

Media Relations

308.1 VERSION

Review Date	Effective Date	Approving Authority
09/22/2021	07/09/2018	Kelley Warner, Chief of Police

308.2 POLICY AND PURPOSE

This policy provides guidelines for the release of official department information to the media. It also addresses coordinating media access to scenes of disasters, criminal investigations, emergencies and other law enforcement activities. It is the policy of the Harrisonburg Police Department to protect the privacy rights of individuals, while releasing non-confidential information to the media regarding topics of public concern. Information that has the potential to negatively affect investigations will not be released.

308.3 ACCOUNTABILITY STATEMENT

All employees are expected to fully comply with the guidelines and timelines set forth in this policy. Responsibility rests with the supervisor to ensure that any violations of policy are investigated and appropriate training, counseling and/or disciplinary action is initiated. This directive is for internal use only, and does not enlarge an employee's civil liability in any way. It should not be construed as the creation of a higher standard of safety or care in an evidentiary sense, with respect to third party claims. Violation of this directive, if proven, can only form the basis of a complaint by this department, and then only in a non-judicial administrative setting.

308.4 RESPONSIBILITIES

The ultimate authority and responsibility for the release of information to the media shall remain with the Chief of Police. In situations not warranting immediate notice to the Chief of Police and in situations where the Chief of Police has given prior approval, Commanders, supervisors and Public Information Officer (PIO) may prepare and release information to the media, arrange and assist at scheduled news conferences and be readily available on an on-call basis to respond to the media in accordance with this policy and applicable laws regarding confidentiality.

The department generally makes information publicly available by means of news releases that are distributed to all local news media representatives and posts to HPD's website and social media site(s). The department may also provide information to news media representatives by other means in response to specific queries.

The Department may routinely release information to the media without receiving a specific request. This may include media releases regarding critical incidents, information of public concern, updates regarding significant incidents or requests for public assistance in solving crimes or identifying suspects. This information may also be released through the department website or other electronic data sources.

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308.4.1 PUBLIC INFORMATION FUNCTION

- (a) The Harrisonburg Police Department is committed to informing the community of events that occur within the jurisdiction of the Police Department and events that involve the Police Department. Law Enforcement agencies must have the support of their communities in order to operate efficiently.
- (b) By providing the public with information on departmental administration and operations, the Harrisonburg Police Department can foster a relationship of mutual trust, cooperation, and respect. In order to facilitate this commitment to the public, the Harrisonburg Police Department has established a public information function to include:
 - 1. Assisting news personnel in covering routine news stories and responding to media inquiries in a timely manner.
 - 2. Having a close relationship and partnership with the City of Harrisonburg Public Information Officer, and keeping him/her informed of incidents that occur.
 - 3. Preparing and distributing agency press releases, and content for the website and social media sites (ensure confidential or restricted information is not inappropriately released to the media).
 - 4. Arranging for and assisting at news conferences.
 - 5. Coordinating and authorizing the release of information to include, but not limited to, criminal incidents, investigations and operations, department activities, and personnel issues.
 - 6. Assisting in crisis situations within the agency.
 - 7. Coordinating the release of information when other public service agencies are involved in a mutual effort.
- (c) The Public Information Officers may also be needed to provide support to the city's PIO during large-scale incidents or events.

308.5 MEDIA REQUESTS

Any media request for information or access to a law enforcement incident shall be referred to the Office of the Chief of Police or, if unavailable, to the first available supervisor. Prior to releasing any information to the media, members shall consider the following:

- (a) At no time shall any member of this department make any comment or release any official information to the media without prior approval from the Chief of Police or his/her designee PIO
- (b) In situations involving multiple agencies or government departments, every reasonable effort should be made to coordinate media releases with the authorized representative of each involved agency prior to the release of any information by this department.
- (c) Under no circumstance should any member of this department make any comment to the media regarding any law enforcement incident not involving this department

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without prior approval of the Chief of Police or designee. Under these circumstances the member should direct the media to the agency handling the incident.

308.6 ACCESS

Authorized media representatives shall be provided access to scenes of disasters, criminal investigations, emergencies and other law enforcement activities as required by law.

Based upon available resources, reasonable effort should be made to provide a safe staging area for the media that is near the incident and that will not interfere with emergency or criminal investigation operations.

Access by the media is subject to the following conditions (Va. Code § 15.2-1714):

- (a) The media representative shall produce valid media credentials that shall be prominently displayed at all times while in areas otherwise closed to the public.
- (b) Media representatives should be prevented from interfering and may be removed for interfering with emergency operations and criminal investigations.
- (c) Media interviews with individuals who are in custody should not be permitted without the approval of the Chief of Police or his/her designee and the express written consent of the person in custody.
- (d) No member of this department who is under investigation shall be subjected to media visits or interviews without the consent of the involved member.

308.6.1 CRITICAL OPERATIONS

Access to any of the noted incidents will be denied to news media representatives in the following situations:

- (a) Inside the perimeter of a crime scene
- (b) Private property, if the owner of the property requests that they be excluded.
- (c) Scenes at which evidence may be tampered, damaged, or removed.
- (d) Scenes at which media presence could potentially disrupt a tactical operation and/or jeopardize the safety of citizens or public safety officials.
- (e) Areas deemed potentially hazardous

308.7 CONFIDENTIAL OR RESTRICTED INFORMATION

It shall be the responsibility of the employee making the release to ensure that confidential or restricted information is not inappropriately released to the media (see the Records Maintenance and Release and Personnel Records policies and Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) guidelines). When in doubt, the Chief of Police, and/or authorized legal counsel should be consulted prior to releasing any information.

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308.8 NEWS MEDIA BRIEFINGS

Media briefings may be utilized for communicating important information, when authorized in advance by the Chief of Police. In such cases, the City Public Information Officer may be requested to help coordinate with the Department PIO team with the following:

- (a) Securing the venue and ensuring it is appropriately arranged and equipped;
- (b) Identifying who will be the principal speaker(s) and preparing talking points;
- (c) Notifying media representatives of the date, time, place and general topic of the briefing;
- (d) Preparing and distributing news releases and handouts;
- (e) Serving as media liaison and assisting media representatives at the briefing.