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S.O.P. #: 400-15

SUBJECT: RELEASE OF INFORMATION AND MEDIA RELATIONS

DIVISION: EMERGENCY OPERATIONS

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Objective: Guidelines for releasing information and handling media relations.

Section 1: Departmental Responsibility

- A. The Fire Department recognizes the public's right to know about many of its activities. The Department has an obligation to comply with legal requirements regarding the release of information, and to take reasonable steps to protect an individual's personal privacy as defined by statute. The Department recognizes its responsibility to provide accurate, timely information to the public, including the media, about matters of public interest.

Section 2: Release of Information

- A. The Chief of the Department, through the Fire Department's Office of Public Affairs and Public Information Officers, authorizes the release of all information relating to incidents, initiatives and all other departmental matters. The Chief of the Department also authorizes the release of certain limited information from the Administrative Duty Officer (ADO) as part of his/her daily duties at Fire Dispatch. The release of information by persons not specifically authorized by the Fire Chief or his designee is strictly prohibited.
- B. "Information" includes interviews, social media postings and public records as defined by the Maryland Public Information Act (MPIA) and other relevant laws. Under the MPIA, public records are documentary material in any form created or received by an agency in connection with the transaction of public business. This includes e-mail, social media postings, written reports, books, audiotapes, photographs, records, computerized records, maps, drawings, microfilms, video, electronic communications, and any information produced via any other medium. Exceptions under the MPIA apply. Fire Department information will be released in accordance with MPIA and other relevant laws.

Section 3: Office of Public Affairs

A. Office of Public Affairs

1. Serves as official voice of the Fire Department
2. Advises Fire Chief, commanders and other members on media relations, public relations and messages
3. Provides timely, factual information about breaking news and department incidents, initiatives, investigations, policies, statistics and other matters via approved department platforms and mainstream media
4. Trains, oversees and manages Public Information Officers to ensure 24/7 coverage of breaking news situations
5. Oversees all Department-approved web-based and social media platforms, including compliance with Baltimore County and Department web and social media policies
6. Participates in communications strategy and strategic messaging

7. Drafts policy regarding the release of information and use of official platforms
8. Facilitates Maryland Public Information Act requests
9. Manages media requests
10. Organizes and oversees press briefings and Departmental events
11. Assists and/or supervises dissemination of public information during Emergency Operations Center activations
12. Coordinates dissemination of information with other agencies, as needed on official Departmental platforms
13. Develops and produces image-building and explanatory information for use on official Departmental platforms
14. Assists with community outreach and education

**B. Public Information Officers and Newsworthy Scenes/Incidents**

1. Public information officers (PIOs) are designated by the Fire Chief and/or Director of Public Affairs to provide confirmed, official information to the general public, including media representatives.
2. PIOs will receive prompt notification from Fire Dispatch about the following types of emergency incidents:
  - a. Working and multi-alarm fires
  - b. Fire or other incidents at schools and other high-profile locations
  - c. Tactical and heavy rescues
  - d. Significant motor vehicle crashes
  - e. Significant incidents involving other modes of transportation
  - f. Carbon monoxide incidents involving illness
  - g. Community emergencies (e.g. weather, water main breaks, gas leaks, hazardous materials)
  - h. EOC activations
  - i. Any incident generating significant media interest

**C. Per SOP 300-03, the ADO is authorized to assist the PIO by providing certain limited information to the media about incidents in progress:**

1. Location of incident.
2. Incident type and alarm level; e.g., “dwelling fire” or “vehicular accident with rescue”.
3. Time call was dispatched.
4. Time incident was placed under control (only if asked).
5. General information about patient injuries and transports – e.g., “Crews have transported an adult male to shock trauma with life-threatening injuries.” Various state and federal statutes prohibit the release of specific medical information.
6. Names will not be released under any circumstances
7. The ADO will refer callers to the PIO about the causes of fires and other incidents. He/she will not speculate on causes of incidents.
8. The ADO will refer requests about past incidents to the PIO
9. The ADO will not confirm civilian or sworn fatalities

D. The PIO will provide information about newsworthy events (including multi-alarm fires, significant rescues, community emergencies and incidents involving injury or death) via approved social media channels. PIOs will not confirm fatalities until authorized by Baltimore County Police that next of kin has been notified and that such confirmation will not harm any active investigation

E. PIOs will respond to emergency scenes at his/her discretion, or at the request of the Incident Commander

1. Prior to the arrival of the PIO at a newsworthy incident, the Incident Commander may establish a media staging area. This area should be located to prevent media interference with the emergency response and in accordance with safety protocols, but should whenever possible allow a visual perspective of the scene. The media's access and proximity to an incident always should be equal or greater to that of the general public.
2. Citizens equipped with cameras will not be treated differently from other bystanders when restricting access to a scene or when managing a crowd.
3. PIO will consult with the Incident Commander and the Police Arson Investigator about the dissemination of information regarding fires requiring investigation.
4. In cases where the PIO does not respond to a scene, the Incident Commander will manage the on-scene dissemination of departmental information to the news media.
5. PIOs and Incident Commanders will not confirm fatalities until authorized by Baltimore County Police that next of kin has been notified and that such confirmation will not harm any active investigation.
6. Fire service personnel will refer all requests for interviews, information, photographs or access to the scene to the Public Information Officer or the Incident Commander.
7. The Department will grant the media reasonable access to incident scenes. The PIO or the Incident Commander will oversee media access in coordination with the Police Department.
8. Fire personnel cannot grant media representatives or third parties access to private property. Private property owners or their representatives must grant such access.

F. All non-emergent requests for information by mainstream or other media shall be referred to the PIO.

G. Information will be released, without partiality, to all media representatives. Specific media inquiries made independently by media representatives will be honored and will not be shared with competitors.

H. Unauthorized release of information is strictly prohibited.

#### Section 4: Investigations, Discipline, Personnel Matters

A. Release of internal investigations, disciplinary actions or other personnel matters is prohibited. The existence of an investigation may be acknowledged.

#### Section 5: Maryland Public Information Act (MPIA) Requests

Requests for information made under the Maryland Public Information Act or as part of a lawsuit in which the County is a party should be forwarded to the Fire Department Records Office.

1. Because the Maryland Public Information Act requires a County response within 10 days, requests should be referred to the Records Office as soon as they are received.
2. The Director of the Office Public Affairs should be notified of MPIA requests from media representatives.

#### Section 6: Use of Social Media Platforms

Per Baltimore County's Social Media Policy (<http://bcnet.co.ba.md.us/agencies/infotech/policies/socialmedia.html>) Department information is provided on official web and social media platforms approved by The County Administrative Officer after review of a business plan provided by the requestor.

Per Baltimore County's Social Media Use Policy, Department personnel are not authorized to post content to official web and social media platforms unless authorized by the Fire Chief and/or the Director of the Office of Public Affairs. The Director of the Office of Public Affairs oversees the Department's official social media platform.