

# GENERAL ORDER



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Replaces / Rescinds	
<b>General Order 204.1 (Release of Information to the New Media)</b>	

DISTRICT OF COLUMBIA

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## I. Background

The public has a right to certain types of information regarding police activity, and the Department is obligated to provide this information accurately, honestly, professionally and without bias. As community members often obtain the majority of their information from the news media, the MPD is encouraged to work in cooperation with the media. However, there are times when police have valid reasons for not releasing information that may come to the attention or in possession of the Department.

The relationship between the media and the MPD is one based on a desire to fairly meet the needs of the public while protecting the rights of the individual and the integrity of Department operations. It is therefore incumbent on members of the Department to deal with the media and media requests in a fair, impartial and professional manner.

## II. Policy

The policy of the Metropolitan Police Department is that members shall make available to the news media timely information pertaining to matters within the scope of the Department, except in those rare instances where the law enforcement process or fair administration of justice might be hampered by premature disclosure of such information. In releasing information to the media, the Department shall also be sensitive to the victims of crimes and their families.

## III. Definitions

A. **Public Information** - information that is of interest to the general public. This includes, but is not limited to, information about policies, procedures or events involving the Department that are not legally protected, does not interfere with the mission of the Department, does not infringe on the rights of a defendant and does

not compromise the legitimate safety and privacy interest of officers, victims, witnesses or others.

- B. **News Media Representatives** - those individuals who are directly employed by agencies of the electronic, print or digital media such as radio, television, newspapers, magazines, wire and on-line services.
- C. **Public Information Office (PIO)** - the Department's central source for releasing Department information and coordinating responses to requests for information by the news media and the community. As part of the Office of Corporate Communications, the Public Information Office is primarily responsible for media relations and is led by the Department's Public Information Officer. (CALEA 54.1.1-d)
- D. **Office of Corporate Communications** – is responsible for all internal and external communications, including the Public Information Office, community outreach, internal communications and Internet communications. The Director of Corporate Communications leads the Office of Corporate Communications.
- E. **Event** – a major disaster, emergency, or situation where the life and health of many individuals may be threatened, or incidents where multiple arrests may occur, such as a protest.
- F. **Personnel Information** – internal or otherwise private information regarding members of the MPD, such as home address, telephone number, disciplinary actions, performance, or other information not releasable under the D.C. Code or regulations of the Department.
- G. **Incident** – a call for police service or other matter requiring police attention, regardless whether an arrest has been made.
- H. **Written Release** – a written statement of the facts, circumstances or other issues made by members of the MPD to news media representatives.
- I. **Verbal Release** – any oral remarks or statements made by members of the MPD to news media representatives.
- J. **Members** – both sworn and civilian employees.

#### IV. Rules

- A. Members shall not pose as a representative of the news media.
- B. Members shall not invite news media representatives to the scenes of arrests, searches, and “raid” or other incidents or events where the presence of news media representatives may jeopardize the operations of the Department, the due administration of justice or the privacy of any individuals.

## **V. Regulations**

- A. Personnel information regarding members of the Department shall only be released with the approval of a Public Information Officer, and only when the release of such information serves a legitimate media purpose.
- B. Members shall not take action that will either unfairly assist or discourage the media from carrying out reporting activities.
- C. Members shall not allow any recording devices, cameras, equipment or media persons in Department vehicles or secure areas without the advance permission of the Public Information Officer.

## **VI. Procedural Guidelines**

- A. Persons authorized to release information – Members of the Department are encouraged to develop cooperative relationships with media members and respond to media requests. Members are authorized to make media releases pursuant to this General Order and in accordance with the following:
  - 1. Members may provide the basic facts, unless otherwise restricted by this General Order, concerning an event or incident of which they have sufficient knowledge, in conjunction with a Unit Official's approval, the rank of lieutenant or above. (CALEA 54.1.1-e)
  - 2. Only the Chief of Police, Command staff and members designated by them may release information pertaining to Department policies, procedures, rules, personnel issues and direction.
  - 3. Only the Chief of Police, Executive Assistant Chief, Director of Corporate Communications and the Public Information Officer are authorized to represent the Department before the media on all matters.
  - 4. Assistant District Commanders may provide a synopsis of an incident and can authorize the release of information that is of material aid in the successful resolution of the case or situation. In the absence of the PIO, Assistant District Commanders or a designee shall handle media requests. (CALEA 54.1.1-b, g)
  - 5. Field Commanders may release information regarding the details at a major event.
  - 6. Office of Organizational Development members shall handle and assist the Public Information Office with all requests pertaining to the release of official crime statistics.

B. Information that may be released to the public.

1. Factual information concerning an individual involved in an incident, such as the complainant's name and address, unless prohibited by this General Order.
2. Circumstances surrounding an incident, such as time and place, possession and use of weapons, resistance, pursuit, identity of the arresting officers, length of investigation, and a general description of items seized.
3. Information that may assist in an investigation, such as lookouts for persons or vehicles, or composites. (CALEA 54.1.1-g)
4. Special interest notices outlining Department initiatives, educational information, grants obtained or public safety announcements.
5. General complaint files (PD Form 251), automated arrest printouts, traffic accident reports (PD Form 10) and reports of missing, lost or stolen property shall be open to public inspection as mandated by the D.C. Code.

C. Information that CANNOT be released to the public.

1. Confidential information that may jeopardize the successful conclusion of an investigation. (CALEA 54.1.1-g)
2. Information concerning victims, witnesses or cooperating individuals, or any information that could reasonably be used to identify them, endanger their lives or physical safety. Members shall not release the names or addresses of deceased persons before the next of kin has been notified. (CALEA 54.1.1-e)
3. Any opinion as to guilt or innocence of the accused or as to the merits of the case.
4. The nature of evidence and any tests.
5. Any criminal history, criminal or police records on an individual. Even if the information appears in a public document, the member shall refer the requesting media person to contact the United States Attorney's Office or the court system.
6. The names, addresses and photographs of juveniles. However, as prescribed in Title 16 of the District of Columbia Code [Section 2307, Transfer for Criminal Prosecution], once it has been verified that a juvenile is certified as an adult, information may be disclosed.
7. All documents not listed as releasable shall be closed to public inspection.
8. A person charged with criminal offenses who is not in the Department's custody or a suspect prior to arrest, except when seeking the public's assistance to affect

an arrest; victims of crimes, juveniles or plainclothes personnel in sensitive positions.

9. Photographs of crime scenes.
10. The content of any confession, statement or admission, unless it appears in a public document.

D. How information releases shall occur.

1. Normal Information Releases – Members of the Department who are approached by news media requesting interviews and/or information pertaining to an incident or event may make a verbal statement consistent with this General Order. The member shall seek the assistance and advice of his/her immediate supervisor, if possible, before making the statement. The supervisor shall coordinate the release of the information with the Public Information Office. (CALEA 54.1.1 - a)
2. MPD Policy Information - When any member is approached by the media regarding the official position that the Department holds on a specific issue, the member shall contact his or her Supervising Official. The Official shall consult with the Public Information Officer to determine the appropriate person to provide a response. (CALEA 54.1.1-c)
3. Crime Scenes - Officials in command of emergency scenes, special events, disasters, major events, major crimes or disorders, where numerous members of the media are drawn shall:
  - a. Establish a perimeter around the event or crime scene, cordoning off the area from members of the media. The perimeter shall provide members of the news media with maximum access to the scene, without disrupting Department operations or endangering a member of the media or any other person. If the news media's presence at the scene of a police response appears to endanger or inflame the situation, the media representatives shall be asked to move to a more neutral or safe location. (CALEA 54.1.3 - a & b)
  - b. Assign an official or member of the force to coordinate police/media activities, to facilitate controlled and accurate dissemination of information. The PIO should be consulted and is available for guidance and on-scene assistance in circumstances as needed. The PIO can be contacted through the Police Communications Division or by pager. Members of the Communications Division shall page the PIO upon request. (CALEA 54.1.1 a-b-f and 54.1.3-a)
  - c. Prohibit media access to private property if the police are still in control of the area and their access could jeopardize the integrity of the investigation. After the investigation has been completed, only the owner

or agent of the owner can authorize the media to enter the private property.

4. Department-wide Releases – To ensure broad distribution and coordination, written news releases that are general in nature and department-wide in scope, to be issued by the Public Information Office. (CALEA 54.1.1 - c)
5. Division and Unit Releases - All written press releases shall be prepared and released through the Office of Corporate Communication. (CALEA 54.1.1 - c)
6. Joint Operations – Whenever MPD members are part of a task force or joint operation with other agencies, the lead operational or investigatory agency shall be responsible for media releases and requests. (CALEA 54.1.1-h)
7. Request Denials - In the case of a denial of a media request for information, a Command Staff Member, the Public Information Officer or the Director of Corporate Communications shall provide a timely and professional explanation.

E. Media and department member relations.

1. Access - Authorized media representatives shall have reasonable access to the Public Information Officer, Command Members and when appropriate, the Chief of Police or his designee.
2. Media Passes - News media representatives on the scene of any incident or event shall be in possession of a valid police news media pass issued by the Department. The holder of a police news pass shall be furnished access to information and to locations as specified in this General Order, provided that such use does not hamper police operations. (CALEA 54.1.1-a)
3. General Order Review – The Public Information Office and the Director of Corporate Communications shall involve media representatives when developing changes in policies and procedures relating to this order. (CALEA 54.1.2)

F. Guidelines for members participating in formal media interviews or as guests on television or radio broadcasts.

1. Department members may participate in formal media interviews and appearances or as guests on television or radio broadcasts (including panel discussions, interviews, documentaries, workshops, audience participation programs, etc.) only with prior approval from the Chief of Police, Executive Assistant Chief, Regional Operation Commander, Senior Executive Director or the Public Information Officer, when the member will be: (CALEA 54.1.1 - d)
  - a. identified as an official representative of the Department; or
  - b. identified as a spokesperson of the Department; or

- c. discussing Department policy; or
  - d. appearing in uniform.
2. If a member is participating in an interview to express personal views, the member shall:
- a. appear or participate only during non-duty status, unless otherwise directed;
  - b. ensure that the interview will not be conducted at a police facility without PIO authorization;
  - c. preface any comments with a clear statement that he or she is expressing a personal viewpoint and not that of the Department;
  - d. be prohibited from appearing in uniform or wearing any Department insignia or item which would indicate he or she is the Department's spokesperson; and,
  - e. not endorse any products or services.

**VII. Cross References**

- A. Related forms – Members are encouraged to review the media relations outline for guidance, attachment A.
- B. Metropolitan Police Department News Media Press Pass, attachment B.

// SIGNED //  
Charles H. Ramsey  
Chief of Police

CHR:NMJ:ws

**Other Procedures in Place**

**COURTESY** – Members shall be courteous with representatives of the news media.

**PRESS PASSES** – News media representatives displaying MPD press passes shall be allowed to go as near as feasible to the scene itself. Officials having yellow police tape erected should also cordon off an area for the media so the general public does not interfere with the media. News media members will be allowed to remain wherever the general public is allowed.

**CRIME SCENE** – Whenever possible, tape-off crime scenes and again provide an area for the media.

**VIDEO TAPING** – News media members may photograph or videotape police officers performing their official duties. Officers **will not** physically block or cover the lenses of cameras or video taping equipment. Members in accordance with General Order 204.1 will not assist nor hinder camerapersons at scenes. Members **will not** bring the media into private residences as part of a crime scene or police raid. **COURTS HAVE RULED THAT MEMBERS MAY BE HELD LIABLE TO CIVIL SUIT FOR SUCH ACTIONS.**

**TRESPASS ON PUBLIC PROPERTY** – News media will not be asked to leave public property unless the property is closed to all persons for the purpose of preserving the scene.

**Metropolitan Police Department  
Public Information Office  
(202) 727 – 4383**

**Chief of Police  
Metropolitan Police Department**

**Handling the News Media  
Outline & Tips**

The Metropolitan Police Department is committed to maintaining a professional working relationship with members of the news media. The news media has an obligation and will be permitted to gather information within the confines of the law and without interference from police personnel in accordance with General Order 204.1. The following is a summary of procedures currently in effect and some tips when dealing with the news media.

**Scene of Major Incidents**

Police are obligated to assist victims, to preserve the integrity of crime scenes, to gather evidence and to complete investigative activities. To ensure that information released to the media is accurate, the ranking official on the scene or a designee is authorized to formally release information regarding the incident. The Ranking Official:

- ✓ Shall determine the need for a member of the Public Information Office (PIO);
- ✓ Shall notify and keep PIO informed of any major incident;
- ✓ Must notify PIO of barricades, homicides, accidents resulting from a police pursuit, officer shot, serious injury to an officer, fatal police shooting and any serious incident of this nature.

In most cases involving the above incidents, only a command official on the scene or a member of PIO will speak with the news media concerning the incident and ongoing investigation at the scene of the incident to ensure the information released is accurate. Officers questioned by the news media shall refer reporters to the appropriate command official.

The commanding official in charge of an incident or the Public information officer will brief the news media representatives present at the scene with basic information concerning the incident. However, officials shall not feel compelled to meet a reporter’s deadline. Provide a briefing only when you are confident you have accurate and reasonably complete information.



<p><b>Release Basic Information</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Names of victims (except if a witness or cooperating individual in a case or decedent and next of kin not yet notified).</li> <li>✓ Names of adults arrested.</li> <li>✓ Time and location of the incident.</li> <li>✓ Summary of what occurred (do not speculate or release information relative to an ongoing investigation).</li> <li>✓ Description of suspect(s) still at large.</li> </ul> <p><b>Do Not Release the Following Information</b></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Name of decedent before notification of next of kin.</li> <li>✓ Name of suspect(s), if not arrested or warrant has not been obtained.</li> <li>✓ The contents of any statement, admission or the fact that a confession has been made.</li> <li>✓ Opinions concerning guilt or innocence of the person(s) arrested.</li> <li>✓ Information that will hamper an investigation or interfere with a right to fair trial.</li> <li>✓ Criminal history of a subject (may not confirm or deny if a person has a criminal history).</li> <li>✓ Any internal communication, inter-office communication, or supplementary report.</li> </ul> <p><b>At the Scene of Traffic or Minor Crime Incidents</b></p> <p>Any sworn member may release basic information to news media that arrive on a scene of traffic accidents or minor crime incidents as long as the member alone is investigating the incident. Investigators of more serious crime incidents and accidents that generate numerous news media inquires shall fax a copy of the report to the PIO or call PIO as soon as possible to provide the basic information to prepare a news release.</p>	<p><b>Points to Remember</b></p> <p><b>Professional Demeanor</b> – Always show concern and never minimize or trivialize a situation that the media has chosen to cover.</p> <p><b>Nothing is “Off the Record”</b> – “Off the record” comments have been reported as “unidentified police source said...” This often compromises criminal and internal investigations.</p> <p><b>Preparation Before the Interview</b> – Officials should take a moment to prepare themselves by noting what information can and cannot be released. Never feel pressured to grant an interview before you are adequately prepared.</p> <p><b>Do Not Speculate</b> – Only give those facts, which can be released, and fall within your area of responsibility and knowledge.</p> <p><b>Policy Matters</b> – Only the Chief of Police, his designee or PIO should address policy matters; refer the news media to PIO for policy matters.</p> <p><b>Jargon</b> – Use plain English and not police jargon.</p> <p><b>Emotion</b> – Never show anger or frustration with the media. Do not act defensive.</p> <p><b>Microphone is Always On</b> – A flippant remark or comments about another case or the internal workings of the Department can become the real story that is reported. Always consider the microphone to be on.</p> <p><b>Answering Questions</b> – Be honest. If you don’t know, just say so. If you’re not permitted to answer a question explain why, i.e. it pertains to an ongoing investigation, it is still under investigation, it would violate the right of privacy of any individual, etc.</p> <p><b>Listen</b> – Be sure you understand a reporter’s question before answering and avoid allowing a reporter to put words in your mouth. Do not paraphrase a reporter’s question in your answer if it’s inappropriate.</p>
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