



# CHATHAM COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT

## STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

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**SOP # OPS-025:**  
**MEDIA RELATIONS**

**EFFECTIVE DATE: 02/01/2018**  
**REVISION DATE: 09/27/21**

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### **PURPOSE**

The purpose of this directive is to establish procedures for a positive and mutually beneficial working relationship between the news media and the Chatham County Police Department (CCPD) and establish guidelines and procedures with respect to the Public Information Officer (PIO).

The Chatham County Police Department recognizes the public's right to have access to public records and the news media's right to report on matters of public interest. Law enforcement agencies are designed to make our communities safer. Its citizens will feel safer and confident in their law enforcement agencies only when they are aware of the efforts and activities of its police department. It is important to the total operation of the CCPD that a unified, non-conflicting image is presented to the public and the media. It is further recognized that the media coverage of law enforcement activity is a basic requirement for an informed public. Assistance to and cooperation with the media, within the constraints of existing law and the needs of the CCPD, is necessary and expected of all Police personnel.

### **POLICY**

It is the policy of the Chief of Police to cooperate fully and impartially with representatives of the news media in their efforts to gather and disseminate factual information where such activities do not subvert the ends of justice or infringe upon individual rights of privacy, or upon individual rights to a fair and impartial trial.

When practical, all news media will be invited to offer input into the development of changes in policies and procedures relating to the news media. News media participation in the process of developing said policies and procedures is encouraged as a means of establishing a cooperative climate between this agency and the news media.

### **PROCEDURES**

#### **I. SPOKESPERSON(S)**

- A. The Chief of Police has the ultimate responsibility for public comments, oral or written, concerning the Chatham County Police Department. The Public Information Officer (PIO/Spokesperson) is authorized to release information to the media on behalf of the Chief of Police to facilitate this responsibility.
- B. As the designated primary spokesperson for the Chatham County Police Department, the PIO will use candor and openness during involvement with the media and the community.
- C. Duties and responsibilities of the Public Information Officer include, but are not limited to the following:
  1. Interact with the news media and assist in generating, gathering, and distributing information of public interest in accordance with the law and Chatham County Police

Department policies and procedures. This may include photographs of crime or accident scenes that may or may not be included on the department website social media sites, and/or distributed with news releases by the Department.

2. Coordinate comments and appearances by other members of the agency as long as the subject matter is applicable to the members' working knowledge and experience. No member of the Chatham County Police Department will be expected to speak to the media unless the member is agreeable to such contact, and that Officer is in charge of an event where no PIO is available or in route.
  3. Prepare and disseminate information from various components of the Chatham County Police Department such as news releases, social media posts and alerts, web site information, radio, and television ads or Public Service Announcements (PSAs), news articles or scripts for broadcast or publication about programs, activities, notable arrests – incidents, crimes-etc., which will include the subject matter and persons authorized to release information.
  4. Obtain published copies of articles written about or electronic media reports concerning activities of the Chatham County Police Department.
  5. Arrange and assist personnel at news conferences and notify news media as efficiently and appropriately as the event or incident requires.
  6. Maintain a current media distribution and contact list.
  7. Be available and readily respond to crime scenes, incidents, or newsworthy events. (This allows the PIO to address the media and free officers and investigators to perform their duties.)
  8. Coordinate and obtain authorization for the release of information about victims and witnesses.
  9. Coordinate and obtain authorization for the release of information concerning confidential Officer investigations and operations.
  10. Organize, coordinate, and where applicable, participate in programs and events scheduled by or on behalf of the Chatham County Police Department.
  11. Report directly to the Chief of Police.
- D. The Public Information Officer will:
1. Be provided with information concerning ongoing investigation on a current basis.
  2. Assist news media personnel in gathering information and arranging interviews for daily news stories, as well as breaking news.
  3. Draft written press releases to be distributed to the news media. Press releases will be equally available to all news media as necessitated by specific occurrences within the CCPD's jurisdiction.
  4. Assist with crisis situations within the agency.

## **II. INVESTIGATIVE INFORMATION RELEASE AUTHORIZATION**

- A. The PAO will be notified by or obtain information from the designated commander or department member to determine what information is available for public release. Cases, where the Chatham County Police Department does not have primary responsibility and jurisdiction will be referred to the appropriate agency.

- B. In the case of ongoing investigations, the following information may be released:
1. Name, sex, and age. (NOTE: Such information in certain cases, including, but not limited to crimes of a sexual nature or crimes involving juveniles, will be confidential unless released by the Chief of Police.)
  2. Day, date, time, location, and nature of the incident (i.e., robbery, disturbance, suspicious death.)
  3. Photograph of a person(s) of interest or suspect(s)
  4. Prior criminal record of suspects charged as available on Chatham County Police Department records or other public Internet websites
- C. Child Violators
1. Name, photograph, block address of a juvenile charged with a felony crime transferred to the adult system, indicted, or transferred to the adult system but sentenced to the juvenile system shall not be considered confidential and exempt solely because of the child's age. The Chief of Police will be consulted before release.
  2. Information that can be released on juveniles includes:
    - a. Crimes identified as felony acts.
    - b. Incident reports, arrest reports, or closed case files of a juvenile previously adjudicated delinquent.
    - c. Incident reports, arrest reports, or closed case files on juvenile traffic offenses.
- D. Name, sex, age, and charges of a defendant, .
- E. The information which should not be released includes:
1. Information revealing the identity of victims of sex offenses and of child abuse. (Victims of such offenses have provided information to CCPD officers and the Department has an obligation to avoid allowing that information to be released in a manner that will further injure the victim.)
  2. Juvenile offender records traditionally are considered confidential and treated differently from other records in the criminal justice system, however, exceptions apply as noted above.
  3. The information which reveals the personal assets of a crime victim, which was not involved in a crime.
  4. Statements regarding a defendant's character or reputation.
  5. Existence or substance of any confession.
  6. Performance or results of any tests, or a defendant's refusal or failure to submit to investigative tests, such as polygraph.
  7. Any opinion about the guilt or innocence of a defendant or the merits of the case.
  8. Information held by a law enforcement agency, prosecutorial agency, or pursuant to statute, which discloses the identity or location of a victim or witness who has been identified or certified for protective or relocation services by the district attorney or statewide prosecutor. This information is confidential and exempt from disclosure.

### **III. NOTIFICATION OF THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER**

- A. The Watch Commanders have the responsibility to promptly notify the Public Information Officer of a major case or incident.
  - 1. Examples include:
    - a. Homicides.
    - b. Shootings, stabbings, and other violent offenses that result in serious injury to any person and require medical transport to a hospital.
    - c. Officers involved in shootings. Also, officers seriously injured while on-duty requiring emergency room treatment.
    - d. Kidnapping/abductions.
    - e. Bank robberies.
    - f. Armed robberies where the victim is injured.
    - g. Crimes where the perpetrator victim or witness is: a foreign tourist; a public official; prominent businessperson; well-known athlete, entertainer, television personality, philanthropist, etc.
    - h. CCPD vehicle pursuits or pursuit assistance to other law enforcement agencies.
    - i. "Severe weather" requiring CCPD response to: property damage; flooding; significant power outages; road blockage/re-routing.
    - j. All barricaded or hostage situations.
    - k. Manpower intensive missing persons or wanted person searches.
    - l. Discovery of explosive devices.
    - m. Evacuations resulting from bomb threats, hazardous material spills, or other public safety issues.
    - n. Riots; strikes; or large crowd disturbances requiring extensive manpower response.
    - o. Deaths that are the result of: fire; aircraft accident; train crash; industrial (on the-job) accident.
    - p. School bus accident or Chatham County Police Department
    - q. Department vehicle, or vehicle of any other law enforcement department involved accident resulting in injury.
    - r. Death of person in custody.
    - s. Prisoner escapes.
    - t. Suicides of a CCPD inmate at the jail.
    - u. Newsworthy altercations/fires/damage/etc. at any public or CCPD facility.
    - v. Major incidents including raids and/or multiple arrests; activity with other law enforcement agencies, or other significant developments of public interest require advanced notification of the Public Information Officer in order to allow proper planning for dissemination of information to the news media.
- B. Supervisory personnel shall inform the Public Information Officer of significant changes in operations, procedures, and personnel.

- C. Employees should inform the Public Information Officer of newsworthy information concerning promotions, projects, programs, or other activities in advance of effective dates.

#### **IV. RELEASING INFORMATION AT THE SCENE**

- A. The highest-ranking Officer at the scene of an incident may release pertinent information to the news media. However, only verified, preliminary information on the incident is to be released at the scene.
- B. For more detailed information, the news media shall be referred to the Public Information Office.

#### **V. MEDIA REQUESTS FOR PUBLIC INFORMATION MATERIALS**

- A. Upon request, public information materials including police reports, accident reports, and body camera footage will be made available to the media in accordance with state and federal law. Members of the media may request this through the online request form on the department's website. The CCPD Records Department will forward the request to the PIO for their awareness. The Records Office will then forward the request to the county attorney's office who will acknowledge and respond to the request after making sure all released materials comply with Open Records and other applicable laws. Public information and open records can also be requested via email, phone or in person. But, the same process outlined above must be followed.

#### **VI. FOLLOW-UP INFORMATION**

- A. In the absence of the Public Affairs Officer, the Incident Commander shall be responsible for gathering and releasing follow-up information on incidents to the news media.
- B. The Criminal Investigation Division (CID) Commander or designee will determine the best mean of distributing information pertaining to an open investigation and advise the PIO.
- C. During regular duty hours, the PIO will maintain in close contact with the CID for updated information on cases or incidents under investigation.
- D. After regular duty hours, the on-call PIO or Incident Commander may supply updated information to the News Media.
- E. If the PIO is not available, the Incident Commander may release information on immediately occurring incidents and shall advise the PIO of such releases.
- F. If possible, the PIO will be informed of new information prior to its release to any media outlet.
- G. For routine updates on cases under investigation, media representatives will be referred to the PIO.
- H. No statement or information will be released which is potentially prejudicial to the rights of the accused or which could compromise the prosecution's case.

#### **VII. AFTER HOURS COORDINATION**

- A. After normal business hours, the Watch Commander shall be notified for media coordination purposes when a major investigation or unusual incident generates substantial media interest.

#### **VIII. MUTUAL AID AGREEMENTS**

- A. When the Chatham County Police Department is the primary agency involved the Public Information Officer will coordinate with the media and make media releases as required.

- B. When assisting other law enforcement or public safety entities considered the primary agency, the Chatham County Police Department Public Information Officer will release information to the media only as directed by the Public Information Officer or commander of the primary agency.

## **IX. MEDIA RELATIONS**

- A. For the purpose of this directive section, the following meanings for Media shall apply:
  - 1. Media: News Organizations - Recognized, properly identified representatives of local, national, and international news organizations.
- B. Chatham County Police Department recognizes valid identification from news agencies and other area law enforcement agencies.
- C. Appropriate media privileges are extended to properly identified news media representatives due to the public purpose served by such agencies. Department personnel may request proper credentials prior to releasing any information.
- D. CCPD employees will be courteous toward representatives of the news media.

## **X. MEDIA ACCESS**

- A. **Crime or Incident Scenes** – It often is necessary to establish police lines to limit access to a crime scene, fire scene, or scenes of other serious incidents. Police lines shall be established at the perimeter of these incident locations to limit access if access:
  - 1. Would jeopardize the life of an Officer or citizen.
  - 2. Would limit quick police response to a rapidly changing situation.
  - 3. Would affect the integrity of the crime scene.
- B. **Hostage or Barricade Situations** - In a hostage or barricade situation, the Officer in charge shall designate a preliminary news media perimeter upon arrival at the scene.
- C. **Suspects, Accused Persons** - Suspects or persons in custody shall not be posed deliberately for photographs, telecasts, or interviews. No action shall be directed against the news media to prevent or impede their lawful right to photograph such persons at incident scenes or in other public places.
- D. **Fire Scenes** - Access to and movement within fire lines at commercial or residential fire scenes is controlled by the fire department's officer-in-charge. When news media arrive at such events, the on-scene supervisor shall confer with the fire department officer in charge and assist in establishing an observation point from which media may observe and/or photograph proceedings. Decisions governing media mobility rest with the judgment of the fire department officer-in-command.
- E. Where there is a danger of personal injury, access shall be restricted until the officer in charge determines the area is safe. Restrictions shall not exceed those applicable to the general public. News media representatives shall have reasonable access to news incidents where the Chatham County Police Department is the primary or lead responder, provided that newsgathering or reporting activities are not permitted to interfere with the official purpose and mission of CCPD.
- F. Photo journalists shall be allowed to freely photograph or video the scene of any incident safely without interfering with the duties of the officers. Media representatives at traffic scenes or major events must provide approved safety vests themselves and utilize them at the scene.



- G. In a major incident, upon arrival at the incident scene, the PIO will immediately establish a media staging area after coordinating with the Incident Commander at the time.
  - 1. If a media staging area has been established, uniformed officers should direct the media to it and say no more.
  - 2. If no media staging has not been established, uniformed officers should refer media members to the PIO. If no PIO is on-site, uniformed officers should refer news media to the Watch or Incident Commander.
  - 3. Do not speculate on any issue or detail.
- H. Notify the Watch Commander and/or Public Information Officer in the event a problem arises between a news media representative and a member of the CCPD.

#### **XI. MEDIA REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION, PHOTOGRAPHING, TELEVISIONING, RECORDING- ROUTINE INQUIRIES**

- A. Major cases and unusual incidents that generate substantial media interest shall be attended to by the Public Information Officer. (NOTE: Officers needing advice or public information assistance at an incident scene are urged to request it.)
- B. **Special Requests** – Interviews, statistical data, or other inquiries shall be directed to the Public Information Officer.
- C. **Interviewing Persons in Custody:** Not Permitted - News media representatives shall not be permitted to interview persons in custody.
- D. **Internal Investigations** - Internal investigations, sensitive information, and/or the identity of officers involved in an Internal Affairs investigation **shall not** be disclosed except by the Chief of Police or his designee. When details of an internal investigation are to be released to the news media, the disclosure shall be made only after the case has been closed.
- E. **Citizen Requests** - Should a victim or citizen request that information of an incident not be released or reported to the media, officers shall explain that crime information is generally considered public information and, therefore, available to news media (unless exempted under Georgia Law). Officers shall explain that such a request will be noted in the information about the incident, and the decision to publicize shall be left to the media. Officers should inform the Public Information Officer of such requests.
- F. **Employees** – An officer or CCPD employee may periodically be photographed while performing their duties. In such instances, their name, rank/assignment may be released (if known) to the media unless the employee/officer is working in an undercover capacity. (Unless now a suspect.)
- G. Confidential operations or investigative information shall not be disclosed except by express permission of the Chief of Police or designee.
- H. When practical, all news media will be invited to offer input into the development of changes in policies and procedures relating to the news media. News media participation in the process of developing said policies and procedures is encouraged as a means of establishing a cooperative climate between this agency and the news media.

#### **XII. COMPLAINTS AGAINST MEDIA MEMBERS**

- A. Members of the Chatham County Police Department with direct knowledge of unfair, inaccurate, or unethical news gathering or reporting should advise the Public Information Officer, as soon as reasonably possible, of such instances.

- B. The Public Information Officer will contact the member of the news organization, if necessary, their supervisor(s). The Chief of Police and all members of the Command Staff shall be notified by the Public information Officer in writing if the allegation is substantiated.

**BY ORDER OF:**

**Electronically Signed in PowerDMS on 09/27/2021**

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**Jeffrey M. Hadley**  
**Chief of Police**