

Media/Communications Policy
City of Tulare – Policy No. ~~98-02~~ **CM-12**
02/03/98

MEDIA/COMMUNICATIONS POLICY

Purpose

To improve media relations while assuring that accurate, appropriate information is released to the news media and identify which staff members respond to media inquiries.

Policy

Generally, the business conducted by the City of Tulare is public and, therefore, is public information. Inquiries regarding pending litigation, matters involving a significant exposure to litigation and certain personnel related information are exceptions.

Inquiries from the news media should be given a high priority and be responded to as quickly and efficiently as possible. Every effort should be made to meet media deadlines and to ensure that all information released is accurate.

Who Responds to Media Inquiries?

Procedure

1. Spokesperson. The Department Head or his/her designated spokesperson who has direct knowledge of an issue or event shall respond to media inquiries.

Inquiries from the news media should be directed to the City Manager, appropriate Department Head, or appropriate management staff. Exceptions regarding departmental spokespersons may be made at the discretion of the Department Head.

When appropriate, on large media issues, the City Manager or Department Head may designate a media spokesperson to respond to an issue of major significance to the community to ensure that information is disseminated swiftly and accurately to all interested media sources. When such a designation is made, the City Manager will notify the Department Head to forward all inquiries regarding a particular issue to the appropriate spokesperson.

Inquiries regarding pending litigation or exposure to litigation should be referred either to the City Attorney's Office or the City Manager's Office. Inquiries regarding personnel related information should be referred to the Human Resources Division.

2. City Council and Commission Members. City Council, commission, and committee members respond to media inquiries at their own discretion and should realize that the media is contacting them as a community representative.

Council, commission, and committee members should declare if their response is on behalf of the entire Council, commission, or committee, or if they are speaking as an individual. The Mayor usually is the spokesperson for the Council, likewise, the chair person of the commission or committee. Council Members are encouraged to notify other members if

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they plan to write an editorial or issue an individual media release, and then provide other members advance copies of media responses.

3. Classified Staff. There are occasions when a non-management employee's involvement in an event makes that individual a logical respondent for a media inquiry. A non-management employee may respond directly to an inquiry regarding routine factual information relating specifically to their function. If the inquiry involves policy issues, the staff member may respond after direction to do so from his/her department head (or designee) and with the department head's knowledge of the response.
4. Fire Department. It is recognized that the Fire Department receives on-going media requests regarding daily activities. In responding to daily Fire Department activities, the following procedures for media contact should be followed:

Media request for information regarding policy or a field incident should be referred to the Incident Commander, designee or Captain on duty.

Where there is a fast breaking story involving major Fire Department activity, the first media contact is with the Incident Commander, Chief, or designee, followed by the City Manager's Office.

It is essential that each individual involved in providing information to the media is kept abreast and briefed on the status of the event as it occurs. The Incident Commander is responsible for notifying the City Manager of all major incidents.

5. Police Department. It is recognized that the Police Department receives on-going media requests regarding daily activities and has a detailed policy on file under Section 7.1 News Media Relations and Releases.

What to do When Contacted by the Press

All media inquiries received by staff should be responded to with accuracy as soon as possible keeping in mind that the media is usually working under a deadline. Be sure to only respond when you know the answer, do not speculate. Clerical staff should be instructed to give priority to phone calls received from the media.

Procedure

1. Media Interviews
 - A. Scheduled

- (1) Print Media Inquiries. Interviews with newspaper or magazine reporters are usually held over the phone or in person during a pre-scheduled interview. Prior to being interviewed, it is important to determine the focus of the story as well as the specific information desired by the reporter. Simply ask the reporter from what angle he/she is approaching the story. During the interview, always assume that all your statements are quotable. The reporter may also audio tape record the interview as backup information.

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Depending on the nature of the story, a photographer may accompany the reporter or schedule a follow-up session. The photographer will appreciate any assistance you can provide in directions to city facilities or appropriate photographs which could enhance the story. Staff members can decline to be photographed.

- (2) Television Inquiries. Television is a visual medium. Television reporters will be most interested in interviewing a staff spokesperson on camera or taping an activity with high visual appeal.

Staff members who have received a request to be interviewed on camera should notify their Department Head, who will then notify the City Manager's Office.

When interviewed on camera, look your best, take time before the reporter and crew arrive to check your appearance. Wear a color such as black, blue, or brown. Avoid light (pale) colors (white, yellow) as they do not photograph well.

B. Unscheduled

- (1) Television Inquiries. Television crews do not cover city hall on a daily basis so reporters may be unfamiliar with the roles of specific staff members, the location of city facilities, or the background on city issues.

During normal working hours, television crews who arrive in the city with no pre-arranged interview appointment should be directed to the City Manager's Office.

- (2) Printed Media Inquiries. When unsure of a response to a surprise inquiry, tell the reporter that you will call them back.

Reasonable efforts will be made to honor all media deadlines. When in doubt, ask the reporter what the deadline is for that particular story.

- (3) On-going. Departments which have on-going daily contact with the media (e.g. Fire Department, Police Department) are required to notify the City Manager's Office only of those media contacts which involve issues of significant concern to the city (i.e. routine – class schedules, routine fire and policy activity versus non-routine – injury to officer, suspect, prisoner, or officer involved shooting).

Example: A reporter calls after a Council or commission meeting with follow-up questions on the previous night's action. If it is routine, you do not have to report activity to the City Manager's Office. However, if it is on a subject that is politically sensitive in the community or is threatening legal suit against the city, it must be reported.

Whether it is a scheduled or unscheduled interview, it is best to write your response or the information you wish to communicate. Be sure to document, in writing, your verbal contact with the media.

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C. Challenging Reporters

Reporters have the obligation to seek out news and then report it. Some aggressive reporters have a “threatening” style, posing rapid fire questions. Remember, you are in control of the situation. You have the information the reporter wants. Think before you speak.

- (1) Prepare an agenda on each subject the media may be interested in. This should include a list of 3-5 points you want to “sell” the reporter.
- (2) Write or verbally deliver quotable quotes of ten words or less.
- (3) Listen carefully to the question. The reporter may have incorrect assumptions in the questions and you will need to give clearer background information before answering the question.
- (4) Avoid an argument with the reporter.
- (5) If interrupted in mid-thought, proceed with your original answer before answering the new question.
- (6) Challenge any effort to put words into your mouth.
- (7) Do not just answer the question; use the question as a springboard to “sell” your agenda.
- (8) If you do not know the answer, say so. Do not speculate.
- (9) If you cannot divulge information, state why in a matter-of-fact way.
- (10) Be positive, not defensive.
- (11) Always tell the truth.

2. Appropriate Responses to Media

- A. Responding to Council Actions. Staff shall not make judgmental comments regarding individual Council Members, Council actions or official city policy when responding to media inquiries. *Staff should also refrain from anticipating an action or position which has not formally been taken by the City Council or city.* Any inquiry regarding “why” an individual Council Member voted in a particular manner on a specific issue should be forwarded to the Council Member in question.

Traditionally, Council Members have made a practice of being fully accessible to the media. Every attempt should be made to encourage the press to directly contact Council Members on Council policies and issues. Unless otherwise notified, Council Members’ home and work phone numbers can be given to the media. Contact the City Manager’s Office for individual Council Member’s phone numbers.

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Commissioner telephone numbers are generally not available to the public. Staff should take a message and relay it to the Commissioner as soon as possible.

- B. Scope of Response. Staff members should not respond to media inquiries which are not directly related to carrying out the employee's professional responsibilities for the city. If such a media inquiry is made, the staff member should assist the media by referring the media to the appropriate Department Head or, when in doubt, to the City Manager's Office.
- C. Inaccurate Information. The media should not be intentionally misled or provided with inaccurate or incomplete information by a staff member regarding any city policy or event.
- D. Litigation. Staff members should not respond to media inquiries regarding an issue involving city litigation or offer legal opinions on city policies or activities. Once a case has been filed, it is public information. Media inquiries regarding filed cases should be referred to the Risk Manager's Office. If the Risk Manager is unsure of the appropriate response, the City Attorney should be contacted.
- E. Personnel. Do not discuss employees or personnel actions.

Media Releases

Procedure

1. Release of Information Pertaining to Significant Issues and Events. It is the responsibility of Department Heads to notify the City Manager of significant events or issues which occur within their departments and may be of major interest to the general public or media.

Such issues could include:

- A. Injury or death of a city employee/city official on or off official city duty.
- B. Major malfunctions of city equipment or in a city facility which could impact the general welfare of the public or environment or the ability of the city to provide service.
- C. An unexpected work stoppage or inability to provide a critical city service.
- D. The arrest or conviction of a city employee which may impact that individual's ability to successfully carry out his/her professional responsibility.
- E. Major police or fire activities.
- F. Programs which receive awards or grants, and city employees/city officials which receive recognition for outstanding achievement.
- G. New employees and terminated staff members.

The City Manager will determine if it is appropriate to contact the City Council, Department Heads, or the appropriate management staff. If public release of the information is deemed

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appropriate, the City Manager, in consultation with the Department Head and appropriate management staff, will determine the most appropriate mechanism to notify the press.

If the City Manager is unavailable, the Department Head should contact the City Manager's appointee for dissemination of information. On those occasions when the City Manager and the City Manager's appointee are unavailable, and the story is fast-breaking, the Department Head should use his/her own judgment in releasing information to the press. This information should then be forwarded to the City Manager.

2. Distribution of Releases. All releases distributed by the city should be on official city letterhead. The release should include the date and name of the city staff person who can serve as a media contact for inquiries or additional information. A distribution list should accompany each release to assure correct distribution. The City Manager's Office will maintain an updated media list of reporters, public affairs directors, and business editors.

News Media Contacts

Procedure

News media contacts should include but not be limited to:

1. Local newspapers (e.g. Tulare Advance Register, Visalia Times Delta, Fresno Bee-South Valley Bureau, Valley Voice)
2. Local radio stations
3. FYI Tulare
4. Access Tulare
5. Flyer inserts in the city utility bill
6. City web page
7. Cable television
8. Welcome to Tulare package.

In addition to the above, the city should utilize the following:

1. Citizen surveys
2. Transit posters
3. Employee newsletter

Where applicable, every attempt shall be made to make material released in Access Tulare, FYI Tulare, the city utility bill inserts, and the Welcome to Tulare package available to the public bilingually.

The above information should be used as a guide. Additional information also can be obtained from the City Manager's Office.