



## **Guidelines for Media Relations: Dissemination of Public Information in Medicolegal Death Investigations**

**DISCLAIMER:** Portions of these Guidelines may not apply in various jurisdictions due to Federal, State and Local laws that may require or prohibit certain information being released as public information. This is intended for day-to-day functions of ME/Coroner offices. In the event that the Incident Command System is activated then National Incident Management System protocol will apply.

### **INTRODUCTION AND DEFINITIONS**

#### **Public Information:**

Information that may be of interest to the general public regarding policy, procedures, or events involving the Coroner/Medical Examiner Department or other newsworthy information that is not legally protected and does not unduly interfere with the mission of the responsible releasing agency. The definition of “Public Information” will vary among state and local laws.

#### **News Media Representatives:**

Those individuals who are directly employed by agencies of electronic or print media such as radio, television, internet, and newspapers. Screen writers, television scriptwriters, student filmmakers, authors, etc. are NOT considered press/media.

#### **Public Information Officer/Coordinator (PIO/C):**

The PIO/C, (Coroner, Deputy Coroner, Medical Examiner, Investigator, sworn staff, etc.), serves as the central source for release of information to all press/media and responds to requests for information by the news media and community. In no instance should non-designated employees release information to the media. A Coroner or Medical Examiner Department should consider assigning a specific staff member to these duties to avoid the possibility of releasing information inadvertently or prematurely.

### **RELEASE OF INFORMATION BY THE PIO/C**

1. Information that **MAY** be released in connection with a death investigation (Information should contain **ONLY** facts, never speculation):
  - a. The fact of death and if appropriate, the general circumstances (i.e. traffic fatality in single car rollover). Care should be taken not to release a preliminary cause / manner of death or extensive death details in suspicious circumstances or when active investigation is ongoing.
  - b. The general location of the death (i.e., city), and the date and time of the death.
  - c. If the next of kin has been notified of the death, then the release of the decedent’s full name, and city of residence, age, race and gender.

- d. The cause and manner of death when established and finalized.
2. Information that should **NOT** be released unless authorized:
    - a. The identity of the decedent if the next of kin is not known or has not yet been notified of the death
    - b. The name, relationship, address or phone number of the next of kin.
    - c. The name of the handling mortuary, unless the body has been released.
    - d. The home address or home telephone number of any department staff or law enforcement officer.
    - e. The results of any investigative finding or laboratory test, unless the case is finalized.  
NOTE: Certain postmortem testing may be confidential and not released to public such as HIV testing.
    - f. Information on a case which, if prematurely released, may interfere with the investigation or apprehension of the suspect.
    - g. Information which may be of evidentiary value in criminal proceedings. For example, any information that only a suspect would know and providing to media would jeopardize pursuit of justice such as:
      - i. Number of time(s) shot (i.e., "Shot 9 times")
      - ii. Contact wound location
  3. Under **NO** circumstances should documents generated by law enforcement agencies, hospitals, personal/business correspondence related to a case, suicide notes, (suicide notes may be acknowledged without further comment), etc. be released to the general public or the media.
    - a. Only disseminate documents generated by your office.

### **GENERAL GUIDELINES IN MANAGING RELATIONSHIPS WITH MEDIA:**

- Maintain appropriate professional relationships with the media when legally and ethically available.
- Update the media simultaneously and as information is available and appropriate for release.
- Maintain cordial relationships with the media, so all media personnel are treated with respect.
- ME/C or agency representatives should not seek personal publicity.

### **SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS:**

1. The news media should not be allowed access to any area or scene of a death where there is a possibility that evidence may be damaged, altered, destroyed, or otherwise prejudiced by being published or portrayed. This is generally the responsibility of law enforcement, but MDI professionals should be aware and assist law enforcement with this process as necessary.
  - a. On private property, photography, film, or videotape recording requires the permission of the owner or representative.
  - b. The decedent should not be posed or arrangements made for photographs, telecasts or interviews, nor should any departmental personnel pose with a decedent or stage or repeat any activity expressly for the media.
  - c. The media should not be allowed into any areas that are not normally accessible to the public without prior consent from the person whose reasonable expectation of privacy exists.

- d. At the scene of a major incident/high profile case, a preliminary press area may be designated as early as possible and as close to the scene as safety and operational requirements will allow.
2. Media representatives should be denied access to the contents of investigative or incident reports and records where release of information would:
    - a. Interfere with law enforcement proceedings, including pending investigations.
    - b. Deprive a person of the right to a fair trial or an impartial adjudication, or give one party to a controversy an undue advantage by exclusive access to such information.
    - c. Constitute an unwarranted invasion of personal privacy rights of another or violate an employee's personnel confidentiality rights.
    - d. Reveal the identity of an individual who has furnished information to the Department under confidential circumstances.
    - e. Disclose investigative techniques and procedures, thereby impairing future effectiveness of a department; or, Endanger the life or physical safety of any person.
    - f. Disclose legally privileged information, such as information covered by attorney-client privilege.