


**CITY OF CHARLOTTESVILLE
STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURE**



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| Type of Policy: Administrative | Policy Number: 100-03 |
| Subject: Employee Media Policy | |
| Circulated for Comment/Approval of Lead Team? YES | Date: 01/03/07 (Amended 11/11/14; 12/18/19) |
| Authorization: Dr. Tarron Richardson, City Manager | |
| Signature of City Manager:  | Effective Date: 12/18/19 |

I. PURPOSE OF POLICY

The City of Charlottesville seeks to provide consistent, accurate, and timely information to the news media and public concerning City business and meetings. The purpose of this policy is to establish procedures and guidelines for all City employees concerning communication with members of the news media concerning City Business when the employee is on-duty or otherwise when acting as a City employee.

II. ENABLING ORDINANCES/LEGISLATION

N/A

III. DEPARTMENTS/DIVISIONS AFFECTED

This policy affects all City Departments and employees. The policy is directed and supervised by the Communications Department within the City Managers Office and appropriate department heads and supervisors.

IV. REGULATIONS AND PROCEDURES

A. Public Roles and Responsibilities

Director of Communications: The City’s Director of Communications resides in the City Manager’s Office and serves as the City’s central contact for the coordination of public information and media relations. In the event the Director of Communications is unavailable, their designee may serve in the capacity of Acting Director of Communications. The key public information functions are as follows:

Official Spokesperson: The Director of Communications is the City’s official spokesperson.

Release of Information: All news releases by all City departments require advance review and approval by the Director of Communications. The Director of Communications is responsible for ensuring the information released by the City to the news media and public is timely, accurate and fairly distributed. News items that appear on the City's website homepage (i.e. a News Flash, Spotlight Item, Emergency Alert, or photography) also require the Director of Communications' approval .

Media Access: the Director of Communications assists the news media in gaining access to the City, its employees, City Council and other Boards and Commissions as well as public records and information.

Assistance to City Departments: The Director of Communications assists other departments in preparing media releases and public service announcements, responding to media inquiries; and developing campaigns and materials to promote City programs, events and policies.

Emergency Preparedness: The Director of Communications is the primary public information contact in the event of an emergency and facilitates information gathering and dissemination with key contacts in the City.

Evaluation of media and public information activities: The Director of Communications is responsible for providing an on-going review and evaluation of the City's public information efforts.

Department Managers and Staff: Department directors and identified management level staff also serve as liaisons to media representatives regarding policy issues. Department directors are expected to make clear to their staffs what kind of inquiries to handle directly and what kind should be directed to management. Department directors and their designees are encouraged to respond promptly and accurately to media inquiries, particularly when they are listed as the primary contact in a news release, keeping in mind the deadlines frequently imposed on the working media. Clerical staff is encouraged to give appropriate attention to phone calls received from the media.

Police & Fire Departments: The Chiefs of Police and Fire may also designate a Public Information Officer (PIO) to handle routine, day-to-day news releases and incidents and to initiate proactive media relations for their departments in a coordinated approach with the Office of Communications. In the event there is no such PIO designee, the Director of Communications is available to handle such inquiries with direction from the Chiefs and appropriate staff. During an active emergency incident, the Incident Commander will establish an Incident Action Plan based on the National Incident Management System-Incident Command guidelines to direct the management of emergency operations including the dissemination of public information. In the event that an Incident Commander or Public Safety PIO releases time sensitive information at the scene, he or she will ensure that the same information is conveyed to the Director of Communications.

The City Manager and Director of Communications should be made aware of any media inquiries received or interviews given by City staff regarding official business.

B. Guidelines for Releasing Information

It is the goal of the City of Charlottesville to provide information to the public, both citizens and the media, in a timely, informative and efficient manner. The City aims to:

- Maintain open access to the media and the public

- Achieve consistency in the manner of releasing such information
- Establish and maintain a good working relationship with all media representatives
- Prevent needless controversy or embarrassment to the City and its employees and elected and appointed officials by the release of inappropriate, untimely or inaccurate information to the media or to the public

Open access to Public Information: Departments shall release public information to the media and public including announcements and notices of upcoming events, activities and programs. Information concerning the day-to-day operation of the department as well as goals and objectives can also be released to the media and public.

Within these guidelines, all department directors and other employees are expected to use good judgment so that the media and the public are not denied open access to public information. Release of public records or documents shall strictly adhere to requirements and time frames established by the City's Freedom of Information Act Policy #100-18. If questions arise as to whether certain information should be released under the Freedom of Information Act, the employee should contact the Director of Communications who serves as the City's FOIA Officer pursuant to Virginia Code Section 2.2-3704.2.

Department-level media procedures: Department directors should define as specifically as possible the latitude subordinate employees have in releasing information. These guidelines should clarify issues such as whose home phone numbers should be available to reporters in case of an emergency after-hours and encourage those designates to be as available as possible once releases are sent. Department designees are responsible for notifying the Director of Communications of significant events or issues that occur within their areas that may be of major interest to the general public or media.

Only the City Manager's Office and department directors or their designees shall respond to citizen or media inquiries in emergency or crisis situations (such as injury, death, legal status). As soon as possible following such an emergency, the Department of Communications should be contacted to be informed of the situation and to help plan a proper response.

C. Critical Situation/Emergency Media Relations Procedures

In the event of a critical situation or emergency, as defined below, the Director of Communications will become the Public Information Officer coordinating the release of information to the media and public as directed by the Incident Commander, if assigned, or by the City Manager, and in coordination with appropriate department directors. This coordination function, as described in the City's Emergency Operations Plan, is essential in the event of an emergency to insure the centralization, accuracy, and consistency of information being released to the media. In some cases, information will be shared by departmental spokespersons and/or Public Safety PIOs.

For the purposes of this policy, critical/emergency situations are defined as follows:

- Sudden death or serious injury of any City employee
- A natural or manmade disaster resulting in significant threat or impact to City residents
- An arrest of a City employee
- An incident which may involve significant legal/policy issues of the City
- A crime or emergency incident which may generate significant interest to media outside the community

- Any other major event that is likely to generate intense and/or sustained media interest involving City local government.

In the event of such a critical incident, the Director of Communications will be notified as soon as possible to coordinate the media response. In the case of an event that requires an immediate on-scene media response, the Incident Commander has the discretion to make an initial response to the media as they deem necessary.

The Director of Communications will work with the City's Critical Incident Management Team and other senior staff as needed to determine the best plan for media relations throughout the course of the situation and will coordinate that effort along with other staff as appropriate. Areas of responsibility involved in this coordination role may include gathering accurate, timely information for release to the media, responding to media inquiries, scheduling news conferences/press briefings as appropriate, serving as an on-scene liaison with media representatives if that need arises, and preparing designated spokespersons for media interviews.

D. Speaking on Behalf of the City on Work-Related Topics

Department directors and their designees are authorized, but are not obligated, to speak directly with or to give interviews with the media on behalf of the City. Other employees may not speak in an official capacity on behalf of the City regarding work-related matters, while at work or during off-hours, without the prior knowledge of and authorization from their department director. If an interview is requested, employees should contact the appropriate person within their department, keep their responses within their area of knowledge and not give personal opinions if they are being interviewed as a City employee. If the staff member is unsure of how to respond to a request for information from the media, they should refer the reporter to the appropriate department head, department PIO, or to the Director of Communications.

E. Speaking as a Private Citizen

City employees have the right to communicate their personal opinions as private citizens on matters of public concern. If an employee chooses to communicate with the media as a private citizen or as a representative of another non-City organization, they should make it clear to the media that they are not speaking on behalf of City government, but as an individual. News releases or "letters to the Editor" in circumstances in which private views are being communicated should not be written on City letterhead, prepared during work time, sent using City computers or by City email, or sent at the City's expense. Personal blogs or web pages should have no identification with the employee's capacity as a City employee.

Nothing in this Policy shall be construed so as to limit any employee's right to engage in protected speech or expression under federal or state law.

V. CONSEQUENCES OF VIOLATION OF POLICY

Employee violation of this policy may be subject to discipline under the City's current Personnel Regulations which can include oral reprimand, written reprimand, suspension, demotion, reduction in pay and dismissal.