

54.0 PUBLIC INFORMATION

PURPOSE: To establish procedures for the timely release of appropriate information on the events of public interest to members of the News Media. To emphasize the department's commitment to consider community opinion/desires in the formulation of departmental policy.

54.1 Public Information

A. Media Personnel Access at Incident Scenes

1. During the occurrence of serious/sensational incidents; i.e., fires, natural disasters, hostage situations, plane crashes, etc., media personnel may respond directly to the incident site. While departmental personnel will assist media personnel whenever possible, deputies have a legal right to prevent media personnel from being in a position or taking action that would interfere with investigative or rescue efforts, or that would place them in harms way. Appropriate perimeter lines will be established at such sites in order to control access into the area. If media personnel respond to such an event, an area will be designated as soon as possible for news briefings and all media personnel directed to that area. Deputies will not interfere with news media personnel in the performance of their duties, as long as media actions are not in violation of law, or not hampering rescue/enforcement actions.
2. Media personnel should be allowed into a scene as soon as no danger exists, and to do so would not jeopardize the investigation or destroy evidence. If the scene is private property, however, media personnel must abide by the wish of the owner with regards to access.
3. Incidents in which media personnel violate the law or interfere with duties if rescue/enforcement personnel will be reported to the Sheriff through the Patrol Commander. The Command Staff may contact the media person's supervisor if circumstances dictate.
4. Personnel may require identification from anyone who requests close access to a scene and claiming to be with the media. If there is doubt as to the identity, deputies may deny access pending satisfactory identification.

B. Procedures for Press Releases

1. The Public Information Officer should be notified immediately, regardless of duty status, with incidents involving serious property crimes, serious bodily harm or death. In situations where the Duty Officer is uncomfortable completing a media release, inquiries should be directed to the PIO via departmentally issued cell phone.
2. For all other situations department personnel will prepare appropriate information for release to news media sources on a "News Release" form concerning a criminal event or other newsworthy situation which the public should be made aware of, before the end of shift. The Duty Officer, prior to dissemination, will review the release. Media sources to which information is released will be so indicated on the press release form. A copy of all press releases will be electronically forwarded to the Public Information Officer.
3. The Public Information Officer, through review of the press releases, capsule reports, and the daily incident bulletin, will coordinate the overall release of information each day if pertinent information is available.
4. Information concerning public safety; i.e., road conditions, hazards, etc., will be reported to all media sources immediately after being received.

C. Coordination of the Media Function

1. While it is the primary task of the Public Information Officer to coordinate the release of public information. Other employees may bring newsworthy information, within the realm of their authority, to the attention of the media through the completion and submission of the departmental news release.
2. The Public Information Officer is assigned the responsibility of coordinating the public information function and will act as the primary liaison between the department and media sources.
3. During events or conditions, which attract widespread media coverage, (i.e., and incident of long duration attracting media sources from outside Washington County, possibly with news personnel wishing to gain access to the scene) the Public Information Officer will coordinate with the Sheriff in scheduling and conducting news briefings.

4. The Public Information Officer will establish a pattern of constant contact with the media sources, daily, if any information is available which may be of public interest.
5. The Duty Officer will be the point of contact for inquiring media sources seeking information on routine matters when the Public Information Officer is off duty.
6. The Duty Officer also may release routine newsworthy events which occur during his/her shift in response to regular inquiries or may designate other communications personnel to give approved news releases.
7. Inquiries concerning the Washington County Detention Center will be referred to the Detention Center Warden or higher authority.
8. Inquiries relating to departmental policies, procedures or practices will be referred to the Sheriff or his designee. The release of information concerning departmental operations in a sustained or complex matter with possible public ramifications will be coordinated with the Sheriff or his designee. The release of information concerning a major joint operation between the Sheriff's Office and another agency will be coordinated with the Sheriff.
9. Inquiries about joint operations between the Sheriff's Office and other agency(s) in which the other agency is the primary investigating agency will be referred to that agency.
10. Release of any information from Central Records files (except the release report copies in accordance with the departmental policy) will be coordinated with the Professional Services Supervisor or higher authority.

D. Subject Matter Not For Release: The following subject matter will not be released without authorization from the Sheriff or his designee:

1. The identity of a sex crime victim
2. The identity of a suspect for which a warrant or an indictment has not been issued.
3. The existence of a criminal record or other impugning information concerning character, which tends to label a subject as a criminal.
4. The existence or contents of statements or confession.

5. The performance, refusal, or results of a test participated in by the victim or the accused.
 6. The identity of actual or possible witnesses to a crime other than the victim, or comments involving an opinion as to the credibility or veracity of any witness.
 7. Opinions as to the guilt or innocence of an accused, or as to the possibility of any plea or plea bargains.
 8. The identity of juvenile accused that have not been waived by the court to adult status. Also, other unique information; i.e., address which could identify the juvenile. Juvenile age and sex, crime, city of residence, and other details about the crime may be released. Care must be taken in releasing reports that name or give other personal information regarding juveniles accused. Juveniles' information should be deleted, such as in accident reports.
 9. Names of deceased prior to next of kin notification. If next of kin cannot be contacted within 24 hours, the name may be released.
 10. Information concerning departmental tactical plans or other specialized enforcement activities without authorization from the Sheriff or his designee.
 11. Unique aspects of a crime should not be released, nor should every detail of a crime be released. Withholding some pertinent information creates a "validation tool" if a person confesses to the crime.
 12. Reported suicides not connected with additional crimes.
 13. Any intelligence material considered confidential.
- E. Subject Matter Appropriate For Release: Subject matter appropriate for release to media sources include:
1. Type of event or crime. When and where occurring and a brief explanation of known facts.
 2. Identity of the victim/person reporting the crime except victims of sexual crimes. If a victim of a crime requests their name not be released, that request will be honored. The Sheriff's Office, however, has no control over the name being released if obtained from another source.
 3. Information regarding types and value of property taken. Any physical injuries or death involved in the crime.
 4. General information on type and length of investigation.

5. Other general information such as description of suspect or vehicles may be released for possible civilian identification.
6. If a warrant has been issued, the name, address, description, etc., of the suspect may be released.
7. Traffic accidents with fatalities, substantial injuries, or a large amount of property damage.
8. Information concerning public safety.
9. Information on juveniles may be released in accordance with state and federal law.

F. Appropriate Information for Release after Arrest.

1. The defendant's name, age, address along with other pertinent background information (excluding previous criminal history information).
2. Nature of charge
3. Investigating deputy unless involved in an undercover or other sensitive assignment.
4. Status after initial appearance; i.e., bond set, released on personal recognizance.
5. Circumstances surrounding the arrest.

G. Media releases will be given to all media sources to include: Newspaper, Radio, and Television.

H. Release of Information concerning confidential agency investigations and operations

1. In situations where there has been a request for confidential information about investigations and or operations. There will be not release of this type of information without permission of the Sheriff. They will make a judgment as to the release, in the best interest of the agency, the county, and the citizen's right and interest in knowing about the matter.

I. Multiple Public Service Agencies involve in a mutual effort

1. In situations where multiple jurisdictions are present (police, fire, medical examiner), the Public Information Officer shall consult with the Commander on the scene or the Sheriff to devise a plan of coordination and dissemination of information to the news media.

J. Departmental Commitment to Keep Public Informed

1. The Sheriff's Office is committed to informing the citizens of Washington County, via the news media, of events and conditions within the public domain, which are addressed by, or involve the Sheriff's Office. The ability of the Department to function effectively is directly affected by an informed citizenry encouraged to become involved and to support the department through information sharing and preventive type programs. Failure to provide complete and accurate information is counterproductive to a successful public relations climate and will create an unfavorable impression with the public.
2. The exercise of good judgment is imperative in the releases of information. The ideal objective is to inform the public with "need to know" information, while refraining from releasing information, which would hinder the department's abilities to conduct its investigation. Personnel will release only accurate information known to be factual and appropriate for release in accordance with this order and Maryland Annotated Code entitled, "State Government", Sections 10-611 through 10-628. In all other cases, the inquiring party will be placed in contact with personnel having the knowledge and/or authority to make the release.
3. Departmental personnel will be diligent in their efforts to inform media sources when involved in newsworthy incidents. However, publicity, which may be harmful to the department or contrary in any way to the due process of law, will be cleared through the Sheriff or his designee before being released.

K. Personnel Authorized to Release Information.

Normally, information will be released to media sources via telephone through inquiries to the Department, or by calls to the media from the Public Information Officer, or a Duty Officer. In other circumstances, personnel are allowed to release information as follows:

1. At an Incident Scene: Depending upon the nature and duration of an incident scene, media representatives may go directly to the scene. Departmental personnel, with accurate information at the scene, may provide information and assistance to media personnel consistent with this order and as duty obligations will allow. If departmental activities and media coverage are extensive, the Public Information Officer will respond to media inquiries. All inquiries will be directed to the Public Information Officer. If the Sheriff's Office is serving in a support capacity; i.e., at a fire scene, inquiries will be directed to the primary agency. If the Public Information Officer is not needed, media personnel with questions will be told that a press release will be compiled **before the end of shift**, and that information may be obtained from the Public Information Officer or in his/her absence, the Duty Officer.

2. From Agency Files: Media personnel will not be allowed direct access to departmental files. While in the Patrol Building, media personnel will be escorted. Information from files concerning criminal activity or other incidents which the public should be made aware of can be released by the Public Information Officer, Duty Officer, or higher authority, in accordance with this order and consistent with law. Any inquiries for information on internal investigations, or other departmental operational policies or procedures will be referred to the Sheriff or his designee.
3. Inquiries from media personnel regarding an ongoing investigation will be forwarded to the investigating deputy. If the release of the information is appropriate, the deputy will prepare a press release and submit it to the Duty Officer for approval and forward an electronic copy to the Public Information Officer. If such contact is not feasible, the CIU Supervisor or Duty Officer may be able to answer the question with information from the "Open Case File" in the Duty Officer Room. Care must be taken, however, not to give information in an ongoing open investigation, which could jeopardize the case. Any information given will be consistent with this order. If there is any question as to the propriety of releasing information, the request should be forwarded to the Patrol Commander or higher authority.
4. Information releases pertaining to auxiliary type activities; (i.e., Police Week, Crime Prevention Meetings), may be released by personnel involved in those activities. Those personnel shall electronically forward a copy of the press release to the Public Information Officer.

54.1.2 Media Input into Departmental Policy

This departmental order on public information may be disseminated to media sources upon their request. Comments/questions from those sources and that information obtained will be considered in policy formulation with the media.

54.1.3 Controlling Media Access at Crime Scene, which may interfere with Sheriff's Office Operations.

- A. The Public Information Officer will coordinate activities of the media at the scene of a crime or activity that is under the control of the Office. A crime scene perimeter and a staging area for the news media will be established. The Public Information Officer will coordinate with the Sheriff and/or the CIU Supervisor the release of information and assist with the media's requests.
- B. The media will be denied access to these areas/situations listed:
 1. The owner of private property requests they be excluded.
 2. If there is a possibility that evidence will be damaged, tampered with or removed from the scene of a crime, or the investigation will be hampered.

3. During a tactical operation, if the media's presence would disrupt operations or place a citizen or deputy in substantial risk of injury or loss of life.
4. May not enter a private residence.
5. Secure areas of the Detention Center without the approval of the Sheriff and escorted by Detention personnel.

54.1.4 Public Information Officer

- A. The Sheriff shall select the Public Information Officer.
The Public Information Officer represents the entire department and speaks for the department.
- B. When the Public Information Officer is not available, supervisors may communicate with the media or authorize others to speak with the media on a case-by-case basis.
- C. Functions of the Public Information Officer:
 1. Preparation and distribution of news releases,
 2. Arrangement and coordination of news briefings. Scheduling such events will be the purview of the Sheriff or the Public Information Officer. The Sheriff or his designee will be responsible for coordinating and authorizing the release of information concerning any confidential agency investigations/operations.
 3. Responding to news media inquiries,
 4. Coordination of on-location news coverage at incident scenes,
 5. Promoting human interest or helpful news stories to the media,
 6. Facilitating and coordinating news coverage of ceremonies, events, and other activities recognizing or honoring department personnel or members of the general public involved in events relative to the department and/or public safety.
 7. Pertinent release of information about victims, witnesses and suspects, consistent with law and departmental policy.
 8. To establish an identifiable position as a contact point for interaction with media sources. While all personnel should contribute

information to the media, when applicable, this position will coordinate the overall public information function.

9. The exercise of good judgment is imperative in the releases of information. The ideal objective is to inform the public with “need to know” information, while refraining from releasing information, which would hinder the department’s abilities to conduct its investigation. Personnel will release only accurate information known to be factual and appropriate for release in accordance with this order and Maryland Annotated Code entitled, “State Government”, Sections 10-611 through 10-628. In all other cases, the inquiring party will be placed in contact with personnel having the knowledge and/or authority to make the release.
10. Departmental personnel will be diligent in their efforts to inform media sources when involved in newsworthy incidents. However, publicity, which may be harmful to the department or contrary in any way to the due process of law, will be cleared through the Sheriff or his designee before being released.