

PS COMMITTEE #1
October 29, 2009

MEMORANDUM

October 27, 2009

TO: Public Safety Committee

FROM: Susan J. Farag, Legislative Analyst *SJF*

SUBJECT: Quarterly Update -- Office of Consumer Protection

Today, the Committee will receive an update from the Office of Consumer Protection (OCP) on its current initiatives and future plans. The following are expected to brief the Committee:

Eric Friedman, Director of the Office of Consumer Protection
Evan Johnson, Administrator, OCP
Marsha Carter, OCP

OCP STAFFING AND VOLUNTEERS

As part of the FY2010 budget process, OCP lost two filled positions – the Communications Manager (part-time investigator position) and the Senior Executive Administrative Aide. Office duties will have to be reallocated to existing staff, beginning July 1, 2009. Total OCP staff was reduced from 21 to 19 positions. This continues a trend of reducing the number of staff in OCP over the past several years.

As a result of its diminishing staff, OCP has focused on its already significant use of volunteers. Many current volunteers are high school, college, and law school interns, as well as retirees. In order to proactively encourage internships, OCP has been working with the University of Maryland to establish a student internship program at the university, allowing students to intern at OCP in exchange for college credit (© 2).

COUNTYSTAT PERFORMANCE MEASURES

As discussed at the last quarterly update, OCP has implemented all new performance measures as part of the CountyStat program. Attached at © 1 is CountyStat's initial performance measure data for OCP for the first quarter of FY10, including information on the length of time taken to resolve cases (44 days), and customer satisfaction (currently 3.4 on a 4.0 scale). The case resolution data is further broken down based on the amount of money in controversy. When no money is involved, cases are resolved on average in 32.9 work days. When complaints involve more than \$5,000 they are resolved on average in 53.3 work days.

Committee members should understand whether these case resolution timelines are sufficient. Should cases be resolved sooner? Is timeliness of complaint resolution something consumers express frustration about?

Council staff is concerned that OCP's complement of 19 staff persons may not be not sufficient to maintain current case resolution statistics, much less reduce the time necessary to resolve them. In addition, OCP may lose additional staff under any proposed FY10 savings plan and/or additional cuts made during the upcoming FY11 budget process. Can the data provided by these performance measures assist OCP in determining even more efficient use of staff time, including the use of volunteers?

CURRENT CONSUMER ISSUES

Energy and Environmental Advocacy

OCP has added a new section on its webpage dedicated to providing information related to energy and environmental advocacy, utility usage, and cost disclosure information for buyers and sellers of residential homes. It will include:

- Information on how to obtain utility bill disclosures;
- Contact list for utility companies;
- Summaries of cases where OCP has taken action in utility regulation cases before the Public Service Commission;
- Frequently asked questions for consumers and sellers; and
- A resource guide for energy and environmental initiatives, incentives, and assistance.

Automotive Repair Complaints and Used Car "Sweep"

OCP recently conducted an investigative sweep to check compliance with state and federal disclosure laws concerning the sale of used vehicles at locations throughout the County. OCP also relies heavily on the technical expertise of a certified automotive expert on staff to resolve technically challenging auto repair complaints.

Unlicensed Home Improvement Contractors

OCP continues to work with the State's Attorney and the Maryland Home Improvement Commission to assist with the criminal prosecution of unlicensed home improvement contractors.

Recent Outreach and Consumer Forums

The Advisory Committee for Consumer Protection hosted a public forum on automotive issues, including information regarding the "Cash for Clunkers" program, auto financing, dealership bankruptcies, lemon law, and repair issues. Attorney General Doug Gansler and County Executive Isiah Leggett joined a panel of state and federal experts moderated by Washington Post columnist Warren Brown.

The Commission on Common Ownership Communities also hosted a public forum entitled "Sustainable Communities" in which the Director of the Department of Environmental Protection and other speakers provided information to the leadership and residents of condominium and homeowner associations.

OCP is developing an advertisement to be placed in Ride-On buses in order to help increase awareness among County residents of the services provided by OCP. In addition, OCP is currently filming its third episode of a cable TV show called "Consumer Compass," which is designed to educate consumers and ensure residents are aware of OCP's services.

Legislative Initiatives

OCP has worked with the CCOC to develop a series of revisions to Chapter 10B in order to enhance the efficiency of the Commission. The proposed revisions pertain to Commission composition, expansion of its jurisdiction, outreach, and changes in certain technical definitions.

<u>This packet includes the following:</u>	<u>©#</u>
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7. CountyStat Performance Measures

The following is the data for the first quarter of FY2010 with respect to OCP's new performance measures.

Measure Text	Measure Type	Collection Frequency	Unit Type	Current Value
Restitution received as a percent of restitution asked for by the consumer and validated by the assigned OCP case investigator	Headline Measure	Annually (Fiscal Year)	%	89.80
Average OCP customer satisfaction rating - Manner in which the customer's case was handled (1-4 scale) based on customer satisfaction survey	Headline Measure	Annually (Fiscal Year)	Unit	3.80
Average OCP customer satisfaction rating - Outcome of the customer's case (1-4 scale) based on customer satisfaction survey	Headline Measure	Annually (Fiscal Year)	Unit	3.40
Average time in workdays to investigate and close a written complaint: All Cases			Unit	44
Average time in workdays to investigate and close a written complaint: (<\$100)	Headline Measure	Annually (Fiscal Year)	Unit	38.40
Average time in workdays to investigate and close a written complaint: (\$101 - \$1,000)	Headline Measure	Annually (Fiscal Year)	Unit	58.40
Average time in workdays to investigate and close a written complaint: (\$1,001 - \$5,000)	Headline Measure	Annually (Fiscal Year)	Unit	55.30
Average time in workdays to investigate and close a written complaint: (>\$5,000)	Headline Measure	Annually (Fiscal Year)	Unit	53.30
Average time in workdays to investigate and close a written complaint: (\$NA)	Headline Measure	Annually (Fiscal Year)	Unit	32.90
Percent of OCP-initiated consumer protection cases closed that are resolved by OCP	Headline Measure	Annually (Fiscal Year)	%	75.00
Media Coverage - Percent of news releases receiving media coverage, including print news, television and radio.	Headline Measure	Annually (Fiscal Year)	%	0.50
Media Coverage - Number of times media outlets, including print news, television and radio, seek out OCP's expertise	Headline Measure	Annually (Fiscal Year)	unit	5.00



OFFICE OF CONSUMER PROTECTION

Isiah Leggett
County Executive

Eric S. Friedman
Director

September 25, 2009

James J. Jones, Esquire
Director
University of Maryland
Student Legal Aid Office
Stamp Student Union, Suite #1235
College Park, MD 20742

RE: Student Internship Programs

Dear Mr. Jones:

This is to inquire about establishing a "for-credit" student internship program between our office and the appropriate department(s) at the University of Maryland.

As you know, our office was established in 1971 and is responsible for enforcing consumer protection laws prohibiting unfair and deceptive business acts to ensure a fair marketplace for consumers and businesses. Our office has hosted high school, college, and law school interns and always found such a relationship to be mutually rewarding and productive.

The activities of our office provide students with the opportunity to engage in different types of endeavors including: investigating and resolving complaints, general and legal research, written and oral communication, data analysis, drafting reports, and even television production and webpage design.

Please contact me at your convenience with guidance on how best to proceed. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,

Eric S. Friedman
Director

ESF/wd

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MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND

News Release

For Immediate Release: 8/27/2009

Public Forum Planned to Address Car Buying/Ownership in Changing Economy

Montgomery County's Advisory Committee on Consumer Protection and Office of Consumer Protection will host a public forum to discuss car buying and ownership issues on Thursday, September 10, from 7 to 9 p.m. at Sport Chevrolet, 3101 Automobile Boulevard, Silver Spring.

County Executive Isiah Leggett will give remarks at the forum entitled, "Car Buying/Ownership in a Changing Economy." The forum will be moderated by automotive writer Warren Brown who will also lead a discussion with leading experts from the County's Office of Consumer Protection, the Federal Trade Commission, Senator Barbara Mikulski's office, the Maryland and District of Columbia Credit Union Association, the Washington Area New Auto Dealers Association, and the Maryland Consumer Rights Coalition. Among the topics will be new federal legislation, including the Cash for Clunkers program, and tax deductions for excise tax; financing options; bankruptcies and dealership closings; lemon law and repossession issues; and buying tips.

For more information call 240-777-3636.

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Release ID: 09-341

Media Contact: Sue Tucker 240-777-6507

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MONTGOMERY COUNTY, MARYLAND

News Release

For Immediate Release: 10/6/2009

Montgomery County's Commission on Common Ownership Communities to Hold Annual Forum

The Montgomery County Commission on Common Ownership Communities (CCOC) will hold its annual forum on Thursday, October 22 at 7 p.m. in the cafeteria of the Executive Office Building, 101 Monroe Street, Rockville. Homeowners and residents of common ownership communities in the County are invited to attend, as well as professionals who work with those communities.

This year's theme is "Building Sustainable Communities" and the forum will feature presentations on the use of new technologies and "green" techniques to help community associations and their residents save energy and money.

Refreshments will be served at 6:30 p.m., and the program will begin at 7 p.m. The forum is free and open to the public, but pre-registration is requested. Further information, including a registration link, is available online at www.montgomerycountymd.gov/ccoc.

The Office of Consumer Protection, which provides staffing to the CCOC, may be contacted at 240-777-3636.

The Commission on Common Ownership Communities is a County agency whose mission includes advising on public policy issues that impact these communities; educating owners, residents and professionals associated with these communities on community management and governance; and resolving disputes between owners or residents and the governing bodies of these communities.

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Media Contact: Sue Tucker 240-777-6507

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