

<b>Subject:</b> Public Information & Media Relations	<b>Number:</b> 6-20
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<b>Responsible Department:</b> City Manager	<b>Approved:</b>

## Purpose

To provide procedures and guidelines for coordinating and disseminating information to the public on behalf of the City of Fresno. The policy will be modified and expanded as necessary.

**Statement:** The City of Fresno shall provide timely and accurate information to keep the Mayor, Council, staff and community apprised of pertinent City issues, services and events. The City shall utilize appropriate and effective means to communicate its messages to both general and target audiences. This policy contains guidelines that will achieve the City's communications objectives and facilitate a successful working relationship with the local and regional media.

## Policy

1. Fully utilize the news and special interest media, the City cable television channel, and City website as effective means of communicating with citizens and target groups (including business sector, community leaders, homeowners groups, City employees).
2. Facilitate the timely flow of public information to appropriate media through an effective internal process that maximizes message consistency and factual accuracy.
3. Educate the community about how government works and encourage citizen participation in the policy-making process.

## Procedures

1. **General Public Communications**
  - a. Letters and opinion surveys designed for mass distribution shall be reviewed by and coordinated with the City Manager's Office for content and format analysis and for placement strategies.
  - b. All printed materials (fliers, posters, signs, pamphlets, brochures, advertisements, maps, presentation materials, etc.) designed for distribution to and/or viewing by the public shall be reviewed by the Public Affairs Officer prior to printing or copying.

## 2. **Media Response Philosophy**

- a. **Timely and Accurate Responses:** The City encourages accurate press coverage of programs, events and decisions that could be of interest and impact a significant segment of the community. In this regard, the City and the media have a mutual responsibility to provide accurate, objective information of City affairs to City residents. Inquiries from the news media are to be given a high priority and be responded to as quickly and efficiently as possible, consistent with Section 5 of this policy. Every effort should be made to meet media deadlines and to ensure that all information released is accurate and messages properly developed.

## 3. **Press Releases**

Press releases are any official written or verbal announcements initiated by the City to the media regarding official City business.

- a. **Responsibility.** All media releases relative to major citywide policies and actions shall be prepared and distributed by the City Manager's Office. Other departments may prepare their own releases in the following situations:

- (1) Police and Fire departments, when providing fast-breaking news updates regarding major police and fire activity.
- (2) Releases relating to specific departmental activities or special event, which do not have major citywide implications.

- b. **Assistance.** Upon request, the City Manager's Office will provide assistance with media releases prepared by those above. Other departments requiring press releases or technical assistance in preparing press releases should provide the City Manager's Office with written information pertaining to the topic as well as any special distribution list.

- c. **Release Preparation & Format.** Press releases shall be prepared according to the City's established format. A master file of press releases will be maintained by the City Manager's Office. A copy of all media releases distributed by any unit outside of the City Manager's Office should be forwarded to the City Manager's Office for inclusion.

## 4. **Release of Information Pertaining to Significant Issues & Events**

- a. **Definition of Issues.** It is the responsibility of department directors to notify the City Manager of significant events or issues that occur within their department, which may be of major interest to the general public or media. Such issues include, but are not limited to:

- (1) An event/issue in an operating department or program that is controversial.
- (2) Injury or death of a City employee while on or off official duty.

(3) Major malfunctions of a City facility that could impact the general welfare of the public or environment.

(4) An unexpected work stoppage or inability to provide a critical City service.

(5) The arrest or conviction of a City employee, which may impact that individual's ability in successfully carrying out his/her professional responsibility.

(6) Major police or fire activities.

- b. **Reporting Procedure.** Once receiving the information, the City Manager will determine if it is necessary to contact the Mayor, City Council, other department directors and the City's Public Affairs Officer. If public release of information is deemed appropriate, the City Manager, in consultation with the department director and the Public Affairs Officer, will determine the most appropriate mechanism in notifying the press.
- c. **Back-up Procedure.** If the City Manager is unavailable, the department director should contact the Assistant City Manager, then the Public Affairs Officer directly for dissemination of information. On those occasions when neither of these individuals nor an acting City Manager is available, the department director should use his/her own judgment in releasing information to the press on fast-breaking news stories.

## 5. Who Responds to Media Inquiries

- a. **Spokesperson.** The City Manager will respond directly or designate a media spokesperson to respond to an issue of major public significance to ensure that the information is disseminated quickly and accurately to all interested media sources. When such a designation is made, the City Manager will notify the appropriate department director(s) and the Public Affairs Officer to forward all inquiries regarding the particular issue to the appointed spokesperson.
- b. **Media Contacts to Staff.** Non-management employees shall refer media inquiries to their department directors. A department director may delegate an employee to respond to an inquiry because of her/his involvement with an event or issue. In such cases, the staff member should work with the department director and Public Affairs Officer **before the interview** to develop appropriate responses to anticipated questions.
- c. **Public Safety.** The Disaster Director (City Manager or Assistant City Manager) will work with the Public Affairs Officer to develop media responses in the event of major emergencies and disasters. A more detailed description of emergency public information procedures is contained in the City's Standard Operating Procedures (SOP). For other fast-breaking stories involving a major police/fire activity, the first media contact is the Police or Fire Chief or his/her designee, followed by the City Manager, public safety liaison and the Public Affairs Officer.

Throughout the entire chain of responsibility, 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 chain of command can be modified to expedite release of crucial information.

## 6. What to Do When Contacted by the Press

Given the City's policy to respond to media inquiries as quickly as possible, staff should give priority to media calls by alerting their respective department director of media inquiries.

- a. **Determine Nature & Focus of Story.** For those assigned to respond to media inquiries, it is important to determine the focus of the story as well as the specific information desired by the reporter. What may seem to be an "innocent" information request, oftentimes can turn out to be a front-page story, distorting the data supplied by the City. That's why it is always important to determine the reporter's focus and slant.
- b. **Notification Procedure.** Any designated staff member (management or non-management) who responds to a media inquiry, provides an interview, appears on a radio or television program, etc., shall notify the City Manager and the Public Affairs Officer, either by phone or written memo.

Regarding controversial matters, the City Manager and/or Public Affairs Officer must be consulted **before** conducting the interview. This gives the spokesperson the opportunity to review anticipated questions and to formulate and properly position appropriate responses.

Departments that have ongoing daily contact with the media are not required to follow the notification procedure for every media contact, only those that involve significant issues of concern.

## 7. Media Etiquette

There are some very important "do's" and "don'ts" that should be observed in strengthening the relations between City Hall and the local media.

- a. **Responding to Council Actions.** Designated staff should not publicly make judgmental comments regarding individual Council Members, Council actions, City administration or official City policy when responding to media inquiries. They should also refrain from anticipating an action or position that has not been formally 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.
- b. **Scope of Response.** Designated staff members should not respond to media inquiries that are not directly related to carrying out their professional responsibilities. If such a media inquiry is made, they should assist the media in receiving the needed information by referring the source to the Public Affairs Officer.

## 8. Public Issues

Most city records and official City meetings are open to the public and media. The media are no more or less privileged than the general public in being provided access to City Council meetings and City records. While City operations need not be disrupted or extraordinary accommodations made to provide access to public records, it should be emphasized that adequate information provided to the media or the public is beneficial both to the citizens and the City in carrying out its public information efforts.

- a. **Attendance at Meetings.** The media and public are encouraged to attend and report on actions taken at Council meetings, workshops, and commission meetings.
- b. **Closed Sessions.** Public and media attendance is **not** allowed at closed Council sessions dealing with litigation, security, negotiations or personnel-related matters.
- c. **Litigation Issues.** Designated staff members shall not respond to media inquiries regarding an issue involving City litigation or render personal or legal opinions on City policies or activities. If in doubt, the City Attorney should be contacted for clarification before responding to a media inquiry.

9. **Correcting Misinformation.**

The City has an obligation to clarify or correct any information released by the media that contains inaccuracies or quotes taken out of context relating to a City issue.

- a. **Factual Discrepancies.** The Public Affairs Officer shall contact the media when a story has been published or aired containing factual error that significantly impacts the public's perception of the issue being addressed. Managers are encouraged to notify the Public Affairs Officer immediately when they believe incorrect information is being communicated by the press regarding a City issue or program.
- b. **Editorial Discrepancies.** Managers should contact the Public Affairs Officer when there is evidence that a specific editorial comment or news story has been published or aired that does not appropriately represent a balanced perspective of the issue being discussed. The City Manager, in consultation with the Public Affairs Officer, will determine when an official City rebuttal or response is appropriate.
- c. **Letters to the Editor.** Department directors who believe an official City rebuttal is warranted regarding a news story should discuss the issue with the City Manager's Office. They will determine if a response is appropriate, as well as who should prepare and sign the letter. The City Manager must authorize and review all letters sent to editors on official City letterhead and/or by an employee who is acting in an official capacity commenting on city issues or programs.
- d. **Responding as Private Citizens.** City employees who choose to contact, initiate or respond to City-related news stories as private citizens shall not prepare such responses on City time, by City phones, on City stationery, or mail at City expense. If responses or letters indicate the employees' City affiliation or title, such responses or letters shall not intimate that the response is on behalf of the City. Use of City facilities or supplies is

prohibited. These guidelines also apply to employees responding to or initiating press contacts as official representatives of City-sanctioned employee groups.

10. **Advertising**

- a. **Display Advertising.** The City Manager's Office coordinates development and placement of media advertising to promote City programs, services, events and issues. All requests for advertising must be submitted to the City Manager's Office, which will coordinate copy development, graphic design, and media placement with the requesting department. This policy does not apply to employment and legal advertising, which will be coordinated by the appropriate departments (i.e., Human Resources and City Clerk, respectively).
- b. **Public Service Announcement.** The City Manager's Office is the central coordinator for developing and placing public service announcements with the broadcast media (radio, TV and cable). PSA spots are announced free by the media as a community service. Two-to-three-week lead times are desired by most stations. All requests for PSAs must be submitted to the City Manager's Office, which will coordinate copy development and placement with the requesting department.