

PUBLIC INFORMATION

1. **PURPOSE:** To establish written guidelines governing the release of information to the news media and the public.
2. **POLICY:** The Huntsville Police Department is committed to informing the community and the news media of events happening in the community that are handled by or involve this agency. Therefore, it shall be the policy of the Huntsville Police Department to work with media outlets to provide impartial and factual information about the department. The release of such information will be governed by whether or not the information, if released, could harm an investigation or prevent a fair and impartial trial.
3. **SCOPE:** This directive is applicable to all personnel.
4. **PUBLIC INFORMATION FUNCTION:** The Public Information function may include:
 - A. Being available for on-call responses to the news media;
 - B. Prepare and distribute agency news releases, including those initiated by the agency for the purpose of educating the public on topics such as crime prevention, personal safety, and the protection of property;
 - C. Arrange and assist at news conferences;
 - D. Coordinate, verify and authorize the release of information about victims and suspects;
 - E. Assist in crisis situations within the agency;
 - F. Coordinate, verify, and draft the release of information concerning agency investigations and operations for approval by the involved investigative chain of command and the Chief of Police; and
 - G. Assist news personnel in covering routine news stories.
5. **RESPONSIBILITY**
 - A. It shall be the responsibility of all personnel employed by the Huntsville Police Department to comply with this Written Directive.
 - B. The Public Information Officer (PIO) will be responsible for the public information function. He/she will oversee all policies and procedures relevant to the dissemination of information to media sources. The PIO will be assisted by others as designated.
 - C. The PIO will be responsible for:

1. Serves as the liaison between representatives of the media and the Department;
 2. Obtains pertinent information on all significant newsworthy events;
 3. Maintains contact with appropriate personnel to determine the progress of ongoing investigations;
 4. Responds via email, telephone, or in person to inquiries from news media;
 5. Arrange interviews with Department personnel and the news media;
 6. Responds to the scene of major incidents;
 7. Coordinates the release of information to media representatives at incident scenes and conducts timely briefings;
 8. Prepares timely news releases;
 9. Maintains media files to include printed news articles about the Department, its operations, members or policies, as well as any articles which may impact the Department;
 10. Prepares written correspondence relating to public information or community relations as required; and
 11. Solicits input from representatives of the media concerning changes in public information policies and procedures.
6. **NEWS RELEASES:** It shall be the responsibility of the PIO to ensure that news releases are completed on relevant events or cases. News releases concerning criminal investigations and/or major incidents shall be reviewed by the Criminal Investigations Division Commander, or designee, prior to dissemination.
- A. All official news releases concerning criminal investigations, arrests or other newsworthy events should follow the news release format.
 - B. News conferences are approved by the Chief of Police or Command Staff prior to being held.
 - C. Written news releases should be prepared by the Public Information Officer or designee at the direction of the Chief of Police or designee.
 - D. Written news releases shall be distributed to all representatives of the media.
 - E. The subject matter of news releases shall conform to the guidelines in this directive
 - F. **INFORMATIONAL RELEASES:** The PIO is responsible for planning, developing,

writing, and distributing informational releases and articles regarding the programs and activities of the Police Department and its members.

1. When possible, newsworthy information, including promotions, projects, programs or other activities, should be shared with the media and public in advance of the effective dates.
2. Members of the Police Department shall be aware of the need for timeliness in providing the PIO with requested information.

G. SAFETY CHECKPOINTS: In accordance with the Safety Checkpoint Program, all related news releases must comply with the procedures outlined above, as well as the following additional requirements:

1. Any associated criminal case must be resolved with a clear disposition to ensure accuracy when responding to media inquiries.
2. The victim's family must provide full consent for the Huntsville Police Department to dedicate the Safety Checkpoint in honor of their deceased family member.
3. All materials prepared for the news release must be reviewed by the City Legal Counsel to ensure legal accuracy, protect sensitive or confidential information and uphold the interests of the Huntsville Police Department.

7. AUTHORITY TO RELEASE INFORMATION

- A. CHIEF OR DESIGNEE: In most circumstances, information should be released by the Chief of Police or designee, as defined in this directive.
- B. OTHER EMPLOYEES: Other employees are only permitted to communicate with the media with permission from the Police Chief, PIO or designee. Employees shall be held responsible for ensuring that the content and accuracy of the information released meets the guidelines in this and all other applicable written directives.
- C. IMPARTIALITY: News information shall be released impartially. Under no circumstances should such information be withheld, delayed, or selectively released to favor any particular news media representative or agency. Specific inquiries made independently by media representatives may, however, be honored at the time of inquiry.
- D. TELEPHONE INQUIRIES: Members of the Police Department are authorized by the Chief of Police, or designee, to give public information over the telephone to known representatives of the news media if the Public Information Officer is unavailable to the media. In cases where the media representative is not known, his or her identity should be confirmed by contacting the employing agency.

E. CITIZEN REQUESTS: If a citizen requests that information on 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.

F. ON-SCENE RESPONSES

1. If a newsworthy event occurs during business hours, the PIO will be provided with information on the incident to accurately relay the information to the media. If a particular incident does not necessitate a call out of the PIO the Shift Commander will cooperate with media personnel requesting information and provide a detailed written update as outlined in section 11 of this directive.
2. The PIO will be notified to handle the media if the volume of media requests impairs the ability of patrol personnel to adequately perform necessary police duties.
3. When the PIO arrives at the scene, the Shift Commander and/or officer in charge will brief the PIO on the details of the case. The PIO will then assume responsibility for media relations. The on-scene commander will be responsible for ensuring that the PIO is informed about developments as they occur.

G. HOLD NOTICES: Any report against which a specific hold notice has been placed will not be copied for dissemination until after the hold has been removed. Hold notices can be placed on incident reports involving ongoing criminal investigations and confidential or internal investigations. All hold notices must be approved by the Chief of Police

H. ONGOING CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS

1. Investigative information will be approved by the assigned investigative unit responsible for the case prior to its release by the PIO.
2. Specific guidelines on what information may be released about an ongoing investigation are defined in this directive under "Investigative Information Release."
3. Investigative information which may be released is applicable only to cases over which the Huntsville Police Department has primary responsibility and jurisdiction.
4. In bank robberies, kidnappings, interstate flight, or other federally controlled investigations, the federal agency in charge of the investigation will control the release of information. The federal agency may authorize the Huntsville Police Department to release information as appropriate.

I. CONFIDENTIAL AND INTERNAL INVESTIGATIONS

1. CONFIDENTIAL INVESTIGATIONS: Confidential intelligence or investigative information from any investigative unit shall not be disclosed except by express permission by the Criminal Investigations Division Commander or Chief of Police.
2. INTERNAL INVESTIGATIONS: Sensitive or investigative information (particularly the identity of officers involved) from internal investigations shall not be disclosed except by express permission by City Legal and Chief of Police or designee.
 - a. When information is released on internal investigations, it will conform with state law as it concerns the rights of the officers.
 - b. When details of an internal investigation are to be released to the news media, disclosure will be made only after the case has been closed and with the approval of City Legal. Names of specific officers involved in such investigations will not be released prior to the conclusion of the investigation, and then only at the discretion of the Chief of Police.

J. WHEN THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER IS NOT AVAILABLE AND AFTER HOURS

1. After normal business hours, on weekends and holidays the on-scene Shift Commander, or designee, will be the primary contact for matters involving news media problems or media inquiries of a special nature. The Shift Commander shall provide a detailed written update of information released as outlined in section 11 of this directive.

K. SPECIAL REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION

1. Requests for information about specific Police Department functions (background, statistical, or documentary information) will be reviewed by the PIO with the Police Chief prior to providing the information. City Legal shall also be consulted, when necessary.
2. If the volume of a special request requires a special effort, charges for time and materials (copies) shall be made as authorized by law or regulation.
3. Members of the Police Department shall not use Departmental resources (personnel or equipment) to perform special research projects or gather for media release extensive information not normally available to the Office of the Chief of Police. Police personnel may suggest sources for the information requested.

8. MEDIA ACCESS TO SCENES

- A. Members of the Huntsville Police Department should extend every reasonable

courtesy to news media representatives who are on scene actively covering an incident. Media access to scenes will be controlled so as not to interfere with legitimate police activities.

- B. Police personnel may provide for media vehicles and equipment to be located closer, so long as this does not interfere with the investigation or with general traffic flow. Where there is danger of personal injury, access shall be restricted until the supervisor determines the area safe.
 - C. Direct access by the media shall be allowed only after all known evidence has been collected, and the scene is released by the on-scene supervisor. This restriction is necessary to preserve the integrity of the scene.
 - D. Access to the immediate area of a fire, natural disaster or other catastrophic event should generally not be restricted to the same extent as a crime scene. The on-scene Fire Department commander will be consulted prior to allowing access to any unauthorized persons into the immediate area of an incident in which the Fire Department is primarily involved. If an investigation involves both Police and Fire, there shall be a collaborative effort between PIO and Fire Information Officer when determining whether media shall be granted access to a scene.
 - E. In hostage or barricaded suspect situations, the shift commander in charge should designate a preliminary media area as soon as it is safe to do so.
 - F. The photographing, televising or recording of suspects, accused persons or prisoners in custody will not be deliberately arranged for the media. Department members will not pose themselves with a suspect or accused, or enter into any agreement to have a suspect or person in custody at a prearranged time and place to be photographed, televised or interviewed. The news media has a lawful right to photograph such persons at incident scenes or in other public places.
 - G. The burden of determining whether a photographed person is an adult or juvenile rests with the media representative. The Department will not be held responsible for publication of media photographs of juveniles in violation of state law.
9. **INVESTIGATIVE INFORMATION RELEASE:** Investigative information shall be released by the PIO after speaking with the person in charge of the investigation.
- A. **WHAT MAY BE RELEASED:** Investigative information which may be released, unless otherwise restricted herein, includes:
 - 1. The type or nature of an incident such as fire, accident, homicide, suicide, rape, robbery, assault or burglary;
 - 2. The location, date and time, injuries sustained, damages and a description of how the incident occurred (in the case of rapes, the area of occurrence may be given if it will not hamper the investigation);

3. The identity and general address (cite hundred blocks only) of a victim (consider exceptions carefully);
4. The name and age of any adult charged with a crime;
5. The fact that a juvenile has been taken into custody, including sex, age, and charge;
6. Request for aid in locating evidence, a complainant or a suspect (a person's race may be released as descriptive information in such cases);
7. Number of officers or people involved in an event or investigation and length of the investigation; and
8. Name of personnel officer in charge of a case, his or her supervisor and division or unit assignment.

EXCEPTION: Investigative techniques and names of undercover or special investigation officers shall not be released.

B. WHAT SHALL NOT BE RELEASED: Information which shall not be released in connection with investigations of an event or crime, unless authorized by the Office of the Chief of Police or his designee, include:

1. The identity of any victim (adult or juvenile) of a sex crime, abduction, spouse or child abuse or related information which, if divulged, would tend to lead to the victim's identification;
2. The identity of any victim of an overdose, suicide, or suicide attempt;
3. The identity or location of any suspect, except that the existence of a suspect may be acknowledged without further comment;
4. The identity of any juvenile 17 years of age or under who is a suspect or a defendant in any case over which the Juvenile Court of the County has jurisdiction;

EXCEPTION: When a juvenile 17 years of age or under has been certified as an adult by a court of competent jurisdiction, or charged as an adult pursuant to applicable statutes.

5. The identity of any critically injured or deceased person prior to the notification of next of kin;

EXCEPTION: When notification has been attempted but is not possible within a reasonable time, to be determined on a case-by-case basis.

6. The specific cause of death (may release the apparent cause of death);

7. Investigative information and information of an evidentiary nature regarding a criminal case;
8. Contents of personal suicide notes;
9. Personal opinion not founded in fact;
10. Unofficial statements concerning personnel or internal affairs matters;
11. Home addresses and telephone numbers of members of the Police Department;
12. Valuables or cash overlooked by crime perpetrators; or
13. The amount of money taken during a crime.

10. ARREST INFORMATION

A. WHAT MAY BE RELEASED: Certain facts may generally be released at the time of, or immediately following, an arrest and formal charging, including:

1. The arrestee's name, age, and description (excluding juveniles);
2. The substance or text of the charge as contained in a complaint, warrant, indictment or information;
3. The identity of the person making the media release; and
4. The circumstances surrounding an arrest, such as
 - a. Time and place of arrest,
 - b. Resistance, and any resulting injuries,
 - c. The length of the investigation, and
 - d. Places of detention.

B. WHAT SHALL NOT BE RELEASED

1. Information after an event, but before a pending arrest or during an investigation, shall not be released, without the approval of the Chief of Police and PIO or their designees to aid an investigation or warn the public.
 - a. The identity or location of any suspect, except that the existence of a suspect may be acknowledged without further comment.
 - b. Results of an investigative procedure, such as a lineup, polygraph,

fingerprinting, lab or ballistics test. The fact that tests have been performed may be acknowledged without further comment.

- c. Information which, if prematurely disclosed, could significantly interfere with an investigation or apprehension, particularly unchecked leads, unverified information, specifics of “MO,” details known only to a suspect or officer or information which may cause a suspect to flee or avoid apprehension.
 - d. Identity of a prospective witness.
 - e. Identity of a victim/witness if such disclosure would prejudice an investigation to any significant degree or if it would place the victim in clear personal danger. Consider “degree” and “danger” carefully, and state reasons clearly, when withholding such information.
 - f. Identity of any involved juveniles
11. NOTIFICATION OF THE PIO: If a particular incident does not necessitate a call of out the PIO, the Shift commander will cooperate with media personnel requesting information on matters of public concern. The Shift Commander will notify the PIO in writing of information released on scene. Notifications shall be made to the “Huntsville Police Media” email group.
12. JOINT AGENCY NEWS RELEASES: In instances where the Huntsville Police Department is engaged in an activity with other law enforcement agencies, Fire Department, Coroner’s Office, Emergency Management, and other public service agencies, the agency having primary jurisdiction should be responsible for releasing or coordinating the release of information.