

**Cobb County Police Department**

**Policy 6.03**

**PUBLIC INFORMATION**

<b>Effective Date:</b> January 12, 2013
<b>Rescinds:</b> Policy 6.03 (July 20, 2012)
<b>Related Orders:</b> Policy 6.10 “Ride-Along Program”
<b>Issued By:</b> Chief J.R. Houser <span style="float: right;"><b>Page 1 of 5</b></span>
The words “he, his, him,” which may appear in this policy, are used generically for clarity and ease of reading. These terms are not meant to imply gender and relate to all employees of the Department.

The Cobb County Police Department recognizes that police activities are of public interest. The purpose of this policy is to ensure the smooth flow of information to the news media and to ensure that such information is released in compliance with federal, state and local laws.

**I. POLICY**

It is the policy of this Department to disclose available information concerning police activity when permissible and as promptly as circumstances permit. At no time will information be released prematurely, nor will information be withheld for the exclusive benefit of any individual reporter or segment of the news media.

**II. PIO NOTIFICATION**

The Public Information Officer is to be immediately notified of the following incidents by the Supervisor or Incident Commander:

- Homicide or malicious wounding with serious injury.
- Confirmed abductions.
- Barricade or hostage situation.
- Special Weapons and Tactics Team (S.W.A.T.) activations.
- Major raids conducted.
- Robbery of financial institutions.
- Property crime with a stolen value in excess of \$50,000.
- Major transportation crashes, i.e. aircraft, trains, or buses.
- Death by any other cause than natural or suicide.
- Traffic crashes involving pedestrians or fatalities.
- Bombings where a device is found or mass evacuation occurs.
- Arrest of suspects in any homicide, rape, or armed robbery.
- Escape of any suspect in police custody.
- Incidents involving an individual of public interest by virtue of their position.

- Any incident involving the use of deadly force by an officer
- Injury to an officer which requires transport to a hospital.
- Any incident where there may be a question as to the agency's liability.
- Natural or man-made disasters resulting in death, multiple injuries, or extensive property damage.
- Any event that has or potentially will attract media attention or be of great concern to the public.

### **III. INTERACTION WITH THE MEDIA**

The news media may photograph and report anything they observe when legally present at an emergency or crime scene.

- A.** Members of this Department will not prevent the photographing of defendants when they are in public places, however, they will not permit the deliberate posing of a person in custody. Officers will neither encourage nor discourage photographing or televising of persons in custody.
- B.** When publication or broadcast would interfere with an investigation, or place a suspect, victim, or others in jeopardy, the Commanding Officer at the scene, or the Public Information Officer, will explain the situation to the news media representatives and request that they withhold the story or certain components of the investigation. Withholding broadcast or publication is dependent upon a cooperative press, not censorship by the Department.
- C.** Personnel of the Department will not interfere with a reporter's activities as long as those activities remain within the confines of the law and boundaries of Department policy. No member of this Department shall forcibly take audio/video recording equipment, cameras, film/tapes, phones, notes, records, etc. from a member of the media present at any incident scene. If the media has information that could be considered or used as evidence, the PIO will be notified.
- D.** In the event of a major incident, crime, or disaster where police lines are established for crowd control and the preservation of evidence, the following guidelines will be followed:
  - 1. Initially, the media will only be permitted in those areas established for the general public. As soon as possible, a media contact area should be established. Reporters and camera crews should be asked to gather at this point and given instructions as to the operational format for briefings.
  - 2. The Commanding Officer of an incident may authorize closer access to the media than that which may be granted to the general public. News media vehicles and equipment may be located at points nearer the scene than permitted by normal traffic control, but such locations shall be at the discretion of the Incident Commander and Public Information Officer.

Special media access shall not be granted if it will interfere with emergency operations. All media representatives will be granted the same privileges, regardless of their affiliation.

3. Statements and interviews concerning the situation should be released from the media contact point only. Regular briefings should be held throughout the incident to keep the public informed.
  4. Only the Chief's Office, Public Information Officer, Incident Commander, or a designee, will be authorized to release information concerning the incident.
  5. Upon completion of on-scene police investigations, only the owner, legal occupant, or their agents may grant permission to the media to enter private dwellings or the surrounding curtilage to gather news.
- E.** Incidents involving unprofessional or discourteous actions of the news media should be brought to the attention of the Public Information Officer or Chief's Office. If the nature of the complaint is significant, the Chief's Office or the Public Information Officer will contact the reporter's news agency and relay the complaint.

#### **IV. RELEASE OF INFORMATION**

Generally, the PIO is responsible for the release of information for all media inquiries that are not filed under the Georgia Open Records Act. His duty is to serve as the primary point of contact for news media representatives.

##### **A. Active Incidents**

In the absence or pending arrival of the Public Information Officer, the Incident Commander of any scene, or his designee, may release pertinent, verified preliminary information to the news media such as:

1. Location and type of incident.
2. Confirmation of arrest.
3. Identity of arresting agencies.
4. The suspect's age and sex.
5. The victim's age and sex.

Request for more detailed information will be referred to the Public Information Officer.

##### **B. Past Incidents**

When a media inquiry is made concerning an incident/investigation that the Public Information Officer does not respond to, a supervisor familiar with the incident/investigation may release the following information:

1. Location and type of incident.
2. Confirmation of arrest.
3. Identity of arresting officers and agencies.
4. The suspect's name, age, sex, and address if 17 years old or older.
5. The suspect's age, sex, and general area of residence if under the age of 17.
6. The victim's name, age, sex, and address if 17 years old or older.
7. The victim's age, sex, and general area of residence if under the age of 17.
8. Confirmation of the presence of witnesses, but no witness information.
9. Request for assistance in obtaining evidence, when approved by the lead investigator or supervisor.
10. Composite sketches, photos, video, or other images of suspects, victims, and witnesses, when approved by the lead investigator or supervisor.
11. Announcement of seizure of any evidence except confessions, when approved by the lead investigator or supervisor.

If more detailed incident information is requested by the media, the Public Information Officer should be consulted.

- C. Employees not directly responsible for an investigation will not release any information that is not indicated on an official Public Information Release form without the approval of the responsible investigator or higher authority.

## **V. MAJOR INCIDENT FORM**

Supervisors, or a designee, will initiate a Major Incident Form on incidents that may be of interest to the press or public. These forms should be completed by the end of the shift of occurrence and forwarded to the Public Information Office, Chief's Office, Bureau Deputy Chief, and Division, Unit, or Precinct Commander.

## **VI. PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER**

The Public Information Officer shall serve as the primary point of contact for news media representatives. He will be available for on-call responses to the scenes of major incidents and to respond to news media inquiries. The Public Information Officer is responsible for, at a minimum:

- A. Assisting media personnel in covering news stories at the scenes of incidents.
- B. Preparing and distributing agency media releases.
- C. Arranging for, and assisting at media conferences.
- D. Coordinating and authorizing the release of information about victims, witnesses, and suspects.

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- E.** Coordinating and authorizing the release of information concerning confidential agency investigations and operations.
- F.** Coordinating the release of information at all major incidents involving the Department. Where more than one agency is involved, the agency having primary jurisdiction should be responsible for coordinating and releasing information.
- G.** Ensuring periodic surveys of local media are conducted to determine the level of relations between the Department and the media, and possible methods for improving the flow of information. The Department should involve the media in the development of changes in policies and procedures relating to the public information function.
- H.** Coordinating with investigators and supervisors before releasing information concerning ongoing investigations.
- I.** Consulting with the Chief's Office prior to arranging feature segments concerning individual officers, detectives, units, or the Department at large.
- J.** Maintaining records of news reports involving Cobb County Police activities, and notifying the Chief's Office of news reports which portray the Department in a negative manner.
- K.** Coordinating reporter ride-alongs in accordance with Policy 6.10 "Ride-Along Program."
- L.** Generating Public Information Releases (PIRs) about significant events/incidents that involve Department activities/investigations. The PIRs will be sent internally to all Department of Public Safety and Medical Examiner employees, and externally to media personnel. PIRs will be made available to the general public.