

[FINAL DRAFT]

Media Relations and Police Budgeting:
A successful equation

November 30, 2002

Clifford Karchmer, Project Director

Police Executive Research Forum
1120 Connecticut Avenue, NW, Suite 930
Washington, DC 20036

Acknowledgments

Information included in this report was provided by news media representatives who cover police and crime issues in Largo, Florida; Charlotte, North Carolina; and Scottsdale, Arizona. Recommendations and concerns were also provided by several members of Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc., in each of those states and in alternative research sites in Nebraska and Maryland. We appreciate the input of those individuals and thank them for all contributions.

Additionally, PERF would like to thank the staff who helped in compiling the information and writing this paper: Andrea Morrozoff, Research Associate; David Bright, Research Assistant; Melissa Schaefer, PERF Fellow; Robin Aase, Intern; and Michael Goldfarb, Consultant.

Contents

1. Background and Introduction.....	1
2. Why Chiefs Should Care About Media Relations	3
3. Insight from the Media: Building Positive Police–Media Relationships.....	5
4. The Public Information Officer	7
5. Media Access to Police Executives	9
6. Rank-and-File Officers and Media Relations.....	11
7. Media Relationships and Budgetary Success: Recommendations from Media Representatives	12
8. Media Coverage and Local Funding Needs.....	15
9. Conclusion	17

1

Background and Introduction

The Police Executive Research Forum (PERF) is completing a National Institute of Justice project to determine why some police departments are more successful than others at obtaining increases in local funding for a range of police services and capital improvements. Specifically, PERF seeks to identify the factors that have enabled departments to achieve increases in operating and capital improvement budgets.

In 1998, PERF surveyed 490 police departments to determine how police budgets are developed and to identify department and community factors (such as budget process and format, population growth, sensational events, crime trends, and degree of local governmental support) that may have affected a departments budgetary success. Using the results of that initial study, PERF identified five police departments¹ that had achieved exceptional success in the budgetary arena² and that represented different geographic locations, service population sizes, budgeting practices, and forms of local government. PERF then held a focus group meeting with the departments' chief executives to collect additional information on budgetary practices. Following that meeting, PERF conducted site visits at three of the departments to further study the techniques used to acquire funding.³

Information gathered at the Police Executives' Roundtable and during the later site visits indicated that a police department's relationship with the media can play a major role in budgetary success. During the three site visits, PERF also interviewed local media representatives who work closely with the police departments. To collect more information

¹ Largo (Florida) Police Department, Omaha (Nebraska) Police Department, Charlotte-Mecklenburg (North Carolina) Police Department, Scottsdale (Arizona) Police Department, and Baltimore County (Maryland) Police Department.

² Budget success was defined as an increase of 20 percent or more in operating budget over two successive years and substantial funding from state and local grants and private organizations.

³ Site visits consisted of in-depth interviews with department and key budgeting personnel, community activists, and media representatives in Largo, Charlotte-Mecklenburg County, and Scottsdale.

from the media's perspective, PERF conducted an informal e-mail survey of members of Investigative Reporters and Editors, Inc. (IRE),⁴ in all five of the states represented in the initial focus group. Information gathered from all those efforts suggests that positive relationships between law enforcement and the local media are advantageous for both the media and police—especially when the police department is seeking continued or additional funding during local budget proceedings.

To identify key factors in positive police–media relationships, PERF asked members of IRE to identify those characteristics of a successful police chief to which they credited the cultivation of such relationships. The overwhelming response was that positive police–media relationships were facilitated by police executives who did the following:

- allowed the media maximum access to the department
- provided useful and timely information
- facilitated interactions, both formal and informal, based on trust and honesty (also identified as candor)

In police departments with successful media relations, police executives and staff sought common ground with media professionals, and members of both professions worked to understand each other's needs. As a result, media reports were generally perceived as more objective by the police and tended to better incorporate the law enforcement perspective.

⁴ IRE is a grass-roots nonprofit organization dedicated to improving the quality of investigative reporting in the field of journalism. IRE (www.ire.org) was formed in 1975 as a networking tool and a forum in which journalists from across the country could raise questions and exchange ideas.

2

Why Chiefs Should Care About Media Relations

Feelings of mutual suspicion develop routinely between the media and the police. In some cases, the cause is their often conflicting responsibilities to the public. For example, a department's need for secrecy in an ongoing investigation conflicts with the media's desire to report as much information as possible. The result is frustration for police and media alike, with each alienated by the other's seeming disregard for their own professional needs. However, positive media relations are possible despite such inherent conflicts and can be very beneficial to a department—especially during the local budgeting process.

Typically, law enforcement and media agencies have competing interests, yet these institutions need each other in order to achieve success.

The media can be a powerful influence in shaping the community's and the local government's perception of the police. Television news magazines and evening news programs often report on police activities, sometimes because of sensational events. Such events, like the 1999 World Trade Organization (WTO) riots in Seattle or the attacks on women during the 2000 Puerto Rican Day Parade in New York City's Central Park, have a great impact on public opinion of the police. Media coverage of those particular events damaged public confidence in the local police departments—especially the New York City Police Department, which had already received a barrage of negative press for the shooting of Amadou Diallo in February 1999 and the violent abuse by police officers of Abner Louima in May of that same year. In all those incidents, the public was bombarded with negative media accounts. Much of the information disseminated by the media was obtained from victims, protesters, bystanders, and various local commentators. However, the reporting contained little information from the police perspective.

Media coverage of sensational events involving the police is the primary basis of public perceptions of the police department as a whole. How departments deal with such events, and to a lesser extent how successful they are at cultivating a favorable relationship in

their daily interactions with the media, determines the department's credibility with the public. Therefore, favorable police–media relationships are critical to the production of stories and reports that present positive images of the police department. Such relationships are thus the foundation for the successful management of potentially damaging sensational events.

A positive police–media relationship can buoy public confidence in a police department. Among other benefits, such confidence leads the public to presume that the department's budgetary requests are justified, practical, and perhaps forward-thinking. When the community believes the police are doing a good job, it is more willing to support continued, increased, or new funding for the department. Typically, media reports are the means by which the public learns that the department's crime-fighting efforts and prevention programs are successful.

3

Insight from the Media: Building Positive Police–Media Relationships

A police executive's success is largely based on his or her ability to gain the trust of the public and to use that trust to secure the resources necessary to advance the department's performance. Positive police-media relationships are integral to achieving such success. The PERF e-mail survey of investigative reporters, as well as in-depth interviews with media professionals working with three successful departments, revealed important insights into police–media relationships and resulted in numerous recommendations for police executives seeking to build positive relationships with media representatives in their communities.

Overall, PERF's exploration of police-media relationships revealed three common characteristics of police departments with self-reported successful media interactions. Those characteristics were described as follows:

1. Police executives and other personnel displayed candor with media representatives.
2. Media representatives were provided with formal and informal access to the departments.
3. The departments provided timely, useful information.

Displaying candor and providing access to the department while protecting ongoing police investigations may prove difficult for some police executives. PERF's media respondents described cases in which their repeated requests for interviews or information led only to referrals to public information officers (PIOs) who did not have either the necessary information or the authority to discuss the issues, or to police executive who refused to deliver even a few comments. They described such situations as their greatest source of frustration. Fortunately, reducing the problem may not be as difficult as it seems. For example, one *Arizona Republic* reporter expressed a desire for 24-hour access

to someone in the department who could speak authoritatively on news events. He also suggested regular bulletins updating the media on police activities. Another reporter, from the *Arizona Daily Star*, expressed a desire to see regular updates on crime and police activities in local neighborhoods. Yet another, from an NBC affiliate in Charlotte, recommends department tours and informal breakfasts with department representatives as a means to improve relationships. A *Charlotte Observer* reporter feels that building positive relationships can be as simple as promptly returning reporters' calls. *Concerns and recommendations from media representatives are discussed further in the next sections, as is the role of police officials in building positive police–media relationships.*

4

The Public Information Officer

The department's PIO is often the main source of police information for the media. The PIO serves not only as a source of official information but also as the media liaison, the first point of contact for media representatives requesting information from a department. IRE survey respondents indicated that a helpful PIO is one who is

- forthcoming with information
- easily accessible
- respectful of the media
- prompt to respond to requests for information

Specifically, respondents stated that they are looking for a PIO who has 24-hour availability and can speak authoritatively on both breaking news and regular, routine activities. PIOs can be a great resource for the media, yet they are commonly perceived as obstacles. A correspondent for the *Arizona Daily Star* said she has run across PIOs who “refuse or severely limit a request for neighborhood crime information” without explaining why. When unaccompanied by a complete and honest explanation, such reluctance is often interpreted as either antagonistic, secretive, or as a sign that the department is unsure of itself.

In most agencies, the PIO has more contact with the media than any other member of the department. Thus, it is critical that the image of “PIO as obstacle” be overcome. The reporters responding to the survey felt that PIOs should be capable of answering all of the media's questions honestly and authoritatively. Furthermore, PIOs should explain clearly and reasonably why certain questions cannot be answered and should state when more information will be available.

Departments seeking to improve relations with the local media must ensure that their PIO works to develop shared trust and mutual respect with the media. To do so, police

“brass” should keep the PIO well informed on routine departmental matters and on breaking news. Departments should also make sure they provide the media with some direct access to police executives and to others in the department who can provide relevant information.

5

Media Access to Police Executives

While the PIO plays a large role in developing a police department's relationship with the media, it is also necessary for the police executive and other high-ranking officers to be accessible to the media and candid in their interactions. In large departments, the PIO can help with many routine requests, but the police executive, too, should be accessible to the media, particularly when promoting new programs or responding to sensational crime events. In dealing with sensational crime events, absolute candor remains a key to good media relationships. Police executives in smaller departments, without the luxury of a PIO, must also be sensitive to the needs of media representatives and respond to even the most routine requests in a transparent and timely manner.

A reporter with the *Arizona Republic* explained that a police executive's candor and willingness to admit mistakes are instrumental in building trust between media and law enforcement, especially in cases of great public interest. One Associated Press reporter noted that candor and a willingness to admit mistakes can also result in the quick resolution of news stories. Controversial media reports are much less dramatic and drawn out when police executives are open about the problem and willing to accept responsibility. The AP reporter mentioned above stated, "[N]othing wipes out a relationship like trying to cover something up." He cited an example of a former chief who, when confronted with reports of illegal activity among some of his officers, called a press conference and provided as much information as was available. The chief explained the problem, discussed his role as chief and the bureaucratic limitations placed upon him in dealing with the issue, and accepted full responsibility for any lapse in leadership that contributed to the problem. He then closed with a promise to the community that he would resolve the issue to the best of his ability. The reporter stated, "[T]hat made it a one-day story. Others [police executives], who don't have that kind of candor, end up dragging the story out over several days or more. That makes a steady stream of what the cops would call 'negative' press, which does erode public confidence."

A police executive who supports reporters by providing accurate information and straightforward answers develops credibility with the media. Reporters for the *Arizona Republic*, *Arizona Daily Star*, and *Charlotte Observer* reiterated the importance of presenting a transparent image of police activities. They suggested that building positive media relations involves letting the media past the “PIO door” and including them as observers in the daily activities of the department. As media personnel grow more familiar with police department policy and routine activities, they gain a professional respect for law enforcement. That respect leads to more favorable reporting, which ultimately improves public opinion of the police.

6

Rank-and-File Officers and Media Relations

Candor is important not only from the PIO and police executive, but from the rest of the department as well. Responding media reporters indicated that interviews with rank-and-file officers are often more informative than those given by the PIO because those officers are more closely involved with the event in question. There are many other advantages to policies that permit rank-and-file officers to participate in media interviews. Police officers can provide information about specific neighborhoods and day-to-day activities, giving reporters a source of information supplementary to the exceptional incident reports. Those interviews can also serve as a source of positive news, helping the public understand the daily activities of the department and its concern for the well-being of the community.

However, such a policy also presents disadvantages. When several people in the department speak with the press, there is a greater risk that a rank-and-file officer will make a statement that either should not be made, or that will be

Use caution when allowing rank-and-file officers to give interviews, but take the risk.

misinterpreted. In addition, sensitive information may be released, harming the department's investigations. Officers working on sensitive or high-profile cases should be briefed before media interviews. If rank-and-file officers are allowed to participate in media interviews, they should first be trained on media relations in general and, more specifically, on the types of information that can be released to the public. The cost of such training is an investment capable of yielding significant returns in subsequent budgetary proceedings.

7

Media Relationships and Budgetary Success: Recommendations from Media Representatives

Reporters want information to be timely, truthful, relevant, and easily accessible. Police information can be distributed to them in many ways, including frequent press releases, police executive statements, website updates, or media tours and informal brunches. The following are media representatives' key recommendations on information sharing:

- Provide useful information.
- Use technology to disseminate general information.
- Train PIOs and officers in working with the media.
- Increase informal media relations.

Provide useful information

Although police departments must take care not to compromise ongoing investigations, there is still much information that can be given to reporters.

Survey respondents indicated that they would like to see general information, such as trends in crime statistics, broken down by time and location for

greater usability. In the event of a sensational crime event or the implementation of a new departmental policy or program, police executives should be prepared to issue frequent press releases and deliver numerous statements to the media. Media representatives also requested that departments document their progress on programs or investigations of public interest and provide detailed yet reader-friendly reports on special issues, such as budgeting and overtime payments. Reporters indicated that the more detailed and specific the information is, the more useful it would be. One reporter recommended that departments develop a directory that would enable reporters to contact the department members most likely to possess the information they want.

Key Media Recommendations:

- ***Provide useful information.***
- ***Use technology.***
- ***Train PIOs and officers.***
- ***Increase media interactions.***

Use technology

Advances in the Internet and other information technology (IT) allow departments to make large amounts of information easily accessible to the press and general public. Using IT to provide reporters with information also reduces the workload of the PIO, thus increasing his or her availability to anticipate and respond to other requests. The increased availability of information also adds an atmosphere of transparency to the law enforcement community as a whole.

In some situations, sharing information with the community may be reciprocated in the form of leads in ongoing investigations. For example, circulating a “most wanted” list or information on stolen property may help develop case leads. The Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department’s website (www.cmpd.org) is a good example of the use of technology to increase the media’s and the public’s access to information. The site describes the department and its services, lists the districts served, provides local crime statistics, and offers contact information. It is also used to post department news releases about current events, crimes, and important issues, and an index is provided to guide users of the website. One investigative reporter observed, “Charlotte’s police do a superb job of computer mapping and they put it on the Web in a searchable format. It’s a wonderful resource.”

Provide media relations training to police

While certain information about investigations and high-profile events should not be shared with the media, as much non-sensitive information as possible should be made available. Additionally, if the media requests case-sensitive information, the department should explain why the information cannot be released and when more information will be provided. An accurate explanation of the potential legal ramifications or the risks posed to ongoing investigations would be viewed as a credible effort to cooperate. In such situations, the police department should attempt to provide as much non-sensitive information as possible.

To accomplish those tasks, training should be provided to PIOs and other police personnel who are in contact with the media. Such training could address media relations strategies and include instruction on how to speak with reporters without jeopardizing the integrity of the agency.

Increase informal interactions

Survey responses suggest a pressing need to improve understanding between police and the media. To clarify the two groups' roles and responsibilities, survey respondents recommended increased contact between the two groups in settings unrelated to specific stories or assignments. For example, one reporter noted from personal experience that a one-day seminar on police and media relations proved to be extremely useful. Others suggested that informal meetings between the two parties (such as brunches for officers and reporters or occasional briefings) might also be helpful.

Another way to increase police–media interaction is to make program information readily available. While information on sensational crime events is crucial to reporters, other police activities are also of interest and may even help feed a slow news day. Providing information to the media on new and current initiatives increases positive press and demonstrates a department's willingness to initiate media contact. Department programs, such as citizen police academies or senior volunteer programs, are interesting to the public and encourage citizen involvement. Finally, to help reporters understand the challenges faced by rank-and-file officers, police departments could offer ride-alongs and observation of police training courses.

Overall, police executives should implement efficient means of providing reporters with information. That effort would improve relationships and reduce reporters' frustration at having to work through excessive amounts of red tape to complete a routine story.

Which methods to employ—using a PIO, expanding IT-based sharing, or allowing rank-and-file officers to speak to the media—is a matter for the police executive to determine. Polling local media representatives is one way to clarify their information needs and determine the best means of making information available.

8

Media Coverage and Local Funding Needs

Positive media coverage can lead to improved community perceptions of the police department, and those perceptions may aid in efforts to secure new support or maintain current funding for department needs. Dramatic events, such as the WTO riots in Seattle, have provided an opportunity for many police departments in large cities to make public their financial needs with regard to equipment, training, and personnel. Washington, DC, Police Chief Charles Ramsey used the lessons learned from the Seattle experience to prepare for the WTO meetings that followed in his jurisdiction. National tragedies, such as the Oklahoma City bombing, the Columbine shootings, and recent terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon, have also provided the impetus for police departments to evaluate current needs and address deficits in equipment or response training for similar events. When a department needs increased funding, prudent responses to such events can prove instrumental.

Local and national events may provide the impetus necessary for additional programs and equipment.

Improvements in department funding can result from events other than tragedies or crises that merit national media coverage. Less dramatic local incidents can provide numerous reasons for increased funding. In smaller jurisdictions, media coverage of parental concern over speeding in school zones can draw public attention to the need for more officer overtime or the need for more vehicles. Police departments may even take the lead and make the media aware of funding needs. For example, after seizing semiautomatic and high-powered weapons from street criminals, the Charlotte-Mecklenburg Police Department invited the media to a press conference. The department displayed the weapons that criminals possessed on the streets, and then compared them, side-by-side, to the officers' guns. That press conference successfully demonstrated the department's urgent need for better firearms and the funds necessary to acquire them. A news correspondent for WBTV in Charlotte recalled that the firearms display had a great impact on the media's and community's un-

derstanding of the importance of additional funding and ultimately helped the department obtain funds for upgrading its weapons.

Continued funding support for police department programs and equipment can also be ensured by providing media demonstrations on how the funding was used, with specific attention to the impact that the new program, equipment, or use of extra staff time (however the funding was used) had on the department's performance. Demonstrating the use of newly funded technology or equipment improves community confidence that the police department is making justified and useful budget requests. Inviting the media to take part in such demonstrations is an easy way to improve relationships with the media and to disseminate key information to the community.

9

Conclusion

The public is constantly looking for more information. There is a growing market for lurid news of wrongdoing, and plenty of sensationalism can be found on television, in magazines, and in newspapers. Continued public interest in crime and violence ensures that the media will search out stories and events of interest to their audience. Agencies should view that desire for information as an opportunity, not a burden. If police departments work to promote and maintain a favorable media relationship, the media's craving for information can be turned into a significant asset for fighting crime and procuring resources.

Of course, a department may encounter problems when dealing with the media. Police agencies risk losing credibility by either disclosing confidential information or mistakenly releasing incorrect information. However, departments can avoid such problems by carefully critiquing current media information systems and by balancing the needs of the media with the needs of the department. Implementing the relationship-building tools discussed in this document (such as increasing informal police–media interactions, providing media access to the police executive or key department personnel, and using a skilled PIO) can help police departments build the working relationships necessary to manage these difficult situations.

Positive media relationships demonstrate competent and effective executive leadership in a department. Maintaining credibility with the media requires a degree of professionalism and cooperation that will invariably provide the department with a strong public image. In times of elevated crime rates or sensational, tragic events, media coverage may even provide a springboard for future departmental funding. Overall, honesty, candor, and access are instrumental in departments' attempts to gain support for innovative initiatives, personnel increases, and new and continuing budget items.