

General Order

Houston Police Department



ISSUE DATE:

March 31, 2020

NO.

800-02

REFERENCE: Supersedes all prior conflicting Circulars and Directives, and General Order 800-02, dated June 29, 2010

SUBJECT: MEDIA RELATIONS

POLICY

All employees of the Houston Police Department shall be transparent, open, fair, and honest with the media in accordance with the rules of the department and the laws of the city, state, and federal governments.

This General Order applies to all employees.

1 PROCEDURES

Media requests for information, including interviews, shall be handled as follows:

- a. Department employees shall refrain from making public statements about departmental policy or initiatives unless the statements have been approved by the Office of the Chief of Police. The department recognizes, however, that each employee has constitutional rights with regard to free speech and respects each employee's right to express personal opinions.
- b. In emergency or scene-related situations, officers shall provide the media with information regarding the scene or event in a timely manner. After the information is released, officers shall notify the department's Office of Public Affairs, Media Relations Unit, as soon as possible. Notification to the Media Relations Unit can be made either by telephone or by sending an email to the department's DL-PA Media Relations group. If the office is closed, the notification shall be left on the telephone recorder.
- c. In follow-up or other non-emergency situations, department employees receiving media inquiries shall first coordinate the release of this type of information by calling the Media Relations Unit. Employees shall talk to a public information officer who shall assist in handling the media request prior to the response. When it is impractical to contact the Media Relations Unit prior to the release of information, department employees shall do so as soon as possible after the release of information is made.
- d. If an officer is involved in a shooting, discharge of a firearm, or injury, or any other significant incident, the media release shall be handled by the duty public information officer. It shall be the responsibility of the Crime Analysis and Command Center to contact the duty public information officer upon receipt of a call of this nature.

2 MEDIA ACCESS THROUGH POLICE LINES

The department appreciates the media's right to have access to certain information concerning noteworthy events. The department also recognizes its primary missions are investigating criminal acts and taking action at the scene of emergencies. It is therefore necessary for the

department to place certain constraints on nonpolice personnel in order to conduct a successful police action.

Officers shall adhere to the following guidelines when dealing with the media at crime scenes and at other police emergencies:

- a. The first officers to arrive at a crime scene or other police event shall quickly establish a tight perimeter around the immediate crime scene. Only police and emergency personnel necessary for the on-scene investigation and operation shall be allowed inside this perimeter.
- b. Department employees are expected to assist members of the media by providing accurate information and allowing passage through police lines when it does not jeopardize public safety or compromise a criminal investigation.
- c. If a public information officer is needed to assist in the dissemination of information to the media at crime scenes or police events, the Crime Analysis and Command Center shall be contacted and advised to have the duty public information officer respond to the scene.
- d. Investigative personnel, when they are present at a police action, shall be responsible for releasing appropriate information to the media. Examples include homicides, robberies, burglaries, auto thefts, and other scenes at which divisional personnel routinely handle the release of information to the media.
- e. During special threat situations, media representatives shall be directed to an area predetermined by the scene commander. When appropriate, information may be released to the media at that area.

3 POLICE AND MEDIA RELATIONS

Officers shall permit media representatives to question witnesses, complainants, or suspects only after such persons have been questioned by the police.

Employees shall not arrange interviews of persons under arrest. (Note: Media representatives who attempt to interview an arrested person while that person is being walked from a scene of the arrest should not be viewed as interfering.)

No details of an internal investigation shall be given to the media until the case has been concluded, and then only with the approval of the Chief of Police.

When an employee is unsure if a person requesting information is in fact a representative of the media, the employee shall direct the person to contact the Media Relations Unit.

When the volume of media requests for information about a specific incident exceeds the ability of a command to answer the inquiries, or when an answer to such requests would compromise the success of an investigation or operation, a supervisor of that command shall contact the Media Relations Unit, brief a public information officer about the incident, and ask the Media Relations Unit to handle calls on the matter. All future media calls shall then be referred to the Media Relations Unit.

4 CONFIDENTIALITY OF INFORMATION

No employee shall release confidential information contained in any personnel database without proper authority. Items deemed to be confidential are employee numbers, home addresses, home and cell telephone numbers, and absences.

Officers' home addresses and home and cell telephone numbers shall not be placed on forms such as incident reports and crash reports.

If personal information about an officer is required on such forms, the following information shall be used:

- a. Name (officer's initials and last name)
- b. Address (1200 Travis)
- c. Phone Number (officer's work phone number)

This policy applies regardless of the duty status of the officer at the time of an incident.



Art Acevedo
Chief of Police