

LOOKING AHEAD TO 2026 Viewpoints on Challenges to Come



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Diane Kresh, Director Arlington Public Library

Interview with Diane Kresh, Director of the Arlington Public Library

BY SHIRLEY RUHE
ARLINGTON CONNECTION

Q: Review 2025 — What were the successes and challenges in 2025?

Diane Kresh, Director of the Arlington Public Library:

The successes and challenges are part of the same thing. The challenge was the new Administration was identifying content that they wanted to change to a different narrative. There is a real danger in agreeing to do that. But the success was this gave people in public institutions the opportunity to stand up for what they believed in. As librarians we are all interested in the truth and to change the narrative leaves people out of the story. People have a tendency to think if I give in now, this will go away in time. But that is foolish; you have principles and values.

Last year the library had 4,200 library programs and 400 outreach events with 95,000 library patrons. But to me that's just widgets. I've been in this business a long time, and to me what's important is what does it mean to be a librarian, to work in a public institution. We're more likely to think about values, stand up for who we are, making sure everyone feels welcome.

Q: Looking Ahead — What are the goals and challenges for 2026?

Kresh: The first goal is to create a budget. The climate is not great, and the library receives all of its funding from the County. The Friends of the Arlington Public Library (FOAL) provides funding separately for the costs of our pub-

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Kate Bates, Arlington Chamber of Commerce

Interview with Kate Bates, CEO and Director, Arlington Chamber of Commerce

BY SHIRLEY RUHE
ARLINGTON CONNECTION

Q: Review 2025— What were the challenges and the successes?

Bates: Broadly speaking it was an incredibly challenging year for all businesses, large and small. The Federal workforce reduction had a huge impact even on restaurants and the personal services industry. Since October eight Arlington restaurants have announced closure. Hotel occupancy was down, and Federal contractors had no less than \$2 billion in contracts terminated in Arlington.

People had fewer discretionary funds to spend, and spending in general fuels the whole economy. Even if people weren't directly impacted by job loss, they were worried about their jobs and this was reflected in reduced spending.

The success was that the community really came together. Our community is resilient; we've been through hard times before. We have the right leaders in public, private and nonprofit positions.

From the Chamber perspective our biggest organizational success was the launching of the Children Alliance in June. The purpose is to facilitate licensed in-home small childcare providers to stay in business and improve child care access and affordability. Almost 30 percent of the 100 in-home providers are participating in the pilot program to provide free hands-on training in areas like marketing, enrollment, and budgeting. The Wall Street Journal identified Arlington as having the most expensive childcare in the country, and 80 percent of the people interviewed listed childcare as a major

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Betsy Frantz, Path Forward

Interview with Betsy Frantz, Director of Path Forward

BY SHIRLEY RUHE
ARLINGTON CONNECTION

Q: Review 2025 – What were the challenges and successes?

Frantz: First the successes. It was a really, really exciting year. We expanded exponentially to add another homeless shelter, the Residential Program Center (RPC) with 42 beds on Columbia Pike. Now we have two shelters as the only provider for male and female adults in the County. But a shelter is no permanent place to live. Our main goal is to help the clients in the shelters to get housed, and we currently have formerly homeless living in 200 scattered apartments.

We went from an \$8 million program to \$12.6 million overnight with the signing of the new contract with Arlington County for the new shelter, and the County also gave us an additional contract to expand the medical services we offer to the homeless to Doorways and Bridges to Independence. We go to each of these organizations once a week to offer flu and COVID vaccines and general medical services.

In addition to the five respite beds in the Homeless Services Center, (HSC) we continue to operate our mobile medical outreach van to reach the homeless on the street. We go at 3:45 am because that's when people are all in one place. We take the homeless meals, try to encourage them to come inside and take a nurse to help with their medical care. We do a lot of foot and wound care. Imagine what it would be like to be outside on a night like last night at 21 degrees. But 41 people stayed outside.

But our goal has always been to move the homeless in our shelters

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FILE PHOTO BY SHIRLEY RUHE

Charles Meng, AFAC

Interview with Charles Meng, CEO and Director of Arlington Food Assistance Center (AFAC)

BY SHIRLEY RUHE
ARLINGTON CONNECTION

Q: Review 2025— What were the challenges and the successes?

Meng: Our big challenge was dealing with the number of families we served last year. It peaked in November with an average of 4,200 families but at some point we saw 5,898 unique families. That was a total record for us.

Also inflation is hurting all of us but when you're buying for 5,000 families it starts to hurt. And changes in SNAP requirements which go into effect in January with the new work requirements will put extra stress on the families.

Our success I think is that we were able to serve all of these families. We are committed to serve all of the families who come to us. And I can rely on a fantastic group of staff members who are committed to the issue and come to work just raring to go and don't complain.

Q: Looking ahead to 2026 what are the challenges and the goals?

Meng: We will face very much the same challenges in 2026 as Federal workers are laid off until there is a change in the administration. We expect the number of families to increase. We live in a generous community who care deeply about food insecurity and so far donations have kept up with the need. The County will give us \$1.4 million this year but it will take almost \$11 million to operate AFAC. In 2025 my food budget was \$1.5 million over the projection for

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Chief Andy Penn, ACPD

Interview with Andy Penn, Chief of Arlington County Police Department

BY SHIRLEY RUHE
ARLINGTON CONNECTION

Q: Review 2025 — What were the challenges and successes?

Andy Penn, Chief of ACPD: The challenge has been to fill our 70 vacant positions to return to our authorized capacity of 377 sworn officers.

But the success for me is the wonderful people who make up the ACPD with the safety of the community as their guiding principle. We have been short staffed for years and are currently operating 70 officers short. But it is incredible the staff really stepped up to provide for the safety of the community and make sure there wasn't a drop in the quality of the service they were receiving. They worked additional hours and overtime. It centers on people to make the ACPD what it is, to make a positive difference every day in our community.

Q: Looking Ahead to 2026 What are the challenges and the goals?

Penn: Our goal is to continue to focus on our four initiatives:

(1) Crime control prevention — identify and hold people accountable and keep crime from occurring.

(2) Transportation safety to keep the roads safe for everybody including cars, bikes, scooters. Police officers in the community can provide enforcement but they can't be everywhere all the time so automated safety such as the new PhotoSPEED program around Arlington school zones assist with the safety efforts. We also believe education plays a key role.

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Diane Kresh

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lic programs.

This year we will spend the entire year focusing on the 250th anniversary of our nation, on what it means for the community in many different aspects. It will focus on who we are, on where we're going. It will be unusual for the library to release an entire year's schedule of events around one theme. Our theme is Libraries, Liberties and the Pursuit of Happiness. We will be launching our website with that information in a few days.

As part of the celebration we will continue our Arlington Reads events, a program I established when I came 20 years ago, which has different themes with a particular resonance like climate change, the Constitution, immigrants. I look for things I think are interesting. This year's theme focuses on

The Arlington Public Library system is composed of the Central Library on N. Quincy Street with seven branch libraries scattered around the County.

cooking, food and culture — how we can see people for who they are. We will have a pie contest explaining food and relating it to culture. Then on June 18 we will have an all day event across all our libraries celebrating the 250 years with music, food, games. A little bit of fun will be a map of the U.S. where people can put what they think about, or did, or ate in different locations around the country.

With regard to challenges I'm not a gloom and doom kind of person. I'm still excited about this job after 20 years. I have the kind of mindset that if something troublesome faces us, we'll figure it out.

But if I had my way, we would have more public conversations. There don't seem to be mechanisms available to allow that to happen. People don't get enough information to contribute meaningfully. People talk past one another. I'd like to find a way to change that.

Kate Bates

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concern.

Q: Looking ahead to 2006—What are your goals and challenges?

Bates: Our goal is to continue to make Arlington a vibrant community where all businesses can flourish. Currently 650 businesses and non-profits out of approximately 3,000 in Arlington are members of the Chamber.

We have been working with community stakeholders and state and local policymakers to come up with a policy agenda and advocate for passage of legislation that will benefit businesses. Locally our top priorities remain advocating for Arlington County to build on the success of the Commercial Market Resiliency Initiative, particularly

The Arlington Chamber of Commerce is a non-profit business advocacy organization that promotes economic growth through networking, government advocacy and community engagement.

by allowing more flexible signage regulations and encouraging economic development by removing unnecessary barriers to development. The most significant practical challenges businesses face in Arlington are commercial vacancy and signage regulations.

At the state level we are working for procurement preferences. Currently Virginia doesn't have a procurement preference for Virginia businesses as other states have for their local businesses. In addition, we are working on child care legislation that will create a pilot that addresses cost-sharing issues.

A big challenge will be the incredibly difficult County budget and how things are funded moving forward. The softening of the economy with rising costs, supply chain issues, labor shortages and inflation will continue to impact all of our businesses.

Betsy Frantz

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into permanent housing. Housing first and that's at risk.

The challenge is how to cope with the changes we expect in our housing programs funded by HUD. We expect the \$4 million in funding we receive for our HUD-funded housing programs to be cut by 70 percent. \$3.2 million is at risk. It could literally go away. This will be incredibly challenging.

In addition, President Trump has issued an Executive order that will prohibit the residents in our HUD-funded housing from being gay, transgender or undocumented and requires them to be male or female. When we originally applied for the funding, diversity was one of the criteria. Now that's being totally reversed. We were told in advance it was coming and thought it would happen in November but

Path Forward is an organization paving the way from homelessness to a home by fostering dignity and stability through transformative services and housing solutions.

the government shutdown delayed the change until 2026.

Q: Looking Ahead at 2026 — What are the challenges and goals?

Frantz: We have to prepare for the notice we know is looming and get people in different programs who can no longer stay in the HUD-funded housing at Culpeper. We have a working group and are engaged with the County and other organizations.

Our second goal will be to integrate the best practices that we currently use in our HSC into the new RPC, to be sure the rules are followed and enforce them. Our full time staff went from 60 to 85. We'll be working on infrastructure really.

Charles Meng

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the year.

It is a big problem with immigration because of the fear factor. We don't know how many of the people we serve are illegal; it doesn't matter to us, but it creates fear in the community. It is important for AFAC to be seen as a safe place. Biden had excluded food pantries from ICE intervention but not anymore. Thankfully we have not seen ICE activity here but that doesn't mean families aren't scared. There have been two incidents on the block recently requiring police. A lot of families will leave the food line when they see police.

One of our goals has been to focus on how to improve food, to increase the quality and the variety of fresh fruit and vegetables we offer.

Arlington Food Assistance Center is a community based nonprofit organization providing weekly supplemental groceries to families in need in Arlington.

But the real goal this upcoming year will be space more than anything else — receiving, storing and processing what looks like 6 million pounds of food this year. We are at capacity. The whole issue of space and how it affects our mission to continue to operate at capacity — can I find a third building in Arlington or will I need to go outside? Somebody here has to think about the future. That's my job.

Andy Penn

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(3) Community engagement. I truly believe we are at our very best when we work as a team in collaboration to provide for the safety of the community.

(4) Wellness and development. Our wellness initiative and professional development for officers is an important part of the overall package. We focus on career development and leadership skills—there are so many aspects to the police profession.

In 2026 we have a real opportunity to rebuild our ranks with the new starting salary of an officer taking effect on July 1 at \$90,000, now the highest starting salary in the region. There is a big hole to fill. This is a huge opportunity to do some of the things we weren't able to do with limited strength.

The challenge has been to fill the

The Arlington County Police Department was formed on Feb. 1, 1940 with 9 officers and has now grown to an authorized strength of 377 sworn officers and approximately 100 civilian members. Its mission is reduction of crime and making Arlington a place where all people can live safely and without fear.

vacant positions. We are selective in hiring people we think will be successful on the force and hire only between 2.5-4 percent of the applicants. But we have a new class of 20 who just graduated from the Police Academy and should be operational around November. It takes almost a year from the day a police officer is hired — 22 weeks of police academy training, then 3 weeks of localized training, followed by field training. It all adds up.

So we will still be operating at reduced numbers but will find ways to be effective and efficient until we're back to full strength.

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