



CITY OF FAIRFAX POLICE DEPARTMENT

GENERAL ORDER

Subject PUBLIC INFORMATION	Number 1-16
Effective Date September 25, 2007	Rescinds General Order 1-16, dated 07-01-05
Accreditation Standards Fifth Edition 54.1.1 thru 54.1.3	Authority Colonel Richard J. Rappoport Chief of Police

PURPOSE:

To establish guidelines, procedures and responsibilities for the timely dissemination of information to the news media and the public. The provisions of this order shall be applicable to all official information of the City of Fairfax Police Department including, but not limited to, statistical data, records, complaints, cases and statements of departmental position.

POLICY:

Police Department information will be made available to the news media and to citizens in accordance with the following general guidelines:

- As much information as possible will be released in as timely a manner as possible, consistent with protecting the integrity of Police Department investigations and subsequent prosecutions and assuring the safety of Police Department operations.
- Every practical effort will be made to assure the accuracy and completeness of the information provided.
- The orientation of every contact must be customer service; when information requested cannot be provided, an explanation why will be given; persons whose requests cannot be fulfilled immediately must feel assured that every effort is being made to help them.
- The same information shall be provided when requested by a citizen as would be provided when requested by a reporter.
- News media representatives shall be treated with courtesy and respect at the scenes of Police Department operations.
- Opportunities to provide positive exposure to the Police Department, its operations and personnel in the news media will be accepted, initiated and encouraged.
- News media requests will be accommodated to the maximum extent practical, consistent with the limitations imposed by operational considerations and financial restraints.
- Appropriate command staff and other supervisory personnel will be encouraged to provide interviews to news media when suitable opportunities arise.
- Responses to queries from news media and citizens will always be truthful; however, protecting the integrity of investigations may make it impossible to provide all known details.
- In making decisions regarding the release of information, the need of the public to be informed for its own safety shall be of paramount consideration.
- The Department will comply with the requirements of the Virginia Freedom of Information Act and other applicable state and federal statutes relating to the release of information.
- At no time will information be released prematurely or withheld for the exclusive benefit of any individual reporter or segment of the news media or public, except that specific inquiries of an exclusive nature will be respected.
- The Department will ensure that appropriate training is provided to enable employees to fulfill their responsibilities as defined in this directive.

DISCUSSION:

Since the prevention of crime and the most effective performance of all other aspects of the Department's mission necessitates a cooperative effort by the police and citizens, and since the Department was created for and exists to serve the public and is responsible to the public, the public has the right to be informed about police activities and operations. By providing such information, the Department can enhance the level of support it receives from the public.

The news media serve as important conduits of information to the public. A relationship of trust, cooperation and mutual respect between the police and the news media is essential to realization of their common objective of serving and informing the public. It is recognized that the media can be of significant assistance to the Department in the successful performance of its mission.

The public information function is one in which every member may become involved, depending on the circumstances surrounding a given situation. Accordingly, each member must be fully aware of the procedures governing the release of information and by whom it may be released.

PROCEDURE:

I PUBLIC INFORMATION RESPONSIBILITIES

- A. The Chief of Police will designate a member of the Department to serve as the Public Information Officer, which position may be in addition to other assigned responsibilities. At least one other member of the Department will be designated to serve in a backup or assisting capacity to the Public Information Officer. The Public Information Officer is the Department's primary media spokesperson, responsible for maintaining regular contact with newsmen regarding current newsworthy events. The Public Information Officer responds to scenes or situations in which Duty Supervisors require assistance in working with news media on the scene. Duties of the Public Information Officer include:
 1. Daily contact with media representatives.
 2. Central review of information given to the media by other members of the Department.
 3. Preparing and disseminating news releases in accordance with Appendix A to this General Order.
 4. Posting a daily news bulletin on the City web site and e-mailing the bulletin to news media, City officials and citizens requesting to receive it.
 5. Notifying news media of the time, date, location and subject matter of any news conferences authorized by the Chief of Police and assisting with the arrangements for such conferences.
 6. Coordinating and authorizing the release of information about victims and arrestees and concerning investigations and operations conducted by the Department, to include follow-up with Department entities regarding the status of investigations and major events about which information has been released.
 7. Assisting in crisis situations within the Department.
 8. Ensuring compliance with Department guidelines and directives governing access of news media representatives to crime scenes and scenes of other major events.
 9. Providing guidance, information and any needed assistance to all Department entities regarding the timely dissemination of newsworthy information.
 10. Anticipating particular needs of the media, such as visual opportunities to illustrate stories, and attempting to accommodate them.
 11. Coordinating as required with other law enforcement agencies or organizations involved in joint operations with the Department regarding release of information about such operations.

12. In coordination with the Criminal Investigations Division, provide terrorism awareness information to the community, and identify and establish methods for citizens to report suspicious activity that may be related to terrorism. Information provided to the public may be sent via news releases, or other media such as the Reverse 911 system, City Radio, City Screen 12, the Cityscene publication, E-Mass or the City Website. (46.3.3)
 13. In coordination with the Criminal Investigations Division provide, upon their request, advice and assistance to crime victims and survivors who have been asked to give or who desire to give media interviews.
 14. Notifying newsmen of proposed changes in policies and procedures relating to the news media and inviting media representatives to participate in the development process. The Public Information Officer shall make copies of this directive available to news media representatives.
- B. The Chief of Police, as the originator of policy and as the Department's top official, may offer comments or provide responses to the news media or the public when necessary and appropriate. In such instances, the Public Information Officer will be advised. Only the Chief of Police or designee may authorize a news conference. News conferences may be utilized when appropriate to disseminate information of a significant, controversial or critically timed nature to multiple news media representatives simultaneously.
1. The Chief of Police and the Public Information Officer are responsible for coordinating the Police Department's participation in any City government crisis communications plan.
- C. Division Commanders may communicate directly with newsmen on matters under their purview when referred by the Public Information Officer. As part of their responsibilities, Division Commanders are expected to be proficient in dealing with media inquiries. Division Commanders are responsible for insuring that the Public Information Officer is advised promptly of any matter requiring public notification or which may result in queries from the news media or the general public. Division Commanders may delegate a media response to a subordinate member of their division who has first hand knowledge of or expertise in a particular activity or subject. Members so designated will make every reasonable effort to release the requested information, subject to the guidelines contained in this directive. Whenever a Division Commander or designee gives a media interview, the Public Information Officer will be advised. The Public Information Officer may request Division Commanders to allow designated members of their divisions to provide specifically defined assistance in the public information function.
1. The Criminal Investigations Division Commander, and/or designated members of that division, in addition to being responsible for coordinating with the Public Information Officer regarding initial release of information concerning felonies or other serious incidents, is responsible for updating the Public Information Officer promptly on any significant developments in such cases, including arrests, need for additional information from the public, or information beneficial to public safety.
 2. The Public Information Officer will be provided copies of all search warrant affidavits filed with the circuit court and any other public documents originated as part of an investigation conducted by the Department.
- D. Duty Supervisors are responsible for initial contact with newsmen during the absence of command level officials or the Public Information Officer, particularly during the evening and midnight shifts and on weekends and holidays. The Public Information Officer or alternate may be called to the scene of any event when the Duty Supervisor determines the media relations function would be better served. In the absence of the Public Information Officer, Duty Supervisors prepare preliminary news briefing information sheets for use by dispatchers to respond to calls from news media during times beyond normal business hours. An information sheet will be prepared by a supervisor as soon as practicable after dispatchers advise that an incident is generating inquiries.
1. For media inquiries about events in progress, dispatchers may confirm reports of current events and their location, but should provide no other details. Requests by media representatives to speak to an on-duty supervisor should be honored in as timely a manner as operational considerations permit. News information sheets prepared by Duty Supervisors will be distributed as denoted in Appendix A to this General Order. Supervisors are responsible for timely notification to the Public Information

Officer of any information known by them to have been released to newsmen during their shift. Supervisors will also insure that the Public Information Officer is advised of any of the events listed in Appendix B to this General Order which occur during their shift.

- E. Other Department personnel may release information only from prepared news releases or news information sheets, unless specifically guided otherwise by a superior officer or the Public Information Officer.

II NEWS MEDIA IDENTIFICATION

- A. Suitable identification issued by media organizations to their employees may be accepted at the discretion of the on-scene officer-in-charge or the Public Information Officer. The Department will honor media credentials issued by other law enforcement agencies within the Washington, D.C. Metropolitan area.
- B. The Chief of Police may revoke the media access privileges of any individual when that individual's conduct hinders operations or is otherwise disruptive. Such sanctions will be applied to individual media representatives rather than to media organizations. Any Department member encountering rudeness or other objectionable conduct by a news media representative should so advise a supervisor. This information will be forwarded to the Public Information Officer, who will consult with the Chief of Police regarding any appropriate action to be taken.

III ON-SCENE MEDIA RELATIONS

- A. Among the most critical interactions between law enforcement and news media are those occurring at the scenes of police or other emergency operations. On-scene supervisors and commanders play an important role in ensuring that the Department maintains a cooperative and constructive working relationship with the news media. Media representatives should not be permitted to interfere with police operations, but should be accommodated as part of the overall responsibilities of the officer-in-charge of the scene. The arrival of media at the scenes of significant events should be anticipated and plans made accordingly, including suitable sitting for mobile broadcast transmission vehicles. The responsibility for meeting the needs of the media falls upon the on-scene supervisor. The supervisor may, depending on the nature and extent of the incident, contact the Public Information Officer or alternate for a call-out and relinquish media relations duties upon that officer's arrival on the scene.
- B. In the absence of the Public Information Officer, the on-scene supervisor or officer-in-charge should either personally respond to media inquiries or designate that responsibility to another officer who becomes media spokesperson for the incident. The on-scene supervisor should designate a staging area for media near the scene and should consider how close to an active scene newsmen should be allowed.
 - 1. All on-scene officers should direct inquiries by the media to the on-scene supervisor or officer-in-charge unless the Public Information Officer is present. If roadways are blocked off due to a police or fire event, the on-scene supervisor should ensure that officers on the perimeter know where to send media representatives who may arrive at their post. In case of a fire event, this should be coordinated with the Fire Commander on the scene.
- C. News media may be permitted closer to incident scenes than the general public, so long as such access does not interfere with public safety operations, compromise investigations or hinder evidence collection. Under no circumstances will media representatives be denied access to any area where members of the general public are permitted.
- D. When approved by the on-scene supervisor or incident commander, media representatives who possess proper identification may be allowed through police barricades or police lines intended to hold back the public, provided:
 - 1. Credentials are displayed on an outer garment.
 - 2. Access to secured areas is limited to the period of time required to take photographs or videotapes.
 - 3. No statements, interviews or questions are permitted within the secured area.

4. Media representatives comply with all instructions issued by the on-scene officer-in-charge and other officers on the scene.
5. No entry is made within a designated crime scene during a crime scene search.
- E. News media representatives may enter an area closed because of a menace to the public health or safety after being advised of the fact that a dangerous situation exists, provided such entry does not in any way hinder police or other public safety operations or in any way jeopardize the safety of public safety personnel. The decision to assume the risk of possible danger remains with the individual newsperson involved, and it is not the responsibility of Police Department members to provide for the safety of those representatives of any news media who voluntarily choose to subject themselves to danger.
- F. Media may be allowed access to an outer perimeter of a crime scene on private property if there is no objection to their presence by the property owner or the owner's designated representative.
- G. Members of the media are not permitted to accompany officers on search warrants or other activities which would provide media access to private property. When media representatives accompany officers on ride-alongs, permission must be obtained for media personnel to enter private property.
- H. Nothing in this directive allows a media representative to disregard posted parking regulations or park a vehicle in such a manner as to interfere with the orderly flow of traffic or the conducting of official government business at or around the scene of an incident.
- I. Police personnel will neither encourage nor discourage the media from photographing or televising anything within or visible from their areas of legal access. Scene security should be maintained and evidence may be covered, removed or blocked from view as needed. Any police restriction on the operation of a media representative shall be based on the guidelines of this directive and not on an individual member's view of what constitutes an acceptable standard of journalism or news photography.
- J. No person under arrest or otherwise in the custody of the Department may be interviewed by the media. While photographs may be taken of arrested persons in public places, such opportunities should occur in the course of normal police operations; the Department will not deliberately "stage" photo opportunities of arrested individuals.

IV RELEASE OF INFORMATION

- A. The following information normally will be released by authorized persons in accordance with this directive:
 1. Date, time and type of incident and general circumstances surrounding it.
 2. Location (may be specific for a business address, but general, normally by hundred block, for residential addresses).
 3. Name, age and address of any deceased crime or accident victims and of injured accident victims, if properly identified and next of kin have been notified.
 4. Sex, age and general area of residence only of any living crime victim.
 5. If injury or death was involved:
 - a. The nature or type of injury.
 - b. The general area of the body where the injury was sustained.
 - c. Where injured persons were taken, unless releasing such information would jeopardize their safety.
 6. If an arrest was made:

- a. Name, age and address of the arrestee, if 18 years or older.
 - b. Date, time and location of arrest.
 - c. Charge(s) placed and court date (if known).
 - d. A general statement of circumstances surrounding the arrest.
 - e. Organization or unit making the arrest.
 - f. Photographs of adult arrestees will be released unless such release would jeopardize an ongoing investigation being conducted by this Department or any other law enforcement agencies.
7. General factual information concerning the status of an investigation.
 8. Information concerning a person who is considered dangerous and for whom warrants are on file, when the public should be notified for its protection or when the release of information would assist in locating a suspect.
 9. Names, ages and addresses of parties and types of vehicles involved and circumstances surrounding traffic crashes, including any charges placed.
 10. Any information contained in a public record (e.g., executed search warrants filed with a court, copies of which may be provided to news media), unless that record has been sealed by court order.
 11. The arrest of any City or school system official or employee, any elected or appointed local, state or federal government official, or any local, state or federal law enforcement officer for any criminal charge or serious traffic charge (e.g., driving under the influence, reckless driving).
 12. Unusual animal cases or human interest stories involving Department personnel.
- B. The following information will **NOT** be released:
1. Specific identifying information of juvenile offenders, except sex, age and general area of residence.
 2. Names and addresses of living crime victims. (Names and addresses of business or institutional entities involved in criminal cases may be released.)
 3. Identities of witnesses or complainants.
 4. Specific information that may impede an investigation, apprehension of a suspect or subsequent prosecution.
 5. The identities of persons killed or injured until properly identified and next of kin have been notified.
 6. The identities of criminal suspects until a warrant or indictment has been issued.
 7. The amount of money taken in robberies.
 8. The existence and nature of a suspect's prior criminal record. (Inquiries should be referred to the court system.)
 9. Information concerning the character or reputation of any individual.
 10. Existence of or information that is contained in any confession, statement or admission of guilt.
 11. The performance or results of any test or the refusal of a suspect to take any test, unless charges are placed on the basis of such refusal.
 12. Any personal opinions.
 13. Any information of an unconfirmed or speculative nature.
 14. Statements concerning the identity, credibility or anticipated testimony of prospective witnesses.

15. The existence or contents of any suicide note.
 16. Name or other information which would lead to the identity of a person who attempted to commit suicide.
 17. Information received from another agency except with that agency's consent.
 18. Joint operation information that is the responsibility of another agency, except with that agency's consent.
 19. The speed or estimated speed involved in any police pursuit, until the investigation is completed.
 20. Any Department personnel issues or Internal Affairs matters without approval of the Chief of Police or Deputy Chief.
 21. Home addresses or telephone numbers, pager numbers and cellular phone numbers of Police Department employees.
- C. Under unusual or exigent circumstances, specific exceptions may be made to the provisions of the foregoing subsections. Such exceptions shall be made only on a case-by-case basis with the authorization of the Chief of Police or the Deputy Chief.

Colonel Richard J. Rappoport / Chief of Police

Attachment A: [Requirements for News Information Sheets and News Releases](#)

Attachment B: [Required Notification of the Public Information Officer](#)

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 Public Information