

## VLGMA Civic Engagement Article

By Nancy Vincent, Director of the Department of Housing and Human Services

for the City of Falls Church

We, in local government, are greeting each day with new challenges. Police departments have come under widespread scrutiny. COVID-19 has disrupted the delivery of services across every department, and we all have a sense of fragility and uneasiness. In this new environment, community involvement and outreach is key.

Falls Church has responded to the outcry heard across the nation and to the Obama Foundation's Mayors pledge challenging cities "to review and reform use of force policies, redefine public safety, and combat systemic racism within law enforcement," by establishing a Use of Force Review Committee. This 13-member committee is made up of seven community members, five city staff members, and one school staff. City residents make up the majority and one serves as Chair. We did not want staff to outweigh community.

The charge of the Committee is to complete the four actions laid out by the Obama Foundation. They are:

1. *REVIEW your police use of force policies.*
2. *ENGAGE your communities by including a diverse range of input, experiences, and stories in your review.*
3. *REPORT the findings of your review to your community and seek feedback.*
4. *REFORM your community's police use of force policies.*

The initial engagement came with member recruitment. Seventy people responded; this is the largest response *The Little City* has ever received to a request for public participation on a committee. Members of the City Council interviewed 20 and chose 7. An example of an interview question was, "when you hear the words 'use of force' what comes to mind? Try to describe your feelings in five words or less." Answers included "measured" and "out of control." Another was, "what has been your experience in dealing with the police or sheriff?" An African American male responded, "officers slowly drive by when I walk at night." The City Council chose folks from a variety of ethnic and professional backgrounds and with a variety of perceptions about the use of force.

The Chair of the committee, Janis Johnson, describes herself as a black woman in America who saw this as an opportunity to work together, bring transparency, and be a part of something that is going to effect change. She found out about this effort through the local newspaper and then went on the City's website for more information.

Once engaged, the Committee reviewed policies and procedures internally as well as from across the U.S. The next step will be to involve the public by listening to and recording comments, stories, and experiences. Experiences residents have with other jurisdictions will be welcome as well. The Committee is still in the process of determining what methods they will use to fully engage the general public. Outreach methods may include social media, website, City Council members, newspaper, surveys, flyers, public forums, and more. Ms. Johnson wants residents to have the greatest opportunity possible to participate.

Critical to this effort has been the willingness of the City Council, City Manager, Police Chief, and Sheriff to listen. To be effective, the community should be allowed and welcomed to participate in such processes. The organization has to have the commitment to hear what the community has to say and then to make change. Ms. Johnson noted that she realizes it takes a lot to hear people say, "look what happened in Kentucky and now we're going to look at you." She and the Committee have commended the willingness of the agencies and personnel at all levels to participate in this process.

Public safety cannot continue to operate the way it has all these years. We have to make the changes and provide the necessary resources. The Committee plans to have their recommendations to City Council by December 2020.

Now, while I have the floor, I'd also like to mention another outreach effort.

We all feel the disruption that COVID-19 has had on our daily lives. Compound this with job loss, limited internet access, virtual schooling and accompanying food insecurity, language barriers, etc. Federal and State funding have allowed local jurisdictions to address some of the challenges created by the hardships this global pandemic has presented, but a question has been how to reach out to the persons who are, or have become, isolated. Many of these people have never accessed public assistance services and are unaware or fearful of the relief local government can provide in the form of financial or other resources for rent or mortgages, utilities, food, and more.

Outreach to these new or isolated populations presented a challenge. In the City of Falls Church, we took a three pronged approach. First, we developed guidelines for assistance and a fast track application that was simpler to complete than our usual application. Second, we developed a flyer in English and Spanish leading people to our Housing and Human Services office. The flyer noted that help was available regardless of immigration status. Third, we distributed this through our usual channels but took additional steps to reach out to folks who may have been unaware of our services. We delivered it to the property managers at every apartment complex, asked them to post the flyer, and asked that they refer anyone they knew was having difficulty paying rent due to loss of income. We hand delivered the flyers to each home in our tax credit property and to each home in lower income neighborhoods. We put it in the mail to our regular clients and gave it to the school social workers to distribute to their families. We contacted the water utility company directly and sent the flyer to households who were in danger of disconnection. These were mostly single family homes. We also put the information in an ad in the local newspaper.

These were time consuming actions, taken in a time when human services was inundated, but necessary to reach those newly affected by financial hardship. The result has been a significant and worthwhile response.

Thanks to Steve Mason, Human Resources Director and Janis Johnson, City resident, for their contributions.