



# GUIDELINES FOR RELEASE OF PUBLIC INFORMATION

- In general, emergency information, news about arrests or newsworthy incidents, and info about in-progress incidents or manhunts may be handled by PIOs.
- Policy issues, staffing issues, political issues, resource deployment issues and personnel issues are handled only by the Sheriff or the Undersheriff.

## NEWS RELEASE APPROVAL PROCESS

- 1) PIO receives raw information, refines and edits info, and formulates news release.
  - a) Headline of news release must be shorter than 70 characters.
- 2) PIO sends draft news release to administrator for approval. This can be done by either email or verbally over the phone.
- 3) Once approved, PIO posts the news release over Nixle.
  - a) Indicate the name, phone number and email address of the contact person for the press to follow-up.
    - i) Expect and be prepared to get phone calls/emails, and to respond quickly to those inquiries.
    - ii) Prepare speaking points and stay on message.
  - b) Make sure to click on recipient groups: "Nixle Feed" and "GCSO Staff".
  - c) Make sure to click on "Post to Facebook" and "Post to Twitter".
  - d) Unclick the message expiration feature unless there is a true expiration date and time. (i.e. short duration road closure due to a crash).

**Note:** News releases shall not be distributed as an Adobe Acrobat (pdf) or as an image file. They're hard to read on a handheld device. The media and citizens are better served receiving the text of the news release that can be easily read on a handheld device or computer screen. *Exception:* attached documents and images in addition to the news release.

**Note:** Written news releases are usually not enough, and the information officer should always include contact information (cell phone, email, etc.) for media and the public to call for more information. Missing an opportunity to provide more information limits the accuracy and completeness of a story.

## **EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION AND WARNING**

Such actions are usually employed when there is a threat to the public, such as a current manhunt for a dangerous fugitive, police activity such as a high-risk warrant service in a neighborhood, wildfire threatening life and property, hazardous materials release, and the like.

Short messages can be sent via Nixle and will auto-post to Facebook and Twitter.

## INVESTIGATIVE INFORMATION

From the initial stage of a criminal investigation until the completion of trial or disposition without trial, GCSO personnel shall refer all requests for information to the department chief executive or designee.

- 1) **Information that *may be released*** in connection with an investigation of an event or crime includes:
  - a) the type or nature of an event or crime;
  - b) the location, date and time, injuries sustained, damages, and a general description of how the incident occurred;
  - c) type and quantity of property taken;
  - d) the identity and approximate address of a victim *EXCEPT* sex crime victims, juvenile victims, and in cases where there is a credible and true extreme threat of reprisals or intimidation may be employed (not just a general fear);
  - e) requests for aid in locating evidence, a complainant, witnesses or a suspect;
  - f) numbers of officers or people involved in an event or investigation, and the length of the investigation; and
  - g) name of the officer in charge of a case, the supervisor and division or unit assignment (exception: the names of any undercover officers will not be released).
  - h) the identity of any deceased person **after** the Coroner has notified of next of kin (RCW 68.50.300);
  - i) the identity of any critically injured person (after approval by investigators);
- 2) **Information that *may not be released*** in connection with an investigation of an event or crime, unless authorized by the department chief executive or designee, includes:
  - a) the identity of an adult suspect prior to arrest ***unless such information would aid in apprehending the suspect or serve to warn the public of potential danger;***
  - b) the identity of any juvenile who is a suspect or defendant in a case subject to the jurisdiction of the juvenile court ***unless such information would aid in apprehending the juvenile suspect or serve to warn the public of potential danger;***
  - c) the identity of any victim of a sex crime or any related information which, if divulged, could lead to the victim's identity;
  - d) the identity of victims or witnesses if such disclosure would prejudice an investigation to any significant degree, or if it would place the victim in personal danger;
  - e) the results of any investigative procedure such as lineups, polygraph tests, fingerprint comparison, ballistics test or other procedures (the fact that these tests have been performed may be revealed without further comment);
  - f) information which, if prematurely released, may interfere with the investigation or apprehension such as the nature of leads, specifics of an "MO," details of the crime known only to the perpetrator and the police, or information that may cause the suspect to flee or more effectively

avoid apprehension;

- g) information that may be of evidentiary value in criminal proceedings;
- h) specific cause of death unless officially determined by the medical examiner; and
- i) the home address or telephone number of any member of the department.

## ARREST INFORMATION

Following arrest, issuance of an arrest warrant, or filing of probable cause statement or charges, it is permissible to release:

- 1) the accused's name, age, residence, occupation, and family status;
- 2) the time and place of arrest, whether pursuit or resistance was encountered, whether weapons were used, charges placed against the suspect, and description of contraband seized;
- 3) the identity of the arresting officers and the duration of the investigation unless the officers are engaged in undercover operations; and
- 4) the amount of bond, scheduled court dates, and place of the suspect's detention.

Following arrest and formal charging of a suspect, but prior to adjudication, the following types of information *should not* be released;

- 1) Prior criminal conviction record, character or reputation of a defendant;
- 2) existence or contents of any confession, admission or statement of a defendant, or his failure or unwillingness to make a statement;
- 3) performance or results of any tests, or a defendant's refusal or failure to submit to tests such as a polygraph;
- 4) identity, statement, or expected testimony of any witness or victim;
- 5) any opinion about the guilt or innocence of a defendant or the merits of the case;
- 6) any opinion or knowledge of the potential for a plea bargain or other pretrial action.

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS - CRIMINAL MATTERS

- 1) GCSO personnel shall extend every reasonable courtesy to news media representatives at crime scenes. This may include closer access of personnel and equipment than available to the general public to the degree that it does not interfere with the police mission or the movement of traffic.
- 2) The news media shall not be allowed access to any area or scene of an incident or crime where there is a possibility that evidence may be damaged, altered, destroyed, or otherwise prejudiced by its existence being published or portrayed. Once evidence has been processed, removed, and secured by the department, the media may be allowed to enter by permission of the commanding officer at the scene.
- 3) On private property, photography, film, or videotape recording requires the permission of the Owner or the Owner's representative.
- 4) Suspects or accused persons in custody shall not be posed or arrangements made for photographs; telecasts or interviews, nor shall GCSO personnel pose with suspects or accused persons in custody.
- 5) When an individual is charged with a criminal offense and is sought by law enforcement authorities, photographs or mug shots **may be released to the media to help locate the individual.**
- 6) No photographs, mug shots, videotape, film or composites of subjects *in custody* shall otherwise be released to the media. *[RCW 70.48.100(2) and (3) the "City and County Jails Act" is the Washington State statute which makes booking photos exempt from public disclosure].*
- 7) At the scene of major crimes, such as hostage and barricade situations, the officer in charge shall designate a preliminary press area as early as possible and as close to the scene as safety and operational requirements allow.
- 8) The fact that a suicide or suspected suicide has occurred may be reported to the media, along with factual information describing how it happened.
  - a) The name, age, address, and sex of the victim may also be released following the Coroner's notification of next of kin.
  - b) The fact that a suicide note exists may also be acknowledged without further comment. The content of such notes is personal and confidential and shall not be released except as provided by law.

## SPECIAL CONSIDERATION - NONCRIMINAL MATTERS

- 1) At the scene of significant accidents, man-made or natural catastrophes, the principles of media cooperation shall mission of the police, fire, medical, or other emergency relief workers.
- 2) Media access to and movement within fire lines shall be controlled by the fire officer in charge. In consultation with the fire officer in charge, the ranking police officer at the scene shall establish an observation point from which the media may observe and photograph the incident. At the discretion of the officer in charge, an inner perimeter may be established for the media from which to record the event.
- 3) News media representatives should not be prevented from access to any area solely because of the possibility of their injury or death. If this is the only consideration, the media representative should be advised of the danger and allowed to make the decision to enter on his/her own volition.
- 4) Information relating to internal investigations of GCSO employees shall only be released by the Sheriff or Undersheriff.
- 5) Daily administrative reports of criminal activity will be made available on a routine basis to media representatives. Statistical reports of criminal activity will also be made available to the media.
- 6) Media representatives shall be denied access to the contents of investigative or incident reports and records where release of the information would:
  - a) interfere with law enforcement proceedings, including pending investigations;
  - b) deprive a person of the right to a fair trial or an impartial adjudication, or give one party to a controversy an undue advantage by exclusive access to such information;
  - c) constitute an unwarranted invasion of the personal privacy rights of another person;
  - d) reveal the identity of an individual who has furnished information to the department under confidential circumstances;
  - e) disclose investigative techniques and procedures, thereby impairing future effectiveness of the department; or
  - f) endanger the life or physical safety of any person.

# AMBER ALERTS

RCW 13.60.010

All elements 1 through 5 (below) should be satisfied, after considering all the facts and circumstances of the incident, for the incident to qualify as an AMBER Alert.

- 1) The child is under eighteen (18) years of age, is known to be abducted, and is not a runaway or throw away from home.
- 2) The abducted child is believed to be in danger of death or serious bodily injury.
- 3) The AMBER Alert activation should occur within 4 hours of the event qualifying under the criteria as an AMBER Alert, unless circumstances or the timeliness of the information warrant otherwise.
- 4) There must be enough descriptive information available to believe that an AMBER Alert activation will assist in the recovery of the child. (Must include as much of the following information as possible.)
  - a) Where the abduction took place;
  - b) A specific physical description of the child [can include clothing worn when last seen; height; weight; age; hair and eye color; hair length; any additional distinguishing physical characteristics];
  - c) A physical description of the abductor [can include approximate height; weight; hair color/length; eye/skin color; clothing; any distinguishing physical characteristics];
  - d) Place last seen;
  - e) Description of the vehicle [color, make, model, license number, approximate year (older, newer)].
- 5) The incident must be reported to and investigated by a law enforcement agency.

Often runaways and custodial disputes do not qualify to be AMBER alerts. These restrictions are in place so that the system is not devalued. Obviously, if the public is inundated with AMBER alerts, they become less effective.

## ACTIONS:

- 1) Obtain a photograph of the missing person and/or suspect as soon as possible
- 2) Appoint a Public Information Officer (PIO) to handle the press. Once the advisory has been activated, media coverage may be overwhelming, especially for a small department. The PIO should be constantly updated and encouraged to utilize the media as much as possible and receive the maximum exposure for the case. Activating agencies may contact the Washington State Patrol Government and Media Relations Office to request assistance.
- 3) The investigating agency or their dispatch center must ensure they are prepared to handle a high volume of phone calls. Consider allocating additional resources.

# ENDANGERED MISSING PERSON ADVISORIES

RCW 13.60.010 and 13.60.050

The EMPA is initiated by law enforcement agencies using the following criteria:

- 1) The person is missing under unexplained, involuntary, or suspicious circumstances; **and**
- 2) The person is believed to be in danger because of age, health, mental or physical disability (as defined in RCW 71A.10.020(4) or vulnerable adult as defined in RCW 74.34.020(17), in combination with environmental or weather conditions, or is believed to be unable to return to safety without assistance; **and**
- 3) There is enough descriptive information that could assist in the safe recovery of the missing person. (Include as much of the following as possible.)
  - a) *For missing person* - photo; height; weight; age; hair and eye color; hair length; race; any distinguishing physical characteristics; clothing worn when last seen; vehicle, if any, to include color, make, model, license number, approximate year (older, newer); location last seen, etc.).
  - b) *For possible subjects/suspects* - same descriptive information as above.
- 4) The incident has been reported to and investigated by a law enforcement agency.

## ACTIONS:

- 1) Obtain a photograph of the missing person and/or suspect as soon as possible
- 2) Appoint a Public Information Officer (PIO) to handle the press. Once the advisory has been activated, media coverage may be overwhelming, especially for a small department. The PIO should be constantly updated and encouraged to utilize the media as much as possible and receive the maximum exposure for the case. Activating agencies may contact the Washington State Patrol Government and Media Relations Office to request assistance.
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# BASICS OF CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

## FOR INTERNAL CRISES

*"When facing an already difficult crisis, the last thing a company needs is to make it worse through its own communications – or lack thereof.  
– Norm Augustine, Former Chairman and CEO, Lockheed Martin Corp.*



Prodrome	Acute Crisis	Chronic Crisis	Resolution
Vulnerability Analysis & Mitigation	Tension, Plateau, Mobilization, Operation	Adaptation, Feedback	Resolution, Recon

The immediate goal to any crisis situation is to hasten to the resolution phase. The overarching goal of any crisis management situation is to turn the crisis into an advantage for the Sheriff, the department, the staff or the population as a whole.

- 1) Identify the crisis
- 2) Isolate the crisis
- 3) Manage the crisis

**Hypothetical sample scenario:** A department-owned assault rifle goes missing from inventory. The rifle’s absence is discovered during a routine inventory of weapons. After an exhaustive internal investigation, the weapon is not found and the department turns the investigation over to another law enforcement agency.

**Identify the Crisis:** The crisis is the loss of a dangerous weapon.

**Isolate the Crisis:** The crisis is the reputation of the agency and its ability to manage an inventory of weapons. The crisis is *not* the investigation. The investigation has been turned over to another agency.

**Manage the Crisis:** The messaging of the crisis is focused on apology, acceptance of responsibility, and a pledge to fix whatever problem caused the rifle to go missing.