial Systems Sub-Panel, and the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOG).
- Coordinate participation in local/regional committee meetings.
- Coordinate with external partners.
- Work closely with county senior leadership.

UAS DEPUTY PROGRAM MANAGER

Position Requirements

- Current Fairfax County government employee.
- Current Remote Pilot Certificate issued by the FAA with small UAS rating.

Duties

- Member of the UAS Steering Committee.

- Coordinate with the Steering Committee on revisions to the UAS Program Manual.
- Provide updated information to all agency program coordinators.
- Liaise with FAA, Virginia Public Safety UAS Council, Commonwealth of Virginia Unmanned Aerial Systems Sub-Panel, and the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments (MWCOG).
- Coordinate participation in local/regional committee meetings.
- Coordinate with external partners.
- Work closely with county senior leadership.

AGENCY PROGRAM COORDINATORS/MANAGERS

Each participating agency shall designate an Agency Program Coordinator/Manager to coordinate the agency's UAS policies, operations, training, documentation, resource management, and data management. The UAS Program Manager shall maintain a list of current Agency Program Coordinators/Managers.

Position Requirements

- Current Fairfax County government employee.
- Designated by the agency director or designee.

Duties

- Member of the UAS Steering Committee.
- Manage an agency's UAS program in coordination with the UAS Program Manager.
- Coordinate agency training and ensure operational guidelines are followed.
- Disseminate revisions to the UAS Program Manual to all agency flight crews and revise any respective agency policies as needed.
- Keep current on best practices and technology and make appropriate recommendations.
- Ensure that all aircraft are up to date.
- Ensure that data management/access and retention guidelines are being followed.
- Ensure preventive/operational maintenance is performed to standards and documented.
- Maintain copies of all training certificates, flight logs, and maintenance logs.
- Respond to county program email as applicable.
- Responsible for ensuring any respective agency standards of operating procedures, general orders, or other policy is updated.
- Conduct indoctrination training for new UAS members.
- Oversee procurement of UAS equipment.
- Conduct audits of agency flight and maintenance logs.
- Maintain and update the county FAA certificates and waivers, as necessary.

PROGRAM MANUAL REVISIONS

The UAS Program Manual will be reviewed periodically as required to incorporate any revisions due to federal, state, or local legislative, regulatory, or policy revisions, operational assessments, or best practices. At a minimum, the UAS Program Manual will be reviewed and updated, as needed. Revisions will include additions of new or supplementary material, deletions of

outdated information or changes in industry best practices. No proposed revision should contradict, or override authorities or other plans contained in statute or regulation. All requests for revisions will be submitted to the Fairfax County UAS Steering Committee for coordination, approval, and distribution. Program manual revisions shall be reviewed and approved by the Deputy County Executive for Safety and Security.

MEMORANDUMS OF UNDERSTANDING/MUTUAL AID

Applicable existing Memorandums of Understanding (MOU) and Mutual Aid agreements will be relied upon when providing support to other localities within the National Capital Region. All guidelines as outlined in this program manual will be followed when supporting another locality or agency. Additional or revised language may be required in current MOUs, Memorandums of Agreement (MOA), or Mutual Aid agreements based on the restrictive nature of this UAS program.

SECTION 3: REGULATORY

All UAS operations will conform to federal, state, local, and other applicable regulations.

INCIDENT/ACCIDENT/MISHAP REPORTING

In addition to federal, state, local, and other applicable regulations, each agency shall follow its agency protocols for incident reporting procedures.

SECTION 4: PROTECTION OF PRIVACY, CIVIL RIGHTS, AND CIVIL LIBERTIES

UAS technology is an emerging field, particularly for use in public safety. Although the potential benefits and enhanced capabilities are substantial, concerns exist that UAS may be misused or abused, particularly by law enforcement agencies. UAS operators, observers, and support staff shall ensure the protection of individuals' civil rights, civil liberties, and privacy in any UAS deployment. To accomplish this primary goal:

- All agency use under the county UAS program will comply with the Code of Virginia, to expressly include § 19.2-60.1., set forth below. This code section prohibits the use of this technology by law enforcement or regulatory agencies with enforcement authority without a valid search warrant except in carefully defined circumstances. Prior to implementing an agency UAS program, the Police Department will develop and maintain training for supervisors and commanders relevant to this code section to ensure compliance. Other participating entities with authority to enforce criminal law or regulatory violations, such as Fire Marshals, will also develop and maintain relevant training, and be required to comply with the provisions of § 19.2-60.1. Any allegations or violations will be reported and investigated in accordance with county and department policies.

- All UAS users, regardless of agency, shall adopt a posture of minimal data collection, limited to only that data, including images or video recordings, which are essential to complete the objective of the UAS mission.
- All personnel operating a county UAS shall take every reasonable precaution to avoid inadvertently recording or transmitting images of individuals and properties unrelated to the mission. To the maximum extent possible, onboard cameras shall be directed toward the area of interest and away from uninvolved individuals or properties to minimize such inadvertent recording or transmission of images.
- Data imagery with no evidentiary value shall be retained for no more than thirty (30) days. Any footage retained beyond this period shall be classified as evidence and maintained in accordance with the Library of Virginia Records Retention Act.
- All personnel operating a county UAS, including non-law enforcement or regulatory personnel, shall be knowledgeable about individual privacy rights, civil rights, civil liberties, and Va. Code § 19.2-60.1.
- Non-law enforcement agencies or other regulatory agencies shall not be requested to fly missions on behalf of law enforcement or any regulatory agency to circumvent any search warrant requirements.
- All video and still images will be maintained in strict compliance with Fairfax County and the Library of Virginia policies and procedures. Recorded data should not be retained beyond any period required by Virginia law. Agencies shall conduct regular audits to ensure that recorded data is not retained beyond these time periods and is destroyed in compliance with Library of Virginia guidelines. See Section 5: Data Management for the retention periods applicable to certain data imagery.
- All persons who have access to any county UAS storage medium must have passed a county approved background check. County agencies maintaining imagery data will keep a complete and accurate record, including identity and purpose, of every access to such data by persons or organizations.
- The video is stored onboard the aircraft. The video transmission from the aircraft uses an encrypted data link. The video is viewable by the operator of the UAS utilizing a monitor at the ground control station.
- The UAS Program will employ reasonable technological or administrative safeguards to ensure that images incidentally or inadvertently recorded are not misused, disseminated, or viewed unnecessarily to protect individual rights. The UAS training program shall include topics on Va. Code § 19.2-60.1, the protection of individuals' privacy, civil rights, and civil liberties, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), and data dissemination, storage, retention, and security requirements.
- The users of UAS recorded data are responsible for ensuring dissemination of data is authorized, follows county policies and Virginia law, including but not limited to the Virginia Data Collection and Dissemination Practices Act and the Virginia Freedom of Information Act (VFOIA) and is consistent with the recipients' legitimate need to know

and authority to receive such data. Any further dissemination by a data recipient will require the data owner's prior consent.

- Any collected data will not be indexed or otherwise arranged to be searchable by an individual's name, personal number, or other identifiers.
- The county UAS program will not be paired with facial recognition technology to identify individuals in real-time.
- The UAS webpage and program email account will be maintained and monitored to provide information and address any public questions, concerns, or recommendations.
- The UAS Steering Committee has been established to review and update UAS procedures and training, identify new technologies, review best practices, implement revisions to UAS related laws and regulations, and review any emerging case law or court decisions.
- The county UAS program will operate in strict compliance with all applicable federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and policies, and in a responsible and ethical manner. All operations will be balanced to accomplish the mission (e.g., emergency or life safety) while protecting privacy rights, civil rights, and civil liberties.
- The county UAS program will not use, retain, or disseminate collected data in any manner that would violate any Constitutional rights or in any manner that would discriminate against persons based upon, but not limited to, race, ethnicity, gender, national origin, or religion.
- No video or photographs taken by a county owned and operated UAS will be used for personal use. Any requests for appropriate county use, such as presentations or publications, must be approved by the UAS Program Manager and the data owner (respective county agency). The Program Manager may seek guidance, if needed, from the Office of the County Attorney. No inadvertent or incidental personal images or information will be permitted to be used under this section.

SECTION 5: DATA MANAGEMENT

POLICY

Fairfax County will use unmanned aircraft to capture imagery and video data only to the extent necessary to assist or support the flight crew or affiliated personnel in planning, response, and recovery efforts, or for training purposes. The method of acquisition may include the utilization of commercial off-the-shelf camera payloads, advanced thermal imaging devices, multi-spectral sensor technologies, and video capture equipment that are placed, as part of a UAS, for remote sensing purposes. The more important function for most UAS missions is the live video feed capability for the flight crew, Incident Commander, or other authorized personnel to view.

All images and video collected using unmanned aircraft will be managed in compliance with county data collection and dissemination policies. County record retention procedures are derived from the requirements outlined in the Library of Virginia archives, records and collections services records retention and disposition schedules for localities.

The Library of Virginia publishes these Schedules pursuant to the Virginia Public Records Act, Va. Code Ann. §§ 42.1-76 through -91 of the Code of Virginia:
http://www.lva.virginia.gov/agencies/records/sched_local/index.htm

PROTECTION

The county ensures the confidentiality, privacy, integrity, and availability of its information and communications systems and data through the governance of county information systems, critical communications and platform infrastructure, and devices by implementing information security policies that meet federal, state, and local regulations and mitigate risk and vulnerabilities.

FREEDOM OF INFORMATION REQUESTS

The Virginia Freedom of Information Act (VFOIA), Va. Code Ann. §§ 2.2-3700 through 3714, allows residents of Virginia open access to public records in the custody of a public body or its officers and employees, and open entry to meeting of public bodies where the business of the people is being conducted. Requests for UAS data, including but not limited to images, video, program manual, pilot and maintenance logs, or other program materials will be treated as a public records request, and forwarded to the appropriate agency housing the data.

FOIA requests will be processed in compliance with the county FOIA Policy. The purpose of this FOIA policy is to set forth a uniform policy for processing, responding to, and tracking requests for public records. This FOIA policy seeks to balance the county's commitment to transparency and openness, while ensuring the protection of the county's privacy and security interests.

The county's FOIA policy may be accessed at the below link:
https://www.fairfaxcounty.gov/publicaffairs/foia

SECTION 6: SAFETY

POLICY

Safety first shall be an overarching priority and philosophy for the county UAS program. This program is committed to providing a safe environment for the public and flight crews and to ensure flight operations are performed in a safe, secure, responsible, lawful, and ethical manner. To mitigate risks, each flight crew shall comply with the requirements of this program manual, safety protocols, all applicable federal, state, and local laws, regulations, and policies, and follow all recommended manufacturer guidelines for each operation. The goal is to have zero accidents or injuries. Guiding safety principles include:

- All flight crew members must recognize that there is still an element of risk during each mission and focus on risk assessment and mitigation.
- Regardless of assigned duties, all crew members have a primary duty to safety considerations, and the authority and responsibility to act immediately to notify and warn others and to suspend operations.

- All flight operations are to comply with the UAS program guidance, applicable laws, regulations, or policies, and any agency specific policies.
- Risk assessment and mitigation are not just pre-flight activities but must continue during a mission.
- Any identified safety hazard, whether procedural, operational, or maintenance related shall be corrected as soon as possible.
- Research, monitor, review, and incorporate, as appropriate, any emerging UAS safety best practices.

AGENCY SPECIFIC REQUIREMENTS

Each agency approved to operate UAS shall have a policy governing their UAS program. For agency specific requirements, their documents can be provided upon request.

APPROVED COUNTY UAS DEPARTMENTS/AGENCIES

- Approved Departments/Agencies: Fire & Rescue Department, DEMS, Police Department, Sherriff's Office and Fairfax County Government Channel 16.
- UAS approved agencies are part of the UAS steering committee.

SECTION 7: ACRONYMS

AED	Automated External Defibrillator
FOIA	Freedom of Information Act
FLIR	Forward Looking InfraRed
IR	InfraRed
MOA	Memorandum of Agreement
MOU	Memorandum of Understanding
MWCOG	Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments
PIC	Pilot in Command
PIO	Public Information Officer
UAS	Unmanned Aircraft System
USAR	Urban Search and Rescue
VFOIA	Virginia Freedom of Information Act