I. INTRODUCTION

A. PURPOSE OF DOCUMENT

This paper is designed to accompany the Considerations Document on Law Enforcement-Media Relations established by the IACP Law Enforcement Policy Center. This paper provides essential background material and supporting documentation to provide a greater understanding of the recommendations and guidance provided in the Considerations Document. This material may be of value to law enforcement executives in their efforts to develop their own policies that meet the requirements and circumstances of their communities and their law enforcement agencies.

B. BACKGROUND

Every law enforcement agency needs a viable media-relations function and a written policy governing the agency’s media relations philosophy. Effective media relations help build positive community relations, which translate into community support for the agency. A written policy is critical to ensuring that all agency personnel understand the importance of media relations and their role in contributing to the agency’s relationship with the media. Policies and procedures should also address the changing nature of the media. While previously limited to formal news outlets, media may now include individuals who identify themselves in a journalistic capacity, such as citizen journalists and bloggers. Agencies should develop procedures for interacting with these individuals. For instance, agencies may opt to provide them with equal access to information and crime scenes as traditional media outlets if they have established themselves as a voice in their community.

The media relations policy should encourage open communication and working relationships between the agency and the media. In many instances, the media has a legal right to report the news and the agency can benefit from that reporting.\(^1\) In addition, the media can be helpful in solving crimes by publicizing information about suspects or other wanted persons. Representatives of the media will be much more willing to help a law enforcement agency if the agency has a history of cooperation and a positive relationship.

II. PROCEDURES\(^2\)

A. MEETINGS WITH THE MEDIA

Regular meetings between law enforcement personnel and members of the media are important to foster positive working relationships. Regular meetings give agencies and media representatives opportunities to discuss issues of mutual

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\(^1\) For example, in the United States, the U.S. Constitution guarantees the right to a free press, and many states have enacted laws to expand that right to include public (including news media) access to government documents.

\(^2\) Each agency should consult their local laws and regulations prior to developing or implementing policies regarding interacting with the news media.
interest and concern. Agencies can also inform the media of any proposed or anticipated changes in agency policy or procedures for interacting with the media.\(^3\)

A major benefit of regular meetings with the media is the opportunity to interact without the pressures of daily news gathering. Many times, potential disputes can be averted before they turn into issues that could possibly jeopardize the positive relationships that agencies have established.

Before any meeting, both law enforcement and media representatives should agree on whether any conversations or discussions are on the record. Other methods such as off the record, on background, and deep background may have different meanings. Law enforcement personnel should determine the exact meaning of these practices before engaging in them.

Additionally, agencies should consider distributing their media relations policy to all their employees and to the local media. The media will benefit from knowledge of specific procedures and have a better understanding of the agency’s willingness to be open and cooperative.

B. IDENTIFICATION OF STAKEHOLDERS

Prior to developing media relations policies and procedures, agencies should identify relevant stakeholders and their needs to determine what information should be released, which communication models should be used to release the information, and any specific procedures that should be implemented.

Potential stakeholders include members of the media. Examples of traditional forms of media are print media, such as newspapers and magazines; broadcast news/journalism, including television and radio; and Internet media, such as online newspapers, articles, and magazines. However, new forms of media are constantly emerging, such as blogs; podcasts; and social media platforms. Agencies should consider these evolving forms of media when developing their policies and procedures.

Other potential stakeholders include representatives of special interest groups, community members, and/or elected officials.

All individuals involved in public information must also be aware that the media landscape continually changes, and there is considerable overlap between online and traditional media.

C. MEDIA RELATIONS PERSONNEL

Public Information Officers (PIOs). Regardless of an agency’s size, at least one person should be responsible for handling news media inquiries. Agencies should consider designating specific personnel responsible for working with the media. This person may be responsible for answering media inquiries; overseeing the dissemination of information to the media, including public records; and advising other agency employees on issues pertaining to public information or interaction with the media. In smaller agencies, the chief executive might perform this function; in other agencies an employee may be assigned the additional duty of public information officer (PIO); in larger agencies, a full-time PIO generally fills this role, while some larger agencies may have more than one PIO. The PIO may be either a sworn officer or civilian employee.

The PIO should be qualified in written and oral communication, have organizational skills, and be cognizant of the importance of a working relationship with the media. Moreover, they should know how to respond and communicate during critical incidents, effectively use and manage social media, and have excellent interpersonal and customer service skills. PIOs should be competent in conveying information compellingly and professionally using written and visual media and should know and be able to effectively communicate their agency’s mission, goals, and objectives.

The PIO should report directly to the agency chief executive for any media-related duties. Because the PIO is the spokesperson not only for the agency—but also for the chief executive, the PIO should always have direct access to this person or their designee. Having to ascend through a chain of command hinders this access.

Agencies should consider establishing regular operating hours for the public information office. Designating such hours allows the media to know when the PIO is available for routine media requests and inquiries. However, the PIO or the PIO team should also be available on call to the agency at all times in order to provide accurate and timely information to the media in the event of a critical incident or other occurrence that may generate media inquiries.

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\(^3\) For agencies seeking accreditation or reaccreditation through the Commission on the Accreditation for Law Enforcement Agencies (CALEA), conducting regularly scheduled meetings with the media earns credit toward accreditation.
Routine requests for information, statistics, interviews, or other media inquiries of a noncritical nature should be encouraged during the normal operating hours of the public information office. Agencies should also determine who is responsible for responding to media inquiries during the PIO’s off-duty hours. This could be communications employees, patrol supervisors, or watch commanders. The agency should inform the media that these employees are not PIOs but are available for basic questions regarding active incidents.

Agencies should also consider designating someone to serve as a backup PIO. This person would be available to serve as PIO during the PIO’s absences from the agency. The backup PIO should have the same training and qualifications as the regular PIO.

All agency personnel should recognize the importance of notifying the PIO of critical incidents, such as terrorist attacks, natural disasters, or officer-involved shootings, in a timely manner. The PIO can determine, along with on-scene commanders, if they need to respond to the scene. Agency personnel should err on the side of caution. If in doubt, agency personnel should notify the PIO so they can help assess whether the incident warrants response to the location.

When a critical incident or other major emergency occurs, the PIO should be aware of the media component of their jurisdiction’s emergency preparedness plan. In such cases, that component may override the agency’s policy.

PIOs should regularly communicate with the other PIOs in their region. This includes one-on-one contacts as well as formal or informal associations. PIOs frequently work together when their individual agencies participate in joint investigations or operations. They can work more efficiently when they already know each other and have established professional relationships. During critical incidents or long-duration emergencies, fellow PIOs can be called upon for mutual aid assistance.

Involvement with PIO associations can also give PIOs opportunities to associate with representatives from other disciplines, such as hospitals, schools, fire departments, emergency medical services, utilities, transportation, and local governments. In the event of a critical incident involving multiple agencies and disciplines, having a previously established relationship among the PIOs ensures the more efficient and accurate dissemination of information.

Another benefit of maintaining a membership with a viable PIO association is the opportunity to share information about local media organizations and their reporters. Members can learn much from the experiences of their fellow PIOs.

Non-PIO Personnel Media Interactions. In addition to PIOs, all agency personnel may encounter the media and/or work with the agency’s information dissemination function and should receive guidance on maintaining positive working relationships with the media. Personnel who are approached for information by a member of the media can help by being courteous and connecting the individual with the PIO or other appropriate source of information.

Supervisors may be responsible for keeping the PIO informed of newsworthy issues, serving as a source of basic information at crime scenes before the arrival of the PIO or in cases where the incident is not serious enough to warrant an on-scene response by the PIO, and answering basic media inquiries during the hours when the PIO is off duty. The media may request interviews with supervisors due to their expertise.

Social Media. Agencies should also consider designating personnel responsible for maintaining and monitoring the agency’s social media pages. If this person is not the agency’s PIO, they should be encouraged to work closely with the PIO to determine what, when, and how information should be disseminated.

D. INFORMATION RELEASE GUIDELINES

Guidelines should be established regarding what information should be released to the community, taking into account legal restrictions or obligations. Each agency should check for applicable public records and related laws or regulations to determine what information must be released, may be released at the agency’s discretion, and cannot be released. Agencies should also consider whether the release of information could potentially hamper the successful conclusion of an investigation or jeopardize the safety of affected persons. For example, agencies should consider permitting the release of the following information on a consistent basis, except as excluded by law:

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4 See the IACP Policy Center’s Documents on Investigation of Officer-Involved Shootings and Other Serious Incidents available at https://www.theiacp.org/resources/policy-center-resource/officer-involved-shootings.
5 See the IACP Policy Center documents on Social Media available at https://www.theiacp.org/resources/policy-center-resource/social-media.
6 For example, the release of public records and other information to the public is regulated in the United States by local, state, and federal laws.
The immediate facts and circumstances about a crime or incident;
- Basic information about victims;
- Description of suspects;
- Basic description of weapons and vehicles used;
- Basic description of stolen items;
- Basic description of injuries and condition of victims;
- The name, age, address and other basic information about arrestees and the charges against them;
- Information contained in arrest affidavits and other applicable crime or incident reports; and
- Booking photographs.

Conversely, agencies should consider prohibiting the release of the following, as governed by applicable law:
- Names, addresses, and any other information that may identify victims of a sexual offense, child abuse, or any other crime where the privacy of the victim is protected;
- Names, addresses, and basic information about juveniles;
- Active criminal investigative information, active criminal intelligence information, and surveillance techniques;
- Names of informants and information provided by them;
- Grand jury testimony and proceedings;
- Internal affairs investigations;
- Names of witnesses;
- The identity of critically injured or deceased persons before next-of-kin notification;
- Home address, telephone numbers, and familial information of law enforcement personnel;
- Names of undercover personnel; and
- Any other information prohibited from public disclosure.

Agencies should consider providing personnel and their families with training regarding social media privacy settings on a periodic basis, with an emphasis on what information may be visible to the public. This is especially important from an officer safety perspective following a high-profile incident.

Critical incidents often entail interactions with the media. Agencies should develop relationships with the media before an incident occurs. For example, while the media has an interest in sharing live coverage of critical incidents with the public, live coverage can pose significant risks to agency operations. Although the media cannot be prohibited from filming in public places, prior discussions can help media representatives understand how their work can impact agency operations and officer safety, potentially reducing some of these risks.

Regarding access to suspects, agencies should consult a legal advisor to determine whether their local laws and regulations permit them to notify the media that a suspect has been arrested, is being brought into a booking facility, or is being transported to a jail. Personnel may not infringe on the right of the media to photograph or talk briefly to persons in custody while in public places, unless security considerations dictate otherwise. The media should not be allowed access to photograph persons in custody in areas that are generally considered off-limits to the general public.

E. NEWS RELEASES AND CONFERENCES

Agencies should have standard operating procedures for news releases. These should specify how news releases will be written and disseminated. Procedures may include identifying what incidents are of community interest or concern and necessitate a news release; the review and approval procedure of news releases in advance of dissemination; the platform or official channel by which the news release will be disseminated, such as the agency website or social media accounts; procedures for coordination with the agency social media personnel; and who will receive news releases, such as the media and agency personnel.

These procedures should be adhered to even in major incidents. Agencies should encourage all personnel, including executives, to utilize the established agency news dissemination channels and/or the agency’s coordinated communication strategy. This strategy should specifically address whether there are any prohibitions on posting information on personal social media accounts.
Agencies should also develop procedures for holding news conferences. They should determine which events or categories of events merit news conferences, who should be notified if a news conference is held, who will facilitate the conference, and guidelines for ensuring that news conferences do not take the place of more timely updates on social media. All news conferences should be video- and audio-recorded.

F. ALTERNATIVE METHODS TO DISSEMINATE INFORMATION

The media can be a valuable tool in getting agencies’ messages to their communities. However, law enforcement agencies should recognize that the media are not the only conduit for reaching community members. In fact, other vehicles – such as social media, podcasts, community newsletters, local government access cable television programming, Web sites, public appearances by agency personnel, and bulletin boards – provide agencies the opportunity to send their message directly to community members without interpretation. Regarding news releases and news conference notifications, agencies should consider electronic distribution methods, such as e-mail, Web sites, and group paging systems.

G. MEDIA RIDE-ALONGS

Media ride-alongs are a tool that agencies can use to give the community insight into how and why law enforcement agencies and personnel function. Agencies who wish to take employ this tool should ensure that their ride-along policies are in compliance with their local laws and regulations. Agencies should consider drafting a media ride-along waiver and release forms to cover liabilities and set out expectations. They may also prohibit members of the media from accompanying officers onto private property or into private homes or prohibit officers from assisting members of the media in gaining permission for access from property owners.

H. ETHICS

Law enforcement agency employees should interact with the media in a professional, ethical manner. Agencies may provide guidance to ensure that this standard is upheld. This guidance may include what employees should do if they encounter media representatives who do not follow the ethical guidelines of their profession.

The following are some voluntary ethics guidelines for media published by professional journalism organizations:

- National Union of Journalists (www.nuj.org.uk/home/)
- Society of Professional Journalists (www.spj.org)
- Canadian Association of Journalists (http://caj.ca/index.php)
- Radio/Television News Directors Association (www.rtnda.org)
- National Press Photographers Association (www.nppa.org)

PIOs are encouraged to post these codes in their offices and to use them as a reference when working with the media. PIOs may also inquire with major media outlets in their community to ascertain whether they have their own ethics rules.

I. MEDIA RELEASES DURING MULTI-AGENCY INVESTIGATIONS

Multijurisdictional investigations can be a special challenge for PIOs. Agencies involved in such investigations are encouraged to speak with one voice to prevent conveying conflicting messages to the community or creating confusion and conflict between agencies. To ensure that the agencies’ messages are consistent, they should determine a lead agency. This agency should choose a spokesperson(s) to provide and coordinate the release of public information. This decision does not preclude other agencies from participating in news conferences or other media opportunities; PIOs from all participating agencies can provide support. Guidelines should also be created for the lead agency regarding sharing information with all the involved agencies prior to public dissemination.

J. INCIDENT SCENES

Agencies should develop procedures for working with the media at incident scenes to ensure the appropriate dissemination of information. Determining who will be responsible for releasing information to the media prior to an incident can ensure that the agency’s message is consistent and accurate. This person should be responsible for ensuring that no information that could endanger law enforcement personnel or the general public is released.

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7 See the IACP Policy Center documents on Social Media available at https://www.theiacp.org/resources/policy-center-resource/social-media.
Establishing a perimeter can assist agencies in interacting with the media and determining how much access the media can have to a scene. Photography and newsgathering should always be permitted outside the perimeter; however, agencies can grant media representatives and their equipment closer access when appropriate. Media representatives should receive adequate warnings prior to attempting to access dangerous areas of their own volition, but agencies should consider whether they are permitted to restrict access to such areas.

Agencies should also consider designating a staging area for the media, taking into consideration safety and operational requirements. Guidance should also be in place for managing other stakeholders at the scene, such as elected officials.

K. MEDIA POOLS

Media pools may also be useful in the event of a critical incident. In typical pool situations, members of the media choose a reporter or photographer or both to have special access to an area not otherwise permitted. In general, the media prefers total access with their own personnel and equipment but understand the necessity of using pools on occasion.

L. MEDIA CREDENTIALS

The media, like any other member of the community, does not need to display identification in an area of unrestricted access. However, at times, the PIO or scene supervisor may give the media opportunities for special access.

Agencies should develop guidelines to distinguish media representatives from the general public, consistent with applicable laws or regulations. For example, some law enforcement agencies choose to issue their own media credentials. Agencies should take into account the changing nature of the media when developing their policies in this area.

M. TRAINING

Agencies should ensure their PIOs and backup PIOs receive proper, specialized training. PIOs may also be responsible for training other members of the agency. Training should be provided for all personnel, especially those designated to work with the media, so that they are aware of key issues, including risks and benefits, involved with any media interaction.

The level of training should be based on the level of an employee’s involvement with the media. For example, line officers should receive basic training. Employees who may be called upon to do interviews with the media, write news releases, or perform backup PIO duties require more advanced training. Training may be provided on an initial and ongoing basis and may include instruction on writing, public speaking, media relations, and open records guidelines and other applicable laws governing the release of information. Agencies may consider incorporating these skills in standards for agency personnel, especially as they qualify for promotions.

III. CONCLUSION

Working relationships between agencies and media representatives are key to establishing transparency and positive community-police relations. They can also assist agencies in disseminating information effectively and resolving crimes more quickly. These relationships can be developed by releasing public information in a consistent, impartial, accurate, and timely manner, and by behaving in an ethical and cordial way with media representatives.

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* In the United States, training is available through regional and state PIO associations, as well as private firms.
Every effort has been made to ensure that this document incorporates the most current information and contemporary professional judgment on this issue. Readers outside of the United States should note that, while this document promotes procedures reflective of a democratic society, its legal basis follows United States Supreme Court rulings and other federal laws and statutes.

Law enforcement administrators should be cautioned that each law enforcement agency operates in a unique environment of court rulings, state laws, local ordinances, regulations, judicial and administrative decisions and collective bargaining agreements that must be considered, and should therefore consult its legal advisor before implementing any policy.