

The Richland County Sheriff's Department  
5623 Two Notch Road  
Columbia, South Carolina 29223

[www.rcsd.net](http://www.rcsd.net)

*Leon Lott,*  
Sheriff



## Media Relations Handbook

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## **Media Relations Handbook**

An external and internal guide

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## **THE MEDIA AND THE SHERIFF'S DEPARTMENT**

Effective media relations are a very important component to the overall success of our Department and the hallmark to any successful law enforcement agency. The media is our connection to the public and we need the media in order to be effective in reducing the fear of crime and preventing crime.

Our daily interaction with the news media makes it imperative that we build a relationship of mutual trust and respect. Although we may not always agree with their objectives, we must never permit our personal views to cloud our professional judgments. TRUST is what it boils down to. The news media must learn to trust law enforcement and in turn law enforcement must trust the media. When dealing with the news media we should always strive to be honest, courteous, and professional. If we maintain these standards, we will continue to move forward in improving the quality of life for our citizens.

It is imperative that we understand that the news media is the driving force in shaping public opinion. This is the reason it is vitally important for the Richland County Sheriff's Department to ensure that all information distributed to the public through the media be fair and accurate. Our department must recognize that the media has a right to do their jobs and we are doing a disservice to ourselves and our citizens if we do not work closely and well with the media.

There are two components to this media relations guide:

- 1) the guidelines for the Department in dealing with the media
- 2) the guidelines for the media in dealing with the Sheriff's Department

The following guidelines should assist you in your day-to-day contacts with news reporters, photographers, editors and producers. Of course, situations may arise that are not covered in the list below. If a reporter places you in a situation in which you aren't comfortable, you can politely defer the question to the office of public information, regardless of the time of day. Please make sure that if you have a problem with a reporter, , photographers, editors and producers a concern or question to notify the on-call PIO immediately.

### **How can I help maintain the relationship with the media? :**

Becoming an employee of the Richland County Sheriff's Department means that you have accepted a position of trust and that you will be held to a high standard of professional accountability communication and teamwork. You are never off duty and your behavior always reflects the department. The news media are public watchdogs and have an obligation to report unscrupulous behavior. Anytime that law enforcement violates the public trust, the public and the media lose confidence in us. In order to assist the department with media relations, always be professional and courteous, remembering that you are a public official and will be held accountable for your actions.

News reporters are professionally trained and should be treated with the same respect that we bestow on our citizens. Like us, they have a job to do and superiors to answer to when the job doesn't get done. We must always provide the media with credible information so the public can make informed decisions. If the media can't trust us for information they will find other sources for the information that may be less reliable.

### **WHEN THE MEDIA CALLS ABOUT A SPECIFIC EVENT**

- 1.** If a reporter calls about a specific incident (armed robbery, shooting, homicide, etc..), you can acknowledge to them that this incident occurred at this time and at this location – in other words, you can give them the **what**, **where** and **when** of a specific event. The **who** and the **why** will come from the on-call PIO.
- 2.** If a reporter wants more details, then politely refer them to the on-call PIO.
- 3.** If a reporter calls to get confirmation on information they have regarding a specific event (such as confirmation on an arrest, name of a suspect or victim, type of weapon used in the crime, etc..), refer them to the on-call PIO.
- 4.** If a reporter calls and asks you about something you are not aware of (i.e. an event going on in Richland County like a chase or armed robbery) call that regional supervisor on the radio and ask them to confirm (on channel 10) if there is an incident going on that you/the Staff Duty/PIO need to be aware of.

## **WHEN THE MEDIA REQUESTS GENERAL INFORMATION**

If a reporter inquires, “Is there anything going on?”, or “Did anything important happen overnight?”, politely refer them to the on-call PIO. We have explained to the news media that it is not the deputies’ duty to determine “what is” and “what isn’t” newsworthy and that RCSD has a policy that if it is going on that the PIO will release it.

## **MUG SHOTS**

- 1.** If the media requests a mug shot, warrant or booking information – please refer them to the Jail or the Richland County Administration PIO.
- 2.** If the media requests a color mug shot on another jurisdiction’s case, then politely refer them to the other jurisdiction.

## **INCIDENT REPORTS**

If the media requests an incident report on a case not in the “media box” at the front desk, you should contact the on-call PIO before releasing that report to them. Sometimes these reports will contain sensitive information that needs to be deleted before the media can have access to them.

## **Role of the media:**

The media has the right to gather facts and report their findings to the public. The public relies on the media for vital information everyday through many different vehicles (internet, television, radio and newspaper). The different media outlets have various deadlines, operating procedures and specific types of information that they need. The Midlands is a medium media market with four television stations, several weekly and monthly newspapers and more than 20 radio stations.

### **What information do the media have a right to have:**

- a. An arrestee's name, age, sex, race, nationality, residence, occupation, and marital status. Exceptions are juveniles of which only age and sex can be released.
- b. The charge for which the arrestee is being held.
- c. Identity of arresting officers (**except** undercover officers).
- d. Circumstances immediately surrounding an arrest; such as, time and place, resistance, pursuit, possession and use of weapons, other contraband, etc.
- e.
  - o Departmental computers/emails
  - o ALL telephone conversations
  - o Incident reports

Note: The media is not entitled to all information. There are legal standards in place that offer protection of the integrity of investigations or witnesses/victims. However, keep in mind that the media can help us tremendously with our investigations (recovery of missing persons, apprehension of suspects, prevention of crime).

### **Concerns, suggestions, issues or problems with the media:**

If you have a concern or issue with a reporter, photographers, editors and producers or media outlet, please notify the PIO or Uniform Division Deputy Chief immediately. If you have a suggestion on ways that we can improve our working relationship with the media, please notify the PIO immediately. If you have a story idea or suggestion on how we can educate the community, please notify the PIO.

## **When the media wants an interview or information:**

Keep in mind that interviews are not conversations. Never immediately start answering questions (think before you speak) and know what you want to say. Use two or three major points and keep them simple. Answers should be concise. Bridge to your point, and “I don’t know” is acceptable. Remember that notepad and camera are always on. Respect reporter deadlines.

1. Before the interview:
  - a. Interview the reporter
  - b. Negotiate when and where
  - c. Inform your supervisor and PIO
  - d. Determine the points the department wants to make
  - e. Rehearse
  - f. Ask yourself are you the right person to do the interview
  
2. During the interview:
  - a. Look at the reporter
  - b. How you appear is important
  - c. Answers should be concise
  - d. Bridge to the department's/your points
  - e. Stay calm and in control
  
3. After the interview:
  - a. Evaluate your answers
  - b. Provide requested information
  - c. Report concerns to your supervisor and PIO
  - d. Watch, read and listen to the story
  - e. Remember competence, confidence, clarity

## **Media Access to Crime Scenes:**

Protecting the integrity of the crime scene is a priority after the initial call for service has been handled. It is important to understand that at any crime scene, the media are not entitled to any greater access than the general public.

1. Departmental personnel will not interfere with the lawful activities of the news media at crime scenes or other locations. At the least, the media is allowed the same access as the general public. In an effort to maintain good relations and keep the public informed, the media may be allowed slightly more access than the public, but not to the point where they interfere with the discharge of officer duties.
2. Members of the media will not be allowed access to any area where there is a presence of evidence and the evidence may be destroyed, damaged, or altered. Once the scene has been processed, and the evidence preserved, it will be up to the discretion of the PIO or the Supervisor in charge to allow access to the media.
3. The media will not be allowed in any area where their presence would jeopardize the safety of department personnel or citizens, or would disrupt the tactical operations of the department.
4. As long as the media is in a designated area, department personnel cannot dictate to the media what pictures or video can be taken. It is not our job to instruct them on what should or shouldn't be shown on television, in the newspaper or on the internet.
5. Department personnel will not deny media interviews with a victim who is willing to give an interview unless the victim is injured, emotionally out of control or otherwise not capable of making sound decisions.

**The following is the procedures for media in receiving information from The Richland County Sheriff's Department:**

- Please keep in mind that Sheriff Leon Lott has created a fulltime staff of public information personnel that stand ready, 24 hours a day 7 days a week, to assist the media and to keep the public informed.
- Press Box is updated when major incidents occur or when incidents happen overnight; which is done by 8:00 AM Monday through Friday and by 10:00 AM on weekends and holidays:

**576-1446** - dial straight and a voice message will start immediately

- The Desk Sergeant is available 24/7. If a reporter/producer hears something on the scanner or wants to verify if something specific is going on please contact them directly by calling:

**576-3102**

The desk sergeant will verify information or suggest contacting the PIO depending on the incident or if the desk is not aware of the specific request.

- PIO on call pager  
**988-6018**
- Please note that if information is needed right away, please page the PIO

**Points of Contact in the Office of Public Information:**

- Lt. Chris Cowan 518-1780/email [ccowan@rcsd.net](mailto:ccowan@rcsd.net)
  - Sgt. Kim Myers 988-6018/309-1624/[kmyers@rcsd.net](mailto:kmyers@rcsd.net)
  - Asst. PIO Monique Mack [309-6398/mmack@rcsd.net](mailto:309-6398/mmack@rcsd.net)
- Office numbers are options but response to immediate requests or stories for that day need to go to the pager (use of a pager is necessary because there are still areas of the county that do not have cell phone coverage).

- **Press Releases will come from [rcsdnewsreleases@rcsd.net](mailto:rcsdnewsreleases@rcsd.net) – Please do not respond to or send emails this email address.**
- Statistical information requests (crime stats, calls for service numbers, specific crime trends, ect.) need to be made in writing (preferably by email) so that we can expedite your request of the information. Extensive requests are encouraged but may involve a fee depending on the time necessary to obtain the information (and need to be made during normal business hours due to hours of operation of the Records Department and GIS Unit.)
- Incident report requests are encouraged but need to be made during normal business hours due to hours of operation of the Records Department and GIS Unit.
- Copies of warrants, photographs of those arrested and housed at Alvin S. Glenn or booking information – these requests should be made to AGDC or to Richland County's Office of Public Information (note that the County Jail and County Office of Public Information operate separate from the Sheriff and report to the County Administrator).
- FOI requests are not necessary but acceptable. If you need information please be specific on the request as to what you need and what the application of the information is. Please be aware that FOI requests will have a fee involved depending on the time it takes to pull the information and number of copies needing to be made.
- Please be aware that we have installed the below equipment in our press room (and also have similar availabilities in mobile form). We would ask that if you have new personnel or personnel that are not familiar with the equipment that you would contact the Office of Public Information for a tour and demonstration:

Digital and video connections on the exterior of the building that allow for camera connections in the press room – therefore there is no need to run cables in/out of the building. These connections are labeled (NBC, CBS, Fox, ABC, State Paper and there are enough connections for local and national and additional news outlets if need be).

Microphones with station flags on the podium (NBC, CBS, Fox, ABC and there are enough splitter connections for local and national if need be). There is no need to add additional microphones to the podium and they will be removed before news conferences if necessary.

Power point, internet, cable television and video surveillance capabilities; for the purposes of recording our press conferences and placement of raw footage on the internet.

**Effective media relations are a very important component to the overall success of our Department. The media is our connection to the public and we need the media in order to be effective in reducing the fear of crime and preventing crime.**

**In order for us to improve the quality of life for our citizens we will strive to have a positive and participatory relationship with the media. If the media has any suggestions on how we can improve the services that we provide, to you or the community, please do not hesitate to contact us. Thank you for working with us and helping us to make Richland County a great place to live and work.**



The consideration stated herein is contractual and the **Releaser** executes and delivers this **Release** after being fully informed of its terms, contents and effects.

**IN WITNESS WHEREOF**, the **Releaser** has executed this release on the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, in the year **200**\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_  
**Print Name of RELEASER**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date of Birth of **RELEASER**

\_\_\_\_\_  
Driver's License #

\_\_\_\_\_  
Address

\_\_\_\_\_  
Social Security #

\_\_\_\_\_  
City, State, Zip

Home Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
*Signature of RELEASER*

Work Phone: \_\_\_\_\_

***Ride along forms are good for 3 months. However you must make contact with the Office of Public Information prior to each ride along, for approval.***

**SWORN** before me this, the \_\_\_\_\_ day of \_\_\_\_\_, 200\_\_\_\_\_.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Notary Public for South Carolina

\_\_\_\_\_  
My Commission Expires

**Instructions to the Releaser:** Please complete this form and return it to the Office of Public Information at the Richland County Sheriff's Department PRIOR to the Ride Along. Upon the Sheriff's review/approval, you will be notified of approval and arrangements will be made to coordinate your ride with a Deputy. You will need to pick up a copy of your approved release form from a representative of the Richland County Sheriff's Department prior to your scheduled ride-a-long. This form must be given to the Deputy you ride with prior to entering a Sheriff's Department vehicle. Your identity will be verified by the Deputy you are scheduled to ride with.

\*\*\*\*\*ADMINISTRATIVE USE ONLY\*\*\*\*\*

APPROVED: \_\_\_\_\_  
LEON LOTT, SHERIFF of RICHLAND COUNTY

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

- 1. Background Check completed \_\_\_\_\_
- 2. Review/Approval by Sheriff \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Coordinate with Releaser issued a copy of approved form \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Ride-a-long scheduled for (date) \_\_\_\_\_ at (time) \_\_\_\_\_
- 5. Region/Person notified \_\_\_\_\_ (Date/time) \_\_\_\_\_
- 6. Copy of Release left at \_\_\_\_\_ (Date/Time) \_\_\_\_\_

**7. Note to Deputy participating in ride-a-long:** review the above information and verify the identity of the releaser. Please make sure that you understand that the Richland County Sheriff's Department does not assist in the media obtaining access to private property for the purposes of interviews, photographing/videography or general access



# Memorandum of Agreement between the Media and The Richland County Sheriff's Department

## Voluntary Guidelines for Live Coverage of Critical Incidents

### Purpose:

- 1) The protection of victims, citizen safety, media safety and officer safety.**
  - 2) Improve understanding for the media and the department on the others role in the event of crisis.**
  - 3) Provide service, by the media and public safety, to our citizens.**
  - 3) To improve the coverage of critical incidents and enhance coverage with all due consideration to the safety of everyone involved.**
- The news media agree to voluntarily restrict the live coverage of law enforcement tactical operations prior to the resolution of the incident, including the precise locations of S.W.A.T personnel such as sharpshooters, entry teams, and negotiators. The media also agree to voluntarily refrain from broadcasting live pictures of hostage takers and hostages when it is reasonable to assume that the suspect(s) may have access to media coverage.
  - The media agree to refrain from contacting hostage takers by telephone or any other means. If a hostage taker calls a media outlet, the media outlet agrees to keep the hostage taker on the telephone, while calling the law enforcement agency involved. The media outlet will not broadcast the telephone conversation until the resolution of the incident.
  - News helicopters will not be excluded from crisis incidents unless their presence is having a direct negative impact on hostage negotiations or officer safety, is affecting police communications, or the aircraft itself is in danger. Pilots are asked to maintain a safe minimum distance or 1000 feet elevation and one mile from the scene while covering these events. Distances may be modified by law enforcement commanders based on the specific threat presented.

-MORE-



- Law enforcement will establish the ground perimeter for media coverage as close to the incident as is safe. The media will not be excluded from any area in which the general public is allowed, and every effort will be made to allow reporters and photographers closer access, again taking into account the safety of all parties. Photography/videography from outside the police tape will NOT be restricted in any way. However please keep in mind that what you air may put people at risk. Please talk with the Public Information Officer to verify.
- The law enforcement agency in charge of the scene will provide a public information officer to disseminate information to the media during the course of the incident. The PIO will establish a media staging area where reporters can safely obtain information in a timely manner. From this location, the PIO will provide regular information updates, conduct interviews, and be available for questions from the media. The PIO will immediately notify media when the incident is resolved.
- This agreement places no restrictions on media reports after the incident has been resolved, including the use of video and photographs acquired during the crisis.

News Director/Managing Editor: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Sheriff Leon Lott \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## **Memorandum of Agreement MEDIA EMBEDDING PROGRAM**

### **MEDIA EMBEDDING PROGRAM**

This document contains both policies and procedures for embedding news media during \_\_\_\_\_ scheduled to take place \_\_\_\_\_. This document contains information for both the members of the Richland County Sheriff's Department and the media \_\_\_\_\_.

The sole purpose of embedding the media with law enforcement is so that the media can better understand the operations and mission of the department. In many cases this may allow for the media to get an inside look at how the department handles investigations, crisis situations and/or improving the quality of life for the citizens we are sworn to serve. Embedding may allow for the media to see how difficult situations are resolved and often times how critical incidents are handled. The goal of embedding the media is to create better relationships with the media and to help the media inform the public.

### **POLICY/PROCEDURES**

The Richland County Sheriff's Department's expectation is that media will have long-term, minimally restrictive access to several units and/or personnel during an investigation or specific event through Media Embedding.

The Public Information Office is responsible for managing Media Embeds. Embed opportunities will be assigned to Media Organizations not to individual reporters. The decision as to which media representative will fill assigned embed slots will be submitted by the Editor/Producer for each news organization and vetted by the Sheriff or his designee.

The Public Information Office will organize and facilitate access for the media. To accomplish this we will embed media with our units. These Embedded Media will work and travel as part of the units with which they are embedded to facilitate maximum, in-depth coverage. Operations Commanders and Public Information Officers will work together to balance the need for media access with the need for operational security.

A media embed is defined as a media representative remaining with a unit or personnel on an extended basis. During the event/embedding the media will have to agree in advance to full shifts or necessary allotted time needed for the personnel to complete their duties.

To ensure a full understanding of all operations media will be given access to operational missions, including mission preparation and debriefing, whenever possible.

When wishing to embed with the Sheriff's Department, the following information should be forwarded to Office of Public Information: NAME OF ORGANIZATION, TYPE OF MEDIA AND CONTACT INFORMATION INCLUDING BUREAU CHIEF/MANAGING EDITOR/NEWS DIRECTOR'S NAME; OFFICE, HOME AND CELL PHONE NUMBERS; PAGER NUMBERS AND EMAIL ADDRESSES.

ALL Embedded Media and News Organizations participating in this Embedding Program must sign an up to date, notarized ride along form – and forward it to the Office of Public Information so that it can be processed. The media should be aware that this will include a background check.

Members of the media will not make special arrangements or request from the unit or personnel that they are assigned to, directly. Nor will the Media make arrangements to embed prior to or during this event with anyone other than the Richland County Sheriff's Department.

If needed (due to multiple requests by different media outlets or a large scale event) specific assignments will be made on a rotating lottery system and each news organization will receive notification on those assignments prior to the event. These daily assignments will be given based on availability. If the media network representative does not want their assignment they can elect not to participate on that day. The Public Information Office should be notified if any media team would not be reporting to their assignment.

Members of the media will meet their assigned unit at the Sheriff's Department Headquarters, unless their assignment states a different location. They must have all their safety equipment with them at all times and adhere to their ride along form requirements. It is essential that they arrive at the designated assignment on time.

Unit Commanders can be authorized to directly coordinate with the media after assignment. Embedded Media operate as part of their assigned unit. An escort may be assigned at the discretion of the unit commander.

Unit Commanders will ensure the media are provided with every opportunity to observe actual operations. It is understood that the personal safety of media personnel could be in jeopardy during some operations.

**No communications equipment for use by the media in the conduct of their duties will be specifically prohibited. However, Unit Commanders may impose temporary restriction on transmissions for operational safety reasons.**

Having embedded media does not preclude contact with other media. However, embedded media, as a result of time invested with the unit, will have an enhanced level of access.

### **TERMINATION OF EMBED ASSIGNMENT**

The Unit Commander has the authority to terminate an embedded media representative's assignment. The media organization may appeal to the P.I.O. Commander but the final decision rests with the Unit Commander.

If for any reason a media representative cannot participate in an operation they will be transported back to the Sheriff's Department's Headquarters, as soon as possible.

By Participating in this Media Embedding Program, Media will agree to abide by the Policies and Procedures contained in this document. Embedded Media must also be aware of safety concerns and follow orders from their unit supervisor during any operation. **Failure to follow orders can result in the serious injury of death of a person.**

**ANY VIOLATION OF THESE POLICES OR PROCEDURES COULD RESULT IN TERMINATION OF THAT MEDIA'S EMBED OPPORTUNITY.**

### **SAFETY/PROTECTIVE GEAR/DRESS CODE**

**If during this event any embedded media is injured the Public Information Office must be notified immediately.**

### **PERSONAL/PROTECTIVE GEAR needed during a large scale event or operation**

The use of personal protective gear such as vest, helmets with a shield and gas masks is mandatory. Media will be responsible for procuring and using such equipment.

Personal protective gear as well as clothing will be subdued in color and appearance. No outward identification of media affiliation will be worn at any time unless designated by the Sheriff or his designee.

### **DRESS CODE**

For safety reasons and in order to better identify the Embedded Media during operations the media may be asked to wear long sleeve shirts, long pants, closed toe shoes and colored vests if the Sheriff or his designee feels appropriate

## **SENSITIVE INFORMATION**

The nature of the embedding process may involve observation of sensitive information, including unit movements, preparations, capabilities and vulnerabilities or other related information. When a Unit Commander has reason to believe that a media member will have access to this type of sensitive information, prior to allowing such access, he/she will take prudent precaution to ensure the security of that information. The primary safeguard will be to brief media in advance that some of the information may be sensitive and must be cleared prior to its use. **WHEN IN DOUBT, MEDIA WILL CONSULT WITH THE UNIT COMMANDER and/or PIO.**

THE FOLLOWING CATEGORIES OF INFORMATION should not be released since their publication or broadcast could jeopardize operations or endanger lives.

1. SPECIFIC NUMBER OF OFFICERS IN A UNIT.
2. SPECIFIC NUMBER OF UNITS PARTICIPATING IN THE EVENT.
3. SPECIFIC NUMBERS REGARDING OTHER EQUIPMENT OR CRITICAL SUPPLIES.
4. SPECIFIC GEOGRAPHIC LOCATIONS OF UNITS DURING THE EVENT. NEWS AND IMAGERY PRODUCTS THAT IDENTIFY OR INCLUDE INDENTIFIABLE FEATURES OF THESE LOCATIONS.
5. INFORMATION REGARDING FUTURE OPERATIONS.
6. INFORMATION REGARDING PROTECTIVE MEASURES AT SPECIFIC LOCATIONS (EXCEPT THOSE WHICH ARE VISIBLE OR READILY APPARENT).
7. RULES OF ENGAGEMENT.
8. INFORMATION ON INTELLIGENCE COLLECTION ACTIVITIES COMPROMISING TACTICS, TECHNIQUES OR PROCEDURES.
9. EXTRA PRECAUTIONS IN REPORTING WILL BE REQUIRED AT THE COMMENCEMENT OF SPECIFIC OPERATIONS.
10. INFORMATION ON SPECIAL OPERATIONS UNITS, UNIQUE OPERATIONS METHODOLOGY OR TACTICS, FOR EXAMPLE, ENTRY POINTS INTO A SPECIFIC AREA AND ESTIMATED RESPONSE TIMES, ETC. GENERAL TERMS MAY BE USED.

Media products will not be confiscated or otherwise impounded. If it is believed that sensitive information has been compromised and the media representative refuses to remove that information, notify the Public Information Unit immediately so the issue may be addressed with the media organization's management.

- This agreement places no restrictions on media reports after the incident has been resolved or the investigation has been completed, including the use of video and photographs acquired.

The sole purpose of embedding the media with law enforcement is so that the media can better understand the operations and mission of the department. In many cases this may allow for the media to get an inside look at how the department handles investigations, crisis situations and/or improving the quality of life for the citizens we are sworn to serve. Embedding may allow for the media to see how difficult situations are resolved and often times how critical incidents are handled. The goal of embedding the media is to create better relationships with the media and to help the media inform the public.

News Director/Managing Editor: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Sheriff Leon Lott \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_