

POLITICS

The 'crazy FOIA lady' used state law to dislodge public records — and improve emergency response times and finances in her town

Laura Mollo of Richlands, in Tazewell County, was met with a campaign of harassment and intimidation after she spent more than \$5,000 to file hundreds of Virginia Freedom of Information Act requests. On Thursday, she will receive a state open government award for her efforts.



by **Susan Cameron**
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Privacy - Terms

Laura Mollo spent three years and thousands of dollars of her own money seeking public records from her town. "This was always about the citizens," she said. "It was never about me. ... Those in Richlands deserve the best quality of life they can have." Photo by Susan Cameron.

Laura Mollo has come to be known as that "crazy FOIA lady," and she admits she's earned the nickname.

Over the last three years, the Richlands native has filed "hundreds and hundreds" of Virginia Freedom of Information Act requests and has spent about \$5,000 of her own money to pay for them.

Mollo, 39, isn't a journalist working on a big story or a public official doing her job. She is a stay-at-home mom whose days had been happily filled with homeschooling her two children.

On Thursday, she will be honored with an award by the Virginia Coalition for Open Government.

It all started in 2020, when she discovered that residents of her small Tazewell County town, population around 5,200, couldn't call 911 like all other county residents when they had an emergency. If they did, they were put on hold while the calls were transferred to the Richlands Police Department, which handled the town's emergency calls.

It made no sense to her. She thought it must be a mistake.

So Mollo took her concerns to the Richlands Town Council, fully expecting its members to thank her for the information and immediately take steps to change over to the county 911 system.

Instead, she was dismissed by town officials, who waved away her concerns and told her they liked things the way they'd always been.

Many would have given up at that point, which is exactly what was expected.

But Mollo is stubborn, determined and persistent.

She began to arm herself with facts and information — financial records, budget numbers, response times for emergency calls, call logs and audio recordings, all obtained through the Virginia Freedom of Information Act.

She'd never filed a FOIA request before, so she reached out to Megan Rhyne, executive director of VCOG, for guidance and found help and an ally.

Her FOIA requests were often "resisted or only turned over grudgingly. She was disparaged and intimidated," Rhyne said.

Many times, Mollo felt she was overcharged as a means of discouragement.



Laura Mollo outside the town hall in Richlands. She was elected to the town council in November; she came in second out of three candidates for three seats. Photo by Susan Cameron.

25 years.

It has 22 dispatchers and all receive emergency medical dispatch training. What that means, according to the sheriff, is that if a child is choking or a person is having a heart attack, one dispatcher pages the appropriate agency to respond while the other gives the caller instructions on how to help the patient.

Meanwhile, a Richlands resident who called 911 would be put on hold and the call transferred to the town police department, which caused delays and required the person to share the information several times, Hieatt said. He added that police department employees didn't have the same level of training or technology offered by the dispatch center, which deals with about 30 fire, rescue and police agencies.

The sheriff added that he'd tried several times over the years to get Richlands officials to make the switch to the county 911 system, but his pleas were rejected.

Mollo continued to ask questions and was often told it was none of her business. And the more information she acquired, the more questions she had about other town operations and budget matters.

Eventually, her requests netted a lot of information, including a number of emergency calls with lengthy response times. One in particular stayed with her. It was a call from a woman whose husband had fallen while cutting and burning brush on their property.

“This lady was begging for help,” Mollo said. “And she couldn't get anyone dispatched. She was told she'd have to wait. She called 911 back and the dispatcher with 911 was like, ‘Ma'am, I'm sorry. ... They won't let us dispatch this.’ And 25 minutes go by.”

The dispatcher at the county 911 center called back later to see if help had arrived only to be told that the man had died while waiting and they were pulling his body out, she said.

“They didn't get to him in time. ... And you'll never know. You know, he might have made it. But I listened to so many calls like that where 20 to 30 minutes go by and nothing. Nobody has been dispatched. And I thought, This is just not right. We are literally talking life and death here,” Mollo said.

She contacted Tazewell County Sheriff Brian Hieatt, who oversees the 911 system. He welcomed her questions and gave her a tour of the dispatch center, which has been operating for

“As so often happens with ‘accidental activists’ like Mollo, once she pulled on that one thread, many other threads opened up and she began to see patterns and practices that she believed were draining the town’s resources,” Rhyne said.

For example, why hadn’t the town used any of the money that had come from the Virginia Department of Transportation for paving? The town had received nearly \$1 million from VDOT each year, and about \$250,000 of it was supposed to be spent on paving and sidewalk projects.

She also wanted to know why electric rates were so high for the town, which is one of 12 in the state to have its own electrical grid — which means it controls its own rates.

What followed was a campaign of public harassment and humiliation. Once Mollo found her mailbox filled with cow manure. On another occasion, she reached for the mail and instead found cooked spaghetti, which she believes was meant to be an insult to her husband’s Italian roots.

She was the butt of jokes on social media, her photo was taken and posted online, she was accused of parking in a handicapped space when she didn’t and was called a troublemaker. Many times, she and her family would go out to eat or shop in another town rather than face harassment in her hometown.

She was followed in her car, verbally harassed, and once even pulled over by police.

She was investigated by a special prosecutor after town officials accused her of perjury when she sought an order of protection against a town contractor who she said had verbally harassed her at her home over a FOIA request. She said the town claimed the visit never happened, but she had video proving it did.

Nothing came of the investigation. The special prosecutor, Russell County Commonwealth’s Attorney Zack Stoots, said in a letter to the judge who appointed him: “In my opinion, based on the current evidence as has been provided to the Special Agent and myself, it would not be possible to proceed with a criminal prosecution at this time.”

Mollo, who keeps good records, persevered. She admits that at times, particularly in the early days, she didn’t always handle criticism in the best way, but she learned not to take things personally and to remain calm and knowledgeable.

Slowly, over time, she began to gain supporters, and attendance at the town council meetings grew. And then, one by one, town council members began to resign so that only one of the original members remains. The body has six members plus the mayor.

When the time came for the council to appoint new members to serve out the time remaining for those who resigned, many residents called for Mollo to be named. At first, the council resisted, but it finally gave in last July and she became a council member. In November, she ran for election to the seat and won a four-year term. She was one of three candidates seeking three seats and came in second with 763 votes, or 27% of the ballots cast.

Since then, she's been busy working with other council members, who she said have been supportive, to make some changes.

Last October, all emergency calls in Richlands had been switched over to the county's 911 system.

It turns out that about \$100,000 in overtime per year was being paid for a member of the town's police department to answer emergency calls, according to Mollo. The move to the county system cost the town nothing.

The police chief resigned in August, claiming he was forced out. A new chief, Ron Holt, was hired, and there was a "mass exodus" of nine police officers, Mollo said. One of the first things the new chief did was to increase pay for officers, using the money that was no longer going to pay overtime to those answering the emergency calls. Starting pay is now \$40,000, which helped with hiring new officers, Mollo said. The goal is to have a total of 17 officers.

The police department is also now working to gain state accreditation for the first time.

In January, the town manager was relieved of his duties, and that job has not yet been filled.

Meanwhile, Richlands is currently operating in the red, and the plan is to address that for now by using about \$1 million in money the town received through the American Rescue Plan Act, the federal stimulus bill to aid recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.

About \$1.5 million in ARPA funds will be used to either pay VDOT back for the money that wasn't spent on paving or to do the paving, which is what Mollo expects to happen.

Town officials are also working with the Army Corps of Engineers to finally do something about the flooding that regularly paralyzes the town when there's heavy rain.

Mollo also requested that the town go through a forensic audit because of questions about the VDOT money and because "there are other unexplained instances in the budget" and "miscellaneous spending that can't be accounted for," she said. It is being conducted by a firm in Northern Virginia and is expected to take a year, she said.

Town leaders have also lowered the personal property tax rate and taken steps to help those struggling with the high electric rates.

One program Mollo has not been able to get approved is Dolly Parton's Imagination Library, which would mail free books to children in Richlands. At the time, she said, she was told books are obsolete and not needed in Richlands. But she plans to continue pushing for the program.

Although she never imagined serving on the town council, or holding any political office, she's enjoying the role. Currently, she is improving her skills and training through the Sorensen Institute for Political Leadership at the University

of Virginia's Political Leaders Program, which is for state residents already engaged in the political, civic, business, nonprofit or governing life of their locality.

The training, which involves one weekend per month at locations across the state, runs through December.

On Thursday, Mollo and her husband, Rocky — whom she credits with supporting her throughout the last three difficult years — will be in Charlottesville to accept the 2023 Laurence E. Richardson Citizen Award for Open Government.

The award is named for one of VCOG's founding members, who was a longtime broadcaster in Charlottesville. It is given to a citizen who uses open records and open meetings laws to contribute to Virginia or to their community.

“Laura exemplifies the very best of the citizen advocate,” said Rhyne. “She is smart, organized and determined. She was so steady and steadfast that people began to trust her. She encouraged them to demand and expect answers from those in power. Never once did she seek to benefit personally. She repeatedly demonstrated how her goal was to help her town and its citizens. People like Laura are why I find VCOG's work to facilitate access to government records and meetings so rewarding. She's the real deal.”

Hieatt, the sheriff, gives Mollo full credit for the town's switch to the county 911 system, saying it never would have happened without her. She deserves the award, he added.

Mollo said the award means “everything” to her.

“This was always about the citizens,” she said. “It was never about me. My heart was broken that there are some people in this town who can't leave financially, who will not leave because they've been here forever. ... Those in Richlands deserve the best quality of life they can have. And the council has failed in giving it to them, so to be able to be recognized for advocating for the very people who deserve it the most — that's a big deal to me.”