

POLICE MEDIA RELATIONS

WILLIAMSTOWN POLICE DEPARTMENT POLICY & PROCEDURE NO. 4.46	ISSUE DATE: 03/17/2022
	REVISION DATE: 03/30/2023
	REVIEW DATE: 03/30/2024

I. GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS AND GUIDELINES

To operate effectively, the department must have the support of the community. The goal of the public information function is to obtain this support through the development and maintenance of a positive relationship of mutual trust, cooperation, and respect with the news media and the community by providing them with accurate and timely information on events that affect the lives of citizens in the community and on the department's administration and operations. While maintaining the privacy rights of individuals and the integrity of criminal investigations, authorized personnel will be expected to release public information with openness and candor. The department is committed to informing the community and the news media of events within the public domain that are handled by or involve the department.

II. POLICY

It is the policy of this department to cooperate fully and impartially with authorized news media representatives in their efforts to gather factual, public information pertaining to activities of the department, as long as these activities do not unduly interfere with departmental operations, infringe upon individual rights, or violate the law.

III. DEFINITIONS

PUBLIC INFORMATION:

Information that may be of interest to the general public regarding policy, procedures, or events involving the department or otherwise newsworthy information that is not legally protected, which does not unduly interfere with

the mission of the department, infringe upon the rights of a defendant, or compromise the legitimate safety and privacy interests of officers, victims, witnesses, or others.

NEWS MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES:

Official news media personnel are those individuals who are directly employed by agencies of the electronic or print media, such as radio, television, news magazines and newspapers, and who have credentials identifying themselves as such. Freelance workers in this field may be regarded as other members of the general public unless otherwise designated by the Chief of Police.

News Media representatives who do not follow established procedures, or who interfere with or disrupt a police operation shall be required to leave the scene. Such incident shall be reported to the Chief of Police via written report. The Chief will in turn notify the representative's employer.

IV. PROCEDURE

A. Duties and Responsibilities

The Chief of Police is the department's official spokesman. The Chief of Police will be the department's Public Information Officer. The Chief of Police other employees to release information to the media.

Dispatchers shall address media inquiries or news checks and can give basic information on that day's accidents, fires, arrests or any other news worthy items recorded in the daily log.

PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICERS:

It is the responsibility of the PIO's to:

- Assist news media personnel in covering routine news stories, and at the scenes of incidents;
- Assist the news media on an on-call basis;
- Prepare and distribute news releases;
- Arrange for, and assist at, news conferences;
- Coordinate and authorize the release of information about victims, witnesses and suspects;
- Assist in crisis situations within the agency and community;
- Arrange media access to incident scenes, as appropriate;
- Coordinate and authorize the release of information concerning confidential agency investigations and operations (such as internal investigations, drug raids, search warrants, etc.); and
- Develop procedures for releasing information when other public service agencies are involved in a mutual effort.

SHIFT SUPERVISOR:

The shift supervisor shall be responsible for ensuring that the Chief of Police or the on-call command staff member are informed of events that may have media interest.

B. Agency Cooperation with the Media**GENERAL CONSIDERATIONS:**

Before providing information to the news media or responding to inquiries from media representatives, the following police requirements will be carefully considered:

- The necessity to prevent interference with, or hampering of a police investigation;
- The necessity to keep confidential police investigative practices and activities from being disclosed;
- The necessity to preserve evidence;
- The necessity to protect the safety of the victims of the crime;
- The necessity to protect the identity of informants;
- The necessity to protect the identification of undercover police officers;
- The necessity to successfully apprehend the perpetrators of crime;
- The necessity to protect the constitutional rights of persons accused of crime; and
- The necessity to avoid prejudicial pretrial publicity.

ACCESS TO RECORDS:

Public records shall be available for view and copying by members of the public at reasonable times and without unreasonable delay. The Daily Log shall be available to the public. The Arrest Log shall be available to the public.

For further information, see the department policy on Records Management and Records Request.

C. Release of Information**GENERALLY:**

Information which may be released shall either be public information or comply with the department policies **4.33 - Records Requests** and **4.07 - Criminal Offender Record Information**.

In addition to the PIO's, the following employees are authorized to release information as specified by the Chief:

Dispatchers shall address media inquiries or news checks and can give basic information on that day's accidents, fires, arrests or any other news-worthy items recorded in the Daily Log.

ROUTINE RELEASE OF PUBLIC RECORD INFORMATION:

Members of the media shall, as do members of the public, have access to public records. See the department policy **4.33 - Records Requests**. Among such records are the Daily Log and the Arrest Log.

Information considered to be public information shall generally be released to the media as promptly as circumstances allow.

Circumstances may cause a reasonable delay in the release of such information, such as withholding the release of the name of an accident victim until family can be notified.

Public information may be provided to media representatives by telephone if the identity of the representative is known or can be authenticated. Such public information includes:

- Arrest information, such as the name, address and charges of persons arrested; and
- Information in the daily log which could be obtained by coming to the police station and reading the log made available to the public.

For release of information which is not obviously public information, see the department policy on **Records Management** and **Records Request**.

Written press statements shall be released by the Command Staff and officers as authorized below. PIO's will copy each other on any press releases as well as the Town Manager.

NEWS RELEASES:

News releases shall be prepared on the appropriate form by the Officer in Charge of the Shift, an officer having specific knowledge of the case or incident or the Chief of Police.

All material disseminated will be done in a timely fashion and with all possible considerations for the deadlines of various media outlets.

- WNAW -- Prior to 6AM, 12 NOON, 5PM and 9:30 PM.
- Berkshire Eagle -- Prior to 10:00 PM.
- iBerkshires.com – On-line only, no deadlines.

News releases shall be prepared without police slang or jargon and shall use civilian times and dates.

All news releases shall be faxed to the news media agencies listed above. A copy of the release shall be forwarded on paper or via email to the Chief.

News releases shall be prepared to report on the following offenses and incidents:

- Attempted Murder
- Major felony crimes and arrests for same.

- Kidnapping.
- Found or detonated explosive devices.
- Traffic accidents involving fatalities, injuries transported to a hospital, those that result in arrest or others that in the judgment of the officer in charge are newsworthy.
- Incidents involving a large number of injured persons.
- Police involved shootings.
- Police involved pursuits.
- Scams and other events where the public should be advised to prevent crime.

Generally, the following information may be released to the news media:

- The nature and general description of the crime or other incident.
- The date and time of the incident.
- The location of occurrence, except in cases of sexual assault or alleged child abuse when the location of these offenses is the victim's house.
- The nature of injuries if known, or damage.
- The identity, basic biographical information of persons arrested and their charges. In cases of juvenile offenders, names will not be released. Only that unnamed juvenile(s) have been arrested, their ages and hometown and the charges will be released.
- The location, date and time of an arrest.
- The names of arresting and assisting officers and other agencies that may have assisted in the incident. i.e.: Williamstown Fire Dept., North Adams PD etc.
- In traffic accidents, the type of vehicle, the damage sustained and whether or not the vehicle was towed from the scene.

If contacted by the news media looking for an update to a news release, when possible, this information should be provided.

When an officer is unsure of whether or not to issue a news release or has a question about its content, contact a sergeant or the Chief.

The normal media outlets that department news releases should be sent to are:

- WNAW – 413-662-2143
- Berkshire Eagle – 413-449-3419
- iBerkshires – 413-663-3384 or info@iberkshires.com

D. INVESTIGATIONS:

From the initial stage of a criminal investigation, police personnel shall refer all media requests for information to PIO's. Police employees not specifically authorized to release information shall not do so.

INFORMATION WHICH MAY BE RELEASED:

Information which may be released by authorized personnel in connection with investigations includes:

- The type or nature of an event or crime;
- The location, date and time, injuries sustained, damages, and a general description of how the incident occurred;
- The general type and quantity of property taken, excluding specific cash amounts from robberies or property value of items taken without specific approval of property owners;
- Requests for aid in locating evidence, a complainant, witnesses or a suspect;
- Number of officers or people involved in an event or investigation, and the length of the investigation; and
- Name of the case officer. (Exception: The name of any undercover officer will not be released).

RELEASE OF C.O.R.I.:

When an individual is charged with a criminal offense and is sought by law enforcement authorities, C.O.R.I. information, as well as photographs or mug shots, may be released to the media to warn the public and to help locate the individual. ¹ No departmental photographs, mug shots, videotape, film, or composites of subjects in custody shall otherwise be released to the media unless authorized by the Chief of Police or Lieutenant;

INFORMATION WHICH MAY NOT BE RELEASED:

The following information may not be released unless authorized by the Chief of Police:

- The identity or booking photo of a suspect prior to arrest unless such information would aid in apprehending the suspect or serve to warn the public of potential danger; ²
- The identity of any victim of a sex crime or domestic violence or any related information which, if divulged, could lead to the victim's identity;
- The identity of witnesses if such disclosure would prejudice an investigation to any significant degree, if it would place the witness in personal danger, or if confidentiality of such witness has been ordered by the court;³
- The identity of any juvenile, under age 18, who is a suspect or defendant in a case subject to the jurisdiction of the juvenile court;
- The identity of any complainant under age 18;
- The results of any investigative procedure such as lineups, polygraph tests, or other procedures (the fact that these tests have been performed may be revealed without further comment);
- Information which, if prematurely released, may interfere with the investigation or apprehension such as the nature of leads, specifics of a "modus operandi," details of the crime known only to the perpetrator and

the police, or information that may cause the suspect to flee or more effectively avoid apprehension; ⁴

- Information that may be of evidentiary value in criminal proceedings; and
- Specific cause of death unless officially determined by the medical examiner.⁵

IDENTITY OF CRIME VICTIMS:

The identity of victims in any kind of incident will generally not be released. The Chief of Police may, under unusual circumstances, release a victim's name (i.e. in a high profile incident). Example: A 23 year old male from Housatonic reported his home broken into and police responded.

The identity of a victim of a homicide or fatal motor vehicle crash will be released after notification to next of kin.

ACCIDENTS:

Information may be released, to include:

- The sex, age and municipality of residence;
 - Example: A 21 year old male from Great Barrington was injured.
 - Example: A 32-year-old female from Lee was partially ejected from the vehicle and taken to BMC...and transported to
- Make, model, and year of vehicles involved;
- Whether or not seat belts were used;
- Persons arrested and charged with a criminal offense will be identified;
- Investigating officer(s);
- Persons that are to be summoned to court cannot be identified until a criminal complaint has been issued through district court;
- Persons cited for a civil motor vehicle offense will be identified;
- A basic explanation of what happened; and
- A general statement that charges will be forthcoming if this has been determined.

SUICIDE / DRUG OVERDOSES:

Generally, attempted suicides, suicides, suspected suicides, or drug overdoses will not be reported to the media unless the Chief of Police decides otherwise.

In these cases, with the Chief's approval:

The fact that an attempted suicide, suicide or suspected suicide has occurred may be reported to the media, together with factual information describing how it happened.

The name, age, address, sex and occupation of the victim may also be released following notification of next of kin.

The fact that a suicide note also exists may also be acknowledged without further comment. The content of such note is personal and confidential and shall not be released except as provided by law.

E. Arrest, Arrest Warrant and Indictment:

INFORMATION WHICH MAY BE RELEASED:

Identification of the Accused:

- Name;
- Age;
- Residence;

NOTE: Identification of juveniles may not be released. The identity of persons taken into custody because of mental illness shall not be released.

- The time and place of arrest;
- Whether pursuit was involved;
- Whether resistance was encountered;
- Whether weapons were used;
- The charges placed against the suspect;
- A description of contraband seized;
- The identity of the arresting officer(s) or case investigator(s);
- The duration of the investigation, unless the officers are engaged in undercover situations; and
- The amount of bail, scheduled court dates, and place of the suspect's detention.

INFORMATION WHICH MAY NOT BE RELEASED:

- Prior criminal conviction record, character, or reputation of the defendant;
- Existence or contents of any confession, admission, or statement of a defendant or his failure or unwillingness to make a statement;
- Performance or results of any tests, or a defendant's refusal or failure to submit to tests such as a polygraph;
- Identity, statement, or expected testimony of any witness or victim;
- Any opinion about the guilt or innocence of a defendant or the merits of the case; and

- Any opinion or knowledge of the potential for a plea bargain or other pretrial action.

F. JOINT OPERATIONS WITH OTHER ENTITIES:

MUNICIPAL AGENCIES:

In instances where the police department is involved in operations with other municipal departments, unless otherwise restricted, authorized police officials may release information relating to the police participation in the operation. Members of the press should be referred to other municipal agencies unless other arrangements have been determined.

OTHER LAW ENFORCEMENT AGENCIES:

In instances where more than one law enforcement agency is involved, the agency having primary jurisdiction should be responsible for the release, or coordinating the release, of information, unless otherwise specifically arranged.

DISTRICT ATTORNEY'S OFFICE:

For operations involving the office of the District Attorney, members of the press should be referred to the District Attorney's office unless Chief of Police or Sergeants decide otherwise.

MEDICAL EXAMINER:

For operations involving the office of the Medical Examiner, authorized police officials may only release general statements regarding deaths. Members of the press should be referred to the Office of the Medical Examiner unless other arrangements have been determined.

INFORMATION WHICH MAY NOT BE RELEASED:

- The home address or telephone number of any member of the department may not be released. ⁶
- Sensitive information relating to internal investigation of police officers shall not be released without the express permission of the Chief of Police. ⁷
- The following information may not be released:
 - The identification of any sexual assault/ domestic abuse victim. ⁸
 - Home addresses and telephone numbers, places of employment or education of victims of adjudicated crimes. ⁹
 - Home addresses and telephone numbers, places of employment or education of victims of domestic violence. ¹⁰
- Records or reports pertaining to handicapped individuals who are physically or mentally incapacitated to the degree that they are confined to a wheelchair or are bedridden or require the use of a device designed to

supply mobility, shall not be made available to the media or general public.¹¹

OTHER RESTRICTIONS:

- Interfering with law enforcement proceedings, including pending investigations;
- Depriving a person of the right to a fair trial or an impartial adjudication or giving one party to a controversy an undue advantage by exclusive access to such information; [1.2.3]
- Constituting an unwarranted invasion of the personal privacy rights of another person;
- Revealing the identity of an individual who has furnished information to the department under confidential circumstances;
- Disclosing investigative techniques and procedures, thereby impairing the future effectiveness of the department; or
- Endangering the life or physical safety of any person.

G. Media Access to Crime/Incident Scenes

ACCESS GENERALLY:

Whenever possible, officers will, to the best degree practicable, clearly define any police scene with items such as barricade tape, flares, rope, signs and barricades.

The Constitution grants no greater right of access to media representatives to the scenes of crimes or disasters than those granted the public¹² nor any less rights granted to the public.

Adequately identified representatives of the news media may be granted access to crime or accident scenes, major fires, or man-made or natural emergency situations at the discretion of the Chief of Police or officers in charge. This may include greater access to personnel and equipment than is available to the general public to the degree that it does not interfere with the police mission or the movement of traffic.

Failure of media personnel to provide authorized identification may provide grounds for restricting access to requested information or to incident scenes.

The activities of media representatives may be reasonably restricted if, in the opinion of the Shift Supervisor:

- Those activities seriously hamper police operations;
- Those activities threaten to worsen a dangerous or volatile situation;
- The presence of the press personnel would create an unreasonable risk of serious bodily injury or death to the media representatives, public safety employees, or the public; or
- Whenever police reasonably believe it is necessary to prohibit all but emergency personnel near a crime or incident scene.

The news media shall not be allowed access to any area or scene of an incident or crime where there is a possibility that evidence may be damaged, altered, destroyed, or otherwise prejudiced by its existence being published or portrayed.

News Media vehicles and equipment may be located at points nearer to the scene than permitted by normal traffic direction and control, but such locations will not be permitted to interfere with investigations or the efficient flow of traffic.

Once evidence has been processed, removed, and secured by the department, the media may be allowed to enter by permission of the commanding officer at the scene.

CRIME OR INCIDENT SCENES:

At the scene of major crime or incident scenes, initially, the officer-in-charge may designate a preliminary press area as early as possible and as close to the scene as safety and operational requirements allow.

The PIO shall be responsible for arranging press access and escort, as appropriate, when the PIO function is established. The principles of media cooperation shall be maintained to the degree that they do not interfere with the mission of the police, fire, medical, or other emergency relief workers.

For further information, see the department policy on ***Incident Command***.

News media representatives should not be prevented from access to any area to which other members of the public have access solely because of the possibility of their injury or death. If this is the only consideration, the media representative should be advised of the danger and allowed to make the decision to enter on his/her own volition.

SEARCH WARRANTS:

News media representatives shall not be permitted to enter private property with department personnel attempting to execute a search or arrest warrant.¹³

FIRE SCENES:

Media access to and movement within fire lines shall be controlled by the Fire Department officer-in-charge. In consultation with the Fire Department officer-in-charge, a ranking police officer at the scene may establish an observation point from which the media may observe and photograph the incident. At the discretion of the Incident Commander, an inner perimeter may be established for the media from which to record the event.

Ranking officers at crime or incident scenes may release very basic information of a factual nature to the media as governed by this policy unless authorized or directed by a superior officer. News releases or briefings shall be the responsibility of the Command Staff or any officer(s) designated.

PHOTO AND VIDEO:

It is permissible for the media to photograph or film from public property. Photography, film, or videotape recording on private property requires the permission of the owner or the owner's representative. Persons may be prohibited from municipally owned property.

PERSONS IN CUSTODY:

News media have a right to photograph a person in custody. Suspects or accused persons in custody shall not be posed nor shall arrangements be made for photographs, telecasts, or interviews. Department personnel shall not pose with suspects or accused persons in custody. Officers shall not act deliberately to shield a suspect from media view unless eyewitness identification is a concern.

¹ 803 CMR 2.04(3); (5)(b).

² 803 CMR 2.04(3); (5)(b).

³ M.G.L. c. 258B, §3(h).

⁴ M.G.L. c. 4, §7(26)(f).

⁵ M.G.L. c. 38, §2.

⁶ M.G.L. c. 66, §10(d).

⁷ M.G.L. c. 4, §7(26)(C).

⁸ M.G.L. c. 41, §97D.

⁹ M.G.L. c. 66, §10(d).

¹⁰ M.G.L. c. 66, §10(d).

¹¹ M.G.L. c. 41, §98F.

¹² *Branzburg v. Hayes* 408 U.S. 665, 92 S.Ct. 2646 U.S. Cal. (1972).

¹³ *Wilson v. Layne*, 119 S.Ct. 1692 (1999); *Hanlon v. Berger*, 119 S.Ct. 1706 (1999).