

Media Relations

308.1 VERSION

Agency Content

Review Date	Effective Date	Approving Authority
01/06/19	7/9/18	Eric D. English, Chief of Police

308.2 POLICY AND PURPOSE

Best Practice **MODIFIED**

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

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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

Best Practice **MODIFIED** VLEPSC - ADM.22.01 (e), ADM.22.01 (a), ADM.22.01 (d)

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, Patrol Commanders and designated Public Information Officers (PIOs) 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.

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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.

308.4.1 PUBLIC INFORMATION FUNCTION

Agency Content VLEPSC - ADM.22.01 (a), ADM.22.01 (b), ADM.22.01 (c), ADM.22.01 (d), ADM.22.01 (e), ADM.22.01 (f), ADM.22.01 (g), ADM.22.01

(h)

- (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. At major crime scenes
 - 3. Having a close relationship and partnership with the City of Harrisonburg Public Information Officer, and keeping him/her informed of incidents that occur.
 - 4. Being available to cover media needs 24/7.
 - 5. Preparing and distributing agency news releases, and content for the website and social media sites.
 - 6. Arranging for and assisting at news conferences.
 - 7. Coordinating and authorizing the release of information to include, but not limited to, criminal incidents, investigations and operations, department activities, and personnel issues.
 - 8. Assisting in crisis situations within the agency.
 - 9. Coordinating the release of information when other public service agencies are involved in a mutual effort.
 - 10. Press Releases
- (c) The Public Information Officers may also be needed to provide support to the city's PIO during large-scale incidents or events.

308.4.2 LEAD PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

Agency Content VLEPSC - ADM.22.01 (a), ADM.22.01 (e)

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- (a) The Public Information Officer Team Commander shall serve as the Lead PIO. It shall be his/her responsibility to:
 - 1. Lead a team of Public Information Officers designated to serve in the capacity of providing and coordinating the release of information pertaining to incidents and operational activities of the police department.
 - 2. Originate and distribute departmental news releases and other types of public communications not otherwise delegated.
 - 3. Review and approve the public release of information by other department personnel, unless such authority is otherwise specifically delegated.
- (b) To assure the availability of a PIO on a 24/7 basis, the Lead PIO will select and arrange appropriate training for other members of the department to provide PIO assistance to the department.
- (c) In the event of planned absences, the Lead PIO shall coordinate who will coordinate PIO response duration of the absence.
- (d) All Commanders are responsible for ensuring that the PIO is advised in a timely manner of all interesting or newsworthy events occurring within their purview.
- (e) The on-duty supervisor is authorized to call out a PIO whenever circumstances require such in order to assist news media personnel in covering news stories at the scene of incidents.

308.5 PROVIDING ADVANCE INFORMATION

Best Practice **MODIFIED** VLEPSC - ADM.22.01 (g), ADM.22.01 (c)

To protect the safety and rights of department members and other persons, advance information about planned actions by law enforcement personnel, such as movement of persons in custody or the execution of an arrest or search warrant, should not be disclosed to the media, nor should media representatives be invited to be present at such actions except with the prior approval of the Chief of Police.

Any exceptions to the above should only be considered for the furtherance of legitimate law enforcement purposes. Prior to approving any exception, the Chief of Police will consider, at a minimum, whether the release of information or the presence of the media would unreasonably endanger any individual or prejudice the rights of any person or is otherwise prohibited by law.

308.6 MEDIA REQUESTS

Best Practice VLEPSC - ADM.22.01 (h), ADM.22.01 (g)

Any media request for information or access to a law enforcement incident shall be referred to the PIO 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 a supervisor or the PIO.

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

308.7 ACCESS

Best Practice VLEPSC - ADM.22.01 (b), ADM.22.02

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

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.
 - 1. 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. All information released to the media should be coordinated through the PIO or other designated spokesperson.
- (c) Media interviews with individuals who are in custody should not be permitted without the approval of the Chief of Police 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.

308.7.1 CRITICAL OPERATIONS

Best Practice **MODIFIED** VLEPSC - ADM.22.01 (b), ADM.22.02

A critical incident or tactical operation should be handled in the same manner as a crime scene, except the media should not be permitted within the inner perimeter of the incident, subject to any restrictions as determined by the supervisor in charge. Department members shall not jeopardize a critical incident or tactical operation in order to accommodate the media. All comments to the media shall be coordinated through a supervisor or the PIO.

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308.8 CONFIDENTIAL OR RESTRICTED INFORMATION

State **MODIFIED** VLEPSC - ADM.22.01 (f), ADM.22.01 (g), ADM.22.01 (c)

It shall be the responsibility of the PIO 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 FOIA guidelines). When in doubt, the Chief of Police, and/or authorized legal counsel should be consulted prior to releasing any information.

308.9 NEWS MEDIA BRIEFINGS

Agency Content VLEPSC - ADM.22.01 (a), ADM.22.01 (b), ADM.22.01 (c), ADM.22.01 (d)

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.