

540 MEDIA RELATIONS

- I. PURPOSE: This policy provides guidelines in regard to media relations and the release of information to the news media and/or other members of the general public.
- II. DISCUSSION: To operate effectively, a contemporary law enforcement agency must obtain the support of the public it serves. By providing the news media and the community with information on agency operations and administration, a relationship of mutual trust, cooperation, and respect can be maintained. This department is committed to informing the community and the news media of events of public interest that are handled by or involve the department, and every effort should be made to cooperate with media representatives and assist in their objective of informing the public. A proactive public information program can be an asset to the department in gaining community support for its service and enforcement programs.

The Public Information Office has developed a proactive approach to communicating the police department's mission of reducing crime and improving the quality of life in our city. This helps build rapport and trust with citizens that is critical to carrying out the department's philosophy of community-oriented policing. Each PIO assignment is designed to accomplish one of the five focus areas of the Public Information Office.

The following process will be followed to determine what information is released proactively to the media: Is there a public safety issue? If there are no public safety issues, then it should meet at least one of the following five criteria:

- A. Educate citizens on how officers are serving and improving their neighborhoods;
- B. Inform citizens on how they can avoid becoming a victim of crime;
- C. Motivate citizens to get involved in community-oriented policing by educating them on how they can help improve their neighborhoods;
- D. Generate public input to help identify a suspect or create leads in a case; or
- E. Improve officer and employee morale by highlighting their efforts and accomplishments to the public.

The police public safety information coordinator is charged with the responsibility of performing the public information function. The department's goal is to be as transparent as possible in regard to media relations. Every employee has the right to speak with the media as to matters of public concern, with certain exceptions as noted below, but they are required to coordinate any statements and/or activities through the Public Information Office.

III. POLICY:

- A. It is the policy of this department to maintain a cooperative and proactive approach to providing information on matters of public concern to the news media and the

general public. Information released to the news media will be disseminated equally to any interested news organization or by public records requests.

- B. As a general rule, release of public information will be by the chief of police, public safety information coordinator, member of the chief's general staff, managerial staff level officer, or other person specifically authorized to report on a particular newsworthy incident or situation. Employees other than those referred to above are not required to participate in an interview with media personnel; however, subject to certain exceptions, no employee is prohibited from speaking with media personnel, but all employees must coordinate with and notify the Public Information Office prior to communicating with the media.
- C. The administration established an after-hours, weekend and holiday procedure to ensure a consistent level of service to the media. This procedure assigns a lieutenant, or authorized sergeant, to Public Information Office duties during non-business hours. The Public Information Office will train the personnel selected by the Chief's Office on Florida Statute Chapter 119 and the department's media policy. Having after-hours Public Information representatives provides the opportunity to show the department's diversity and develops the media skills of authorized personnel for promotion within the department.
- D. Division commanders and shift/bureau commanders shall advise the public safety information coordinator as to new programs, outstanding achievements, current or investigative developments likely to prompt media attention or inquiries, and any other newsworthy information from their respective areas of responsibility that will assist him/her in maintaining a proactive media relations program.
- E. To ensure that a cooperative and proactive media relations program is maintained, and is operated in the interest of providing consistent factual information while protecting certain privacies as provided by law, the following guidelines are set forth:
 - 1. At incident scenes, media personnel seeking information should be referred to the scene supervisor. The ranking supervisor shall be responsible for the official release of information in the absence of the public safety information coordinator.

If in the opinion of the ranking supervisor there is a need for someone to coordinate the media, he or she will direct Communications to contact the lieutenant on PIO Duty who will then determine if a representative of the Public Information Office should be contacted during non-business hours.

- 2. In after-hours breaking news scenarios, media representatives contacting employees should be referred to the after-hours media line for information on such incidents:
 - a. If the shift commander is not available and, in the event, Communications receives a specific inquiry regarding a call for

service, the Communications Supervisor will be responsible for the following:

- i. Confirm whether or not the call for service has been received; and
 - ii. Refer the media representative to the affected district shift commander or lieutenant on PIO Duty, and when appropriate provide the general nature, general location and time of the call.
 - b. If the incident has been referred to another division for investigation, or is being handled entirely by another division, the inquiries should be referred to the proper district shift commander or lieutenant on PIO Duty.
 3. The PIO will provide news releases as facts are gathered and provide the media with timely updates to investigations/incidents via media alert and/or social media.
 - a. When the Public Safety Information Coordinator is present at the incident scene or at headquarters in response to the developing incident, media inquiries will be referred to him/her.
 - b. In either event, a concerted effort will be made to accommodate media requests for information.
 4. Requests by media personnel for information unrelated to an incident e.g., statistical information, interviews with employees reference any facet of police operations, investigative efforts, or administration shall be referred to the Public Safety Information Coordinator. These requests are not considered breaking news and will be handled during normal business hours.
 5. Requests for PIO response to breaking news or other news issues during non-business hours (nights, weekends, and/or holidays) will be made through the Communications supervisor, the affected Shift Commanders, or the lieutenant on PIO Duty.
- F. Restrictions on Release of Information - All information released will be in accordance with applicable law.
1. Information that could be used to locate or harass a victim or the victim's family cannot be released to the media or the general public.
 - a. This does not include the victim's name. However, it does include the victim's address, and phone number and anything that could be

utilized to locate or harass the victim

- b. The location of a crime may be released, so long as the location is not the victim's address. In an instance where the crime took place in the victim's home, a general description (the 400 block of N Tampa St.) will suffice.
2. All records concerning reports of child abuse or neglect and all records generated, as a result of such reports shall be confidential;
3. The name, address, or other identifying fact or information of the victim of any sexual offense shall not be released;
4. Any information that reveals personal assets of a victim of a crime, other than property stolen or destroyed during commission of the crime will not be released.
5. Prior to releasing the amount of money or property taken in a crime, consideration will be given to whether or not such release might jeopardize the investigation.
6. Any information that would reveal the identity of a confidential informant will not be released.
7. Any information revealing police tactics, surveillance techniques, procedures, or personnel will remain confidential.
8. Any information that would reveal the identity of any undercover person of any criminal justice agency will not be released.
9. The home address, telephone number, or photograph of a current or former sworn or professional staff employee; or such information including the place of employment of such officer's or employee's spouse; or such information including names and/or location of any school attended by the children of such officers or employees shall not be released.
10. The name of a person taken into custody but not yet charged will not be released unless approved by an investigating supervisor. An arrested person's name and jail mugshot may be released when the original report of an incident or a statistical data report shows the person as arrested.
11. The name of a suspect not in custody will not be released unless a warrant or capias has been issued or unless approved by an investigating supervisor.
12. The identity of a witness to a murder will not be released.

13. The identity, testimony, or credibility of any prospective witness will not be released upon request of the witness or if it appears the witness might be in jeopardy.
14. Results of any examinations conducted, refusal by an accused to submit to an examination, polygraph results, descriptions of evidence, and the existence and/or text of confessions will not be released.
15. Information regarding the existence, or details, of any Professional Standards investigation shall not be released until that investigation is concluded and the offending officer has been served the discipline. The Chief of Police or his or her designee may acknowledge the existence of a complaint and the fact that an investigation is underway.
16. Information that would hinder an investigation or jeopardize the outcome of a case will not be released, including active criminal intelligence or active criminal investigative information.
17. No personnel shall comment on active civil litigation cases in which the city is, or may be, a party.

G. Juveniles:

1. The name and address of a child who has been charged with an offense which, if committed by an adult, would be a felony may be released.
2. In the case of a juvenile who has been prosecuted as an adult and found guilty of that offense or a lesser included offense, the child may thereafter be treated in every respect as if an adult and, therefore, information about his/her involvement in an incident will be handled as if it were an adult situation.

H. Other General Guidelines:

1. Because of the potential for jeopardizing the outcome of a case, revealing legally protected information, or causing irreparable harm to the reputation of a citizen, release of certain types of information must be accomplished with great care. Such information includes, but is not limited to:
 - a. The prior criminal record, character, or reputation of an accused;
 - b. Photographs of an accused;
 - c. The existence of any confession, admission of guilt, or statements made by an accused, or the failure or refusal of an accused to make a statement;

- d. Any opinion of department personnel regarding the guilt or innocence of an accused;
 - e. Any opinion of department personnel regarding the merits of a case or quality of evidence gathered; and
 - f. Information received from other law enforcement agencies without their concurrence to release the information.
2. When an agency member is the subject of an active criminal investigation, the existence of the investigation may be confirmed upon request.
- a. In addition, the following information may be released:
 - i. Name of the agency member;
 - ii. Position, including rank and assignment;
 - iii. Date of hire;
 - iv. Information regarding previous completed investigations and/or disciplinary action;
 - v. Personnel file information that is not exempt under F.S. Chapter 119.
 - b. The following information may not be released:
 - i. Home address and personal phone number of agency member;
 - ii. Date of birth;
 - iii. Social security number;
 - iv. Names of family members, dependents;
 - v. Specific information related to the investigation.
 - c. When an agency member is the subject of an active internal investigation all information obtained pursuant to the investigation is confidential until the investigation is no longer active, and a finding is established.
 - d. When presented with an inquiry from a media representative relative

to information such as is listed above, the request should be referred to the Public Safety Information Coordinator or, in his/her absence, the division commander responsible for the investigation of the case.

I. Access to Incident Scenes:

1. The general public will be denied access to any incident scene, which is cordoned by the investigators.
2. Representatives of the news media will be denied access only:
 - a. On private property at the owner or custodian's request;
 - b. To preserve evidence;
 - c. If their presence will impede the work of firefighters or police; or
 - d. If a danger to the physical well-being of the media person exists.
 - e. If one or more of the above conditions exist, the media will be directed to stage in a location directly outside of the external perimeter and consideration will be given to ensuring that their needs are accommodated. In the absence of a representative from the Public Information Office, the ranking on-scene supervisor or the lieutenant on PIO duty will be responsible for directing and responding to the media.
3. Even though media personnel may be granted access to an incident scene, with supervisor approval (beyond yellow tape), they will be escorted throughout their presence therein. In the absence of a representative from PIO, the ranking supervisor or lieutenant on PIO duty will be responsible for coordinating any scene access such as a pool camera, etc.
4. It should be noted that media has access anywhere around a crime scene where the general public is allowed. If investigator do not want the media or camera equipment in a specific area, they must tape that area off from the general public.
5. The use of a radio by media personnel or the general public will be denied when the threat of a bomb exists.

J. Role in Incident Command System (ICS):

1. Under the Incident Command System (ICS), the Public Information Officer (PIO) is a key staff member supporting the Incident Command structure. The PIO represents and advises the Incident Command on all

public information matters relating to the management of the incident. The PIO handles media and public inquiries, emergency public information and warnings, rumor monitoring and response, media monitoring, and other functions required to coordinate, clear with appropriate authorities, and disseminate accurate and timely information related to the incident, particularly regarding information on public health and safety and protection.

2. The PIO is also responsible for coordinating public information at or near the incident site and serving as the on-scene link to the Joint Information System (JIS).
3. In a large-scale operation, the on-scene PIO serves as a field PIO with links to the Joint Information Center (JIC), which is typically co-located with the federal, regional, state, local, or tribal EOC tasked with primary incident coordination responsibilities.
4. The JIS provides the mechanism for integrating public information activities among JICs, across jurisdictions, and with private-sector and non-governmental organizations.

Supersedes SOP 540, dated 5/24.