



# County of Fairfax, Virginia

To protect and enrich the quality of life for the people, neighborhoods and diverse communities of Fairfax County

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## **Creation of the Department of Code Compliance**

### **PROGRAM OVERVIEW/ABSTRACT**

Under the leadership of former County Executive Anthony H. Griffin and direction of Deputy County Executive Robert A. Stalzer, as the Project Executive, the Department of Code Compliance (DCC) began operations on July 1, 2010 as a consolidation of various county code authorities and skills to promote code compliance and better serve the community. DCC embarked on a path to improve services by enhancing customer responsiveness and intake processes, cross-training technical staff to promote code efficiencies, improve collaboration with numerous sister agencies and promote code compliance in the community by outreach and education. The formation of this new department was undertaken to address quality of life issues typically found in older residential communities including overcrowding and to provide for the mitigation of serious life safety issues related to unpermitted construction and improper maintenance.

### **THE PROBLEM/NEED FOR THE PROGRAM**

Until 2007 code authorities and enforcement efforts were divided among multiple agencies which resulted in ineffective communication between enforcement agencies and divergent prioritization of and response to community issues. Initial efforts to consider multiple code enforcement began in 2004 as it became evident to staff that the current enforcement systems being used were not flexible enough to deal with changing trends in neighborhood complaint issues. As a direct result, in 2005 a pilot program of combined staff from the Zoning Enforcement Branch of the Department of Planning and Zoning (DPZ), Fire Marshal, the Health Department, the Department of Housing and Community Development and the Department of Public Works and Environmental Services (DPWES) was formed to enhance compliance issues in one county neighborhood located in eastern Fairfax County. This new team concept in enforcement demonstrated the potential efficiencies that could be found utilizing a team of multi-disciplinary code inspectors. Based on those prior successes in 2007 the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors created the Enhanced Code Enforcement Strike Teams modeled on the Incident Command System, a standardized

on-scene emergency management concept developed to allow users to implement an integrated organizational structure equal to the complexity of the situation. The Strike Teams, composed of professionals from Zoning Enforcement, Building Code Services, the Fire Marshal's Office, Health Department, Office of the Sheriff and the Police Department, were brought together as a matrixed organizational unit to address the changing nature of neighborhood and community issues.

## **1. DESCRIPTION OF THE PROGRAM**

On July 1, 2010, a collaborative multi-functional department, the Department of Code Compliance (DCC) was initiated, to investigate and resolve violations and concerns in residential and commercial communities. The vision of the consolidation was to create an adaptable, accountable, responsive multi-code enforcement organization within a unified leadership/management structure that responds effectively and efficiently toward building and sustaining neighborhoods and communities. One of the main drivers for creating a unified code compliance agency was to better enable the county to take coordinated action on new or emerging code enforcement trends and problems instead of requiring coordination and distribution to multiple agencies in order to enforce the various codes separately. DCC was created by combining the functions of the Enhanced Code Enforcement Strike Team, the majority of the Zoning and Property Maintenance enforcement function in the Department of Planning and Zoning (DPZ), components of the former Building Code Enforcement Branch in DPWES, the Blight Program from the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD), a small portion of the Environmental Health Division of the Health Department (HD) and certain aspects of Fire Code enforcement from the Fire and Rescue Department as well as certain public safety staff from the Police and Sheriff's Departments.

### ***Staff Organization***

Organization of DCC was based on a combination of traditional staff alignments in code enforcement combined with the development of teams comprised of staff proficient in all aspects of code enforcement. Management was under the Director and the systems operations were divided into three categories, Field Operations, Code Authority/Strategic Initiatives and Customer Call Center/ Administration. Staffing of each new team was comprised of a Division Supervisor and specialists in Zoning, Property Maintenance, Building Code, Fire and Health as well as support from public safety staff. Administration of the new Department was developed which provided for a less

hierarchical structure than a traditional organization. Field Operations have been constructed in five geographically-based teams of investigators assembled in coordination with the local Police district stations which enhances connections to Board of Supervisors member offices. This structure of multi-disciplinary teams are concentrated in areas that have demonstrated a higher number of complaints while simultaneously reducing the number of direct reports to the team supervisor, allowing for greater efficiencies and effectiveness in case management, staff discussions, and quality control. Additionally, a comprehensive reclassification of all Investigator positions was conducted to better align the compensation and position classification with this multi-disciplinary approach. Of DCC's thirty-one (31) investigator positions, thirty (30) have Property Maintenance Certifications, twenty-two (22) have Zoning Certification, eight (8) staff have received Fire Marshall Certifications, eight (8) have Building Inspection Certifications and one (1) investigator has a Health Certification. DCC's minimum certification requirements for investigative staff, is possession of two (2) certifications, although many currently possess three (3) and four (4) certifications. Furthermore, DCC has worked closely with the Fire Department to develop a Fire Certification Program for DCC's non-uniform staff.

## **2. USE OF TECHNOLOGY**

### ***Central Call Center***

County residents have clearly stated that they want a simple and quick way to make complaints; one that is straightforward, transparent, and easy to navigate, yet provides accountability and effectiveness. Once a complaint is submitted, they want to make sure the problem is resolved. One highlight is that DCC is centrally responsible for customer service intake and administrative support for the Codes within their assigned programs. By consolidating many of the common neighborhood community complaint intake processes from multiple agencies relating to neighborhood safety issues and by enhancing the county's Web based system, DCC is in a position to better support its customers by creating more of an integrated call center approach. This has improved customer satisfaction and support by enabling a one-call location and reducing calls that, formerly, needed to be transferred to another agency or agencies further frustrating the complainants. The Call Center responded to approximately 20,000 total calls and 4,000 Web complaints in FY 2011, resulting in the creation of nearly 8,900 service requests (cases) within DCC.

### *Fairfax Inspection Database Online (FIDO)*

Staff of DCC, were part of a multi-agency team which designed and implemented several customer support Web pages, a revised code enforcement tracking system and wireless inspection system that maximizes citizen access to county resources while contributing to enhanced operations. New on-line functions enable residents to be able to research actions on permits, file complaints on-line and track case progress. County savings were approximately \$300,000 to \$400,000 given the cost of comparable systems. This effort was awarded a TEAM EXCELLANCE AWARD by the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors in March of 2011.

### **3. THE COSTS OF THE PROGRAM**

With the creation of DCC in 2010, funds for personnel and operational costs were transferred from those agencies where staff was originally assigned, so the Department was created on a cost neutral basis as no additional funding or positions were required or created. For FY 2013 it has been estimated that personnel expenses will total \$2,995,837 and operating expenses will total \$514,746 for an agency of 52 staff positions, some of which are seasonal positions for enforcement of the Grass Ordinance.

### **4. THE RESULTS/SUCCESS OF THE PROGRAM**

#### *Public Outreach*

In their first year of operation, DCC staff made a concentrated effort to provide information regarding the county's enforcement efforts to both the general public and sister agencies in an effort to educate stakeholders of their mission and capabilities. Outreach efforts involved presentations including roll call training at police stations, the Office of Emergency Management and almost two dozen presentations for a variety of civic and home owner association meetings. Videos, booklets and handout publications were produced and incorporated into local television broadcast and outreach efforts. As the department concludes in its second year of operations it has further expanded the number of presentations about code enforcement and outreach will continue to increase.

#### *Active Enforcement*

While education was an important component of DCC's mission, DCC typically pursues successful prosecution of over 300 cases per year in Circuit Court. In addition, DCC's public safety component of Police and Sherriff Office

staff played an instrumental role in the discovery and successful prosecution of fraudulent mortgage practices in the county that were uncovered in large part through the initial efforts of the Enhanced Code Enforcement Strike Team. In FY 2011, DCC as noted, received over 8900 service requests, which, excluding tall grass complaints, resulted in over 5600 investigations initiated, over 4900 cases resolved, 9600 individual code issues brought into compliance, over 3800 Notices of Violations issued and over 13,700 inspections being made.

### ***Training Program***

A pinnacle priority to the new department was to create an enhanced training program to enable field inspection staff to gain additional technical disciplines and certifications and ultimately improve effectiveness, efficiency and promote more expedite compliance. In November of 2010, DCC developed a *"Master Training Program for 2011"*. This *Master Program* was developed in consultation with staff, code officials and others to meet the training needs of DCC. Prior to formulating the training needs of DCC, staff discussed the *Vision Statement and Goals* for DCC and developed a training *Vision Statement, Goal Statement, Goals and Objectives* for DCC's training needs. The training program was initiated on January 4, 2011. Classes were open to all DCC staff as well as other county agencies, including staff from the DPWES, DPZ and the Department of Housing and Community Development (DHCD). DCC provided the majority of the instructors; however, experts from the sister agencies were contacted and graciously volunteered to assist in teaching a variety of classes as well. Seventy one (71) different classes consisting of a total of 134 classroom hours were conducted. These classes were led by forty two (42) different instructors resulted in 968 contact instructional hours for thirty nine (39) students.

### ***Special Investigations Unit***

In order to better address changing trends in neighborhoods and communities, DCC supported and staffed a Special Investigative Unit (SIU) of highly trained investigators. This unit primarily focuses on "after hours" activities in the commercial areas of the county and is staffed by DCC investigators who also maintain their normal caseload. This unit was tasked with addressing zoning, building code and fire code issues related to illegal commercial uses. This SIU group coordinates its activities with the Police Department, Fire and Rescue, Alcohol Beverage Control Board, Federal Bureau of Investigation, Immigration Services and other state and federal agencies. SIU has been

successful in bringing those illegal commercial activities, which present a danger to the public due to code violations, into compliance. In many cases, the SIUs persistence has eliminated the illegal operation due to diligent pursuit of their continued violations.

***Increased Use of Informational Warning Letters***

On February 1, 2011, based on the success of the *Warning Letter* program to-date, the Department of Code Compliance with Board of Supervisor approval expanded and modified the program to include violations such as; Illegal banners and portable signs, yard sales, child care signs in residential districts, accessory structures in disrepair, improperly fenced swimming pools in unsanitary conditions, minor property maintenance issues such as broken windows in vacant dwellings.

**Progress Two Years after Consolidation and Agency Creation**

As DCC approaches completion of its second year of operation, an apparent improvement in overall satisfaction in the responsiveness, outcomes and performance of the agency has been reported by the community, sister agencies and the governing body. Certainly positive feedback and customer response is always an important tool to help assess improving organizational performance. However, the question of whether the consolidation and observed performance improvements could be readily quantified required some further review. Challenging that review were changes that occurred within a two to three year period in information database systems and well as changes in how cases are recorded and counted. From an operation period beginning in calendar year 2009 (the year prior to consolidation and agency creation) through 2010 (the year that DCC was created) and concluding in December 2011, the following workload and performance metrics occurred:

Year	# Cases	# Code Violation	# Notice Viol.	# Inspections	Intake to inspect.
2009	8822	8356	3648	10423	21 days
2010	6980	8356	3259	12371	
2011	6604	11497	4819	14500	14 days

Although there had been a decline in casework over a three year period, the ability of the investigators to conduct inspections, issue notices of violation and cite code violations improved dramatically and disproportionately due to an

improvement in efficiency allowed by cross-training and multiple certifications. Rather than sending multiple investigators (each with a separate code certification) to an address to investigate a complaint, DCC cross-trained its investigators with multiple certifications, some of whom obtained as many as four separate disciplines. This multi-code certification better enabled the investigators to identify and resolve code violations in the field with less visits and in a more expedient manner. By reducing the staffing commitment (efficiency) needed to gain compliance, the investigators are better enabled to conduct more timely inspections and follow-up inspections to ensure and achieve much greater compliance. Still working with the same staffing resources available to its prior home agencies, the new agency was able to conduct 50% greater numbers of field inspections, achieve a 33% reduction in time to first inspection (achieving its budgetary goal of 14 days) as well as create a customer call center, thereby improving customer satisfaction.

Along with the financial savings resulting from improvement of services, efficiencies and overall performance, DCC's efforts have resulted in:

- Streamlined and re-engineered investigative processes and policies
- Amended technical codes
- Creation of a robust training program for all staff resulting in a formal program that offers 140 hours per year of relevant training
- Enhanced multi-agency collaboration
- Creation of a work culture that engages all staff and encourages self-development and contribution
- Creation of an enhanced classification/compensation system that enables and encourages staff to grow and develop

#### **7. WORTHINESS OF AN AWARD:**

- The consolidation of enforcement agencies and the administration of the code compliance function has reduced the over-lapping and inefficient delivery of services from separate agencies toward promotion of a more effective, collaborative and multi-faceted method.

- The provision of extensive training programs for staff and the creation of appropriate classifications, a better educated and motivated work force has been established which in turn provides for more efficient service delivery to the public.
- Creation of opportunities to collaborate with the community to better identify those trends while helping to educate those residents in a positive and proactive manner is one of DCCs major goals and one of DCCs major accomplishments. This approach will help reduce compliance problems that have been a priority for DCC and will continue to be important in the future.
- In order to properly identify and assess these trends and issues, a deliberate and well planned outreach program better enables the Department staff to communicate and collaborate with community residents and leaders. This two-way dialog thus enables and provides Department staff with information to better align services with community challenges.
- Feedback from the community and governing body has shown that improvements are being observed, are effective and are appreciated in the community. Being able to identify code enforcement trends and quickly create programs to address them is a critical component to an effective code compliance program.
- Creating multi-disciplinary teams with staff from various agencies has shown to be an extremely effective method in fostering intergovernmental coordination in addressing problems shared in our community as well in the Northern Virginia region.

The establishment of the Department and its functions is unique to the region and Commonwealth in that key neighborhood quality of life issues pertaining to building, zoning, property maintenance, fire, health, tall grass, and blighted structures have been combined into a "one-stop" shop which can provide the county's residents with comprehensive enforcement activities. The multi-disciplinary approach of DCC for code enforcement has shown itself to be a more efficient and effective approach in dealing with issues involving the quality of life in the neighborhoods of Fairfax County. It is an enforcement system that can be replicated in many different forms and programs and can provide for a comprehensive approach to neighborhood issues, thereby improving the overall quality of life for the community's residents. For the reasons as stated in this nomination, we believe DCC deserves a 2012 VACo Achievement Award.