



Horry County Media Policy

Summary: It is important to present information clearly, accurately, courteously and promptly. County employees who are contacted by the media should refer them to the County's Public Information Officer or their Department Head immediately, before responding to the reporter's questions. Employees who receive a call from a media representative that has been directed to them by the Public Information Officer are encouraged to respond to the reporter's questions and then follow up with the Public Information Officer.

I. Purpose/Scope

Horry County government is becoming a more visible organization in the state and region. This visibility draws increasing attention from citizens, and from members of the media who act on behalf of the general public.

Communicating with the public, sometimes through the media, is an important function of government. Citizens have a right to know what we do as county employees, and the media offers opportunities to communicate about what we do to those who need or use our services or programs, and to those who help pay for them.

Again, it is important to present information clearly, accurately, courteously and promptly. **The County Administrator intends that contacts with members of the media be centralized so that information about Horry County, intended for a general public audience, can be communicated with consistent, uniform and comprehensive messages.** This is particularly critical in responding to unsolicited inquiries from media representatives on complex or controversial issues. Designating a central point for incoming and outgoing media contacts also offers the benefit of establishing rapport and developing professional relationships with media representatives.

In Horry County, the Public Information Officer is the designated liaison between the County and the media. The Public Information Officer works under the direct supervision of the County

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Administrator and in cooperation with Division Directors and Department Heads. Deciding what information to share with the media varies depending on circumstances, but is critical because what is shared can create a long-term impression among citizens about the work, employees, policies, or programs and services of Horry County government.

Note: As per state law, this policy does not apply to appointed and elected officials or their employees. However it is encourage that they adhere to the “spirit” of this policy.

The Horry County Police Department and Horry County Fire/Rescue have designated Public Information Officers who handle their department’s media relations. They have separate media policies, which follow the “spirit” of the countywide media policy.

The Horry County Public Information Officer is the senior Public Information Officer for the County and may be called upon by the County Administrator and/or the Public Safety Division Director to lead media relations during any type of situation and has the authority to assume direction of all County public information officers for the purpose of providing information to the public.

Definitions

“Media” means members of organizations who report news, including information about programs or services of government or decisions by County Council, to citizens. It includes reporters, producers, editors, news directors, editorial writers, columnists, researchers and interns who work for television, radio, weekly newspaper, daily newspaper, cable, or Internet news organizations with a local, state or national audience.

“Deadlines” refer to how much time media representatives have to gather and shape information they’re preparing before it must be completed for publication or broadcast. Television news reporters, and some daily newspaper reporters, often have deadlines of only hours before their work must be completed.

For the purposes of this policy, the term “reporters” will be used to generally describe employees of media organizations who seek information from Horry County.

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II. General Information and Procedures

This media policy concerns two common situations:

- Reporters who need information and contact the Public Information Officer, or
- Reporters who contact staff directly without first working through the Public Information Officer.

If reporters contact the Public Information Officer to begin with, they are choosing to honor the County's media policy.

- Under direction from the County Administrator and Division Directors, the Public Information Officer will provide the information she is aware of that is appropriate and pertinent.
- If the reporter needs more detailed information, the Public Information Officer may ask her/him to contact another staff person directly, typically a Department Head, who is knowledgeable about the subject under discussion. If time allows, the Public Information Officer will alert that person about a pending reporter call via email or voicemail.
- In that circumstance, employees are encouraged to respond to reporters' questions as soon as possible. Employees who have conversations or interviews with reporters in these circumstances should have a follow-up conversation with the Public Information Officer and their Division Director to debrief on the conversation.
- Prompt responses are important to reporters, especially those who work in the electronic media and may have a deadline only hours away. However, before an employee provides a response to a reporter's questions, they should be confident that the answer is accurate. Sometimes reporter questions require research and cannot be answered immediately. Staff should let the Public Information Officer know how much time will be required to answer the questions or obtain requested documents.
- Department Heads who are not comfortable talking to members of the media, or those who have little experience in doing so, may contact the Public Information Officer for tips on conducting successful media interviews. (See *Talking with the Media Handbook*) Employees who are contacted after being referred by the Public Information Officer, but

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- believe they are not the best person to provide information, should tell the reporter they will contact the reporter when they have obtained the necessary information. Then the employees should discuss the situation with the Public Information Officer.

If reporters contact staff directly, the employee should first ask whether the caller was referred by the County Public Information Officer.

- If the answer is “no”, staff members are expected to avoid entering into an interview immediately and instead, should forward the person to their Department Head or the Public Information Officer to learn more from the reporter about what they’re working on.
- If you are taking a message for your Department Head you should ask the media representative specifically what information they seek, what type of article is being prepared, how to contact them and what their deadlines are.
- Next, the staff person should immediately contact his/her Department Head and the Public Information Officer, to jointly work out a response or alternate strategy. Because of the need to respect media deadlines, the Public Information Officer can be easily reached in the office at 915-5390 or by cell at 455-0117.

III. Crisis Communications/Emergencies

With regard to this policy, crisis communications or emergencies are those situations that have the potential to attract news media attention for Horry County and/or its departments/core businesses, or situations that put residents’ safety and/or well being at immediate risk and require the assistance of the news media to disseminate information to the public. ***This will also include those events that receive regional and national media attention.***

In cases where Horry County Emergency Management has been activated in response to a community crisis, the Horry County Public Information Officer will take the lead for the County in managing all media relations. In the event of a community emergency deemed by the County Administrator and the Public Safety Director, the Public Information Officer has the authority to assume direction of all County public information officers for the purpose of providing information to the public about the emergency, through media relations. In addition, during such crisis, all media relations involving Horry County government including those not related to the crisis will be coordinated through the Public Information Officer. This procedure will allow the highest priority messages to be delivered to the news media during this time.

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In cases of a crisis or emergency that does not involve Horry County Emergency Management, the Public Information Officer should be informed of the situation as soon as possible.

IV. Additional Information

It is important that all media contacts to Horry County be centralized so information that is communicated is consistent and uniform. Individual employees may not be aware of the total range of information that is available about a particular issue. They might not discern the depth or nature of a reporter's interest. The Public Information Officer can provide that context.

Reporters have no legal or ethical obligation to honor our standing request that they contact the County Public Information Officer when they need information about county government. If they do so, they benefit by saving time; they get accurate, timely information quickly or are referred to the appropriate staff person as a resource who can provide the necessary information. However, as reporters prepare work products that involve Horry County government, they learn which county staff are "experts" on certain public policy issues, programs or services that are of interest to them; reporters keep names, titles and telephone numbers for those staff for easy reference and may call upon those sources directly at their next opportunity.

Some reporters who are unfamiliar with Horry County government and are unaware of the Public Information Officer position **often call departments directly seeking answers to their questions.** It is not unusual for reporters to contact several employees simultaneously when seeking the same information; if all of those calls are returned and answers are not coordinated by a central source, chances are good that subtle or even significant differences between answers may occur.

Reporters occasionally request information that is comprehensive, encompassing large numbers of documents, requiring a great deal of policy background or history research, or that concerns sensitive legal issues. **In those cases, it is recommended that employees get the request for information in writing.** Reporters often shorten or clarify their request when they put it in writing.

In some cases with media contacts, judgment is appropriate: routine, non-controversial, simple facts can be provided (such as library locations, jail visiting hours, etc.) without first contacting the Public Information Officer. But even simple questions from reporters, such as seeking meeting times or content of agendas, could signal a greater interest for the reporter that, if detected, should be passed along to the Public Information Officer.

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If staff are misquoted: Employees who are interviewed by the media and subsequently believe the media representative misquoted them, misled the media audience or misunderstood information given to them, they should discuss the situation with the Public Information Officer before taking any further action.

Promoting good news: Staff who wishes to proactively promote an event, program, service or other aspect of County government should work with the Public Information Officer before contacting media representatives. Proactive media relations include preparing news releases, holding news conferences, pitching news story ideas, and staging special events to attract news media coverage.

Legal requirements: In general, Horry County employees should respond to media requests for information in the same way as if the request came from any other citizen. We must respond within a reasonable amount of time. We must allow citizens (and reporters) access to inspect (look at) information on site, and we should inform them about the meaning of the information. There are no firm definitions for a “reasonable” amount of time, or for what it means to inform citizens of what the information means that was requested.

Under state law, we do not have to create information we do not have. If we have information in a specific format, we are not required to produce it in a different format to meet a citizen or reporter’s request. In some circumstances, we are allowed to charge for copies when requested and for staff time required to produce information.

For more information about the **South Carolina Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)** refer to Horry County’s FOIA Policy.

Exceptions

Although this policy is intended to be applicable to all situations, it is acknowledged that unique situations may arise requiring procedures that are not consistent with this policy. In those situations, exceptions to this policy will be addressed by the County Administrator, the Division Directors and/or the Public Information Officer on a case-by-case basis.

--The County Administrator and the Division Directors adopted this policy on February 1, 2006.