

## **COMMUNICATION AND NEWS MEDIA RELATIONS POLICY AND PROCEDURE**

### **1.0 POLICY/PURPOSE**

1.1 **Policy.** The City of San Angelo is committed to maintaining a positive relationship with the members of the community governed by the City's actions. A critical factor in maintaining this relationship is effective communication.

1.2 **Purpose.** The purpose of this directive is to establish guidelines for appropriate practices in direct public communications and in indirect public communications through the news media. It is issued by authority of the City Manager, who reserves the right to modify, revoke, suspend, interpret, terminate, or change any or all of the provisions of this directive at any time with or without notice.

### **2.0 GENERAL PROVISIONS**

2.1 The Public Information Department is the primary communication agency for creating and managing the flow of public information between the City government, its employees and citizens. The Public Information Department may initiate communications or may assist other City departments in matters pertaining to the media, employee and citizen communication, public information requests, corporate image, and electronic and web broadcasting of public information. Specifically, the Public Information Department provides:

- Strategic message development and placement for City Manager's Office and City departments
- Public affairs assistance to Mayor and Council
- Public affairs and communications assistance to City Manager's Office and City departments
- Release of information to employees and citizens
- News media relations access
- Communications coordination in Crisis/Disaster situations
- Evaluation of press coverage

- 2.2 **City Spokespersons.** The City Manager, City Manager Designee, Mayor, and Community Information Coordinator are the authorized spokespersons for the City of San Angelo. Department Directors may speak on behalf of the City on matters within their areas of control. Department Directors may designate individual employees to handle news media relations and/or public information requests. In particular situations, such as making presentations to community groups or at scenes of incidents that result in on-scene media response, individual employees have authority as specified by their Directors to speak on behalf of the City. In communicating on behalf of the City, employees should limit their comments to presenting factual information within their personal knowledge, and avoid speculation, or making any comments on the actions taken by or likely to be taken by other employees or departments. Most City employees should not respond to the media if there is a more appropriate person/expert on the subject matter.
- 2.3 **Publications.** The City publishes information in print and electronic form to advise the public of City programs and services. All City publications should be timely, accurate, and understandable. Where necessary for effective communication, information distributed in print or electronic media should be in languages other than English. Each department should review its publications on an annual basis to ensure information is current and complete, and that it does not unnecessarily duplicate other information published by that department or any other division of the City.
- 2.4 If an employee receives a request for information that is best supplied by another department, the employee should not speculate about the operations of another department but should refer the requestor to the appropriate department. The employee should then contact the other department to provide advanced notice of the request for information.

### 3.0 PUBLIC INFORMATION

- 3.1 Unless a more specific statute applies, access to all information collected, assembled, or maintained by City employees in the course of their duties is governed by Texas Government Code Chapter 552, the Public Information Act (PIA). The Act applies to documents and records maintained in any form (paper, film, devices that store electronic signals, tape, and voice, data, or video held in computer memory).

- 3.2 The statute provides that any member of the public may both inspect and obtain copies of government documents and records. Among information excepted from required disclosure under the Act are: certain personal information on employees, information relating to civil or criminal litigation where the government or an officer or employee of the government is or may be a party as a consequence of the person's office or employment, information that would give an advantage to a competitor or bidder in a competitive bidding process, certain law enforcement or prosecutorial information, birth records (for up to 50 years), death records (for up to 25 years), personal information on participants in Neighborhood Crime Watch organizations, and certain information on economic development activities of the governmental entity. Other exemptions from disclosure may apply in certain situations.
- 3.3 The Act allows the governmental entity to establish reasonable rules of procedure for access to or providing copies of documents and records, including copy costs. Unless the requestor agrees otherwise in writing, all requests for information made under the Public Information Act must be responded to within ten working days of receipt of the request.
- 3.4 Any employee who receives a request for access to documents and/or records specifically designated as being under the Texas Public Information Act (PIA) should immediately direct the request to the person in the employee's department specified in department written procedures for handling PIA requests. In the absence of any designation of a person within the employee's department to handle PIA requests, the request should be directed to the Public Information Department.
- 3.5 The Public Information Act provides a criminal penalty for failure to comply with a properly submitted request and for distribution of information that is designated as confidential under the Act. It also provides a criminal penalty for willful destruction, mutilation, or removal without permission, or alteration of public information. Destruction or removal of documents or records of the City of San Angelo are to be made only in accordance with the City's Records Retention Schedule.

#### **4.0 NEWS MEDIA RELATIONS**

- 4.1 **General Guidelines.** The news media plays a critical role in the City's communication with the community. In interacting with representatives of the news media, the following guidelines will be observed by City spokespeople:
- Understand how the media organization's needs affect its ability to pass on the desired information. Consider deadlines, impact of video or graphic presentations, and whether subjects are "hard news" or "feature" material.

- Establish and maintain a positive cooperative working relationship with reporters.
  - Respect enterprise stories. If a reporter has developed a story that another media outlet has not expressed an interest in and if the City had not otherwise intended to publicly release the information in an open forum, only the reporter requesting the information should get it.
  - Avoid use of the phrase “No comment”. When an employee has insufficient knowledge to answer an inquiry, or when other reasons preclude a factual and complete answer, indicate the reason for the failure to provide information.
  - **Bad news is better released sooner than later.**
  - Be prepared to admit mistakes.
  - Information that is required by law to be disclosed cannot be withheld arbitrarily. If there is a question about the release of information, consult the Public Information Department or the City Attorney’s Office. The City does not withhold information that it knows is public record to delay its publication or avoid criticism.
  - Never lie to the news media.
  - Be sure there is clear understanding of what is “on the record” and what is “off the record”. It is better to **NEVER** speak “off the record”
- 4.2 The Public Information Department is responsible for oversight of City communications with the news media. The Office will provide the media with requested information and when necessary refer the media to the appropriate sources of information in other departments. The Public Information Department provides assistance to other departments in media matters. If you have been contacted by the media for an interview, please send a short summary of your communication with them to the Community Information Coordinator.
- 4.3 **Media Communications Tools**
- 4.31 **News Releases** are typically limited to one or two pages, and are written as the ideal article on the subject. They should be reviewed by Public Information Department before release. News releases are related to “spot news” or news features.

- 4.3.2 **News Advisories** are abbreviated news releases that are provided to give the media information, not to provide a written story for the public. They usually encourage media to attend or participate in an event. They may be used as a summary of involved, complicated information and typically outline how information will be released to the media.
- 4.3.3 **News Conferences** are coordinated by the Public Information Department unless a department director determines that this would constitute a delay that would not be in the best interest of the City. A news conference is held when the City has something significant to announce that would be inadequately explained in another media distribution tool. Use of a news conference allows for questions and answers on complicated issues. A news conference includes all local media. A news conference is not held unless the subject matter is particularly useful and significant to the City and the media.
- 4.3.4 **Photo Opportunities** are provided to the media on events, people, or other subject matter that may not merit a news story but will provide interesting video footage or still pictures.
- 4.3.5 **Editorial Board Meeting appearances** are intended to educate the members of the editorial boards at newspaper and broadcast news organizations. These members set the standards and dictate the editorial positions of news organizations, thus influencing the way news is reported. Editorial board meetings are typically reserved for executive team members to have a dialogue with editors and reporters on this board. Boards vary on ground rule policies. Ground rules should be determined before the meeting. **(we do not currently do this but may in the future.)**
- 4.3.6 **Interviews** are one-on-one communication between a reporter and the subject of the interview. An interview is the most effective method for communicating with the media because it provides the opportunity to clear up misunderstandings and misconceptions face-to-face. All media requests to interview employees should be coordinated through the Public Information Department, a department director or the employee designated by the department director to handle media relations. This will ensure that the most appropriate department personnel act as media sources and contacts. If the resulting story is expected to be controversial or if the interview between the reporter and employee did not go well; contact the Public Information Department immediately. This will make city management and other city officials aware of issues that may appear in the press.
- A. Those who are likely to be a regular media source for the City must complete media training courses to sharpen skills in interviewing and message presentation.

- B. Management level employees should expect to regularly interact with the news media. It is expected that these employees will be able to anticipate when an issue or concern will lead to news coverage.
- C. “Practice makes perfect.” Management level employees and/or City spokespeople who regularly interact with the media must do their homework before all interviews. Especially valuable are “question and answer” drills with the assistance of staff and in some cases strategy sessions to determine the most effective way to communicate the message.
- D. Identify “must quotes.” Write out or know your most important quotes and do not be afraid to repeat them more than once during the interview.
- E. Never assume the reporter understands the complexity or nuances of an issue. Be prepared to explain and summarize the issue during the interview.
- F. Never guess. If you do not know the answer to a question, offer to obtain the information or refer the reporter to someone else in the City or to the Public Information Department. Comment only on issues that you have personal knowledge and expertise.
- G. Do not use jargon or purposely obfuscate (confuse).

4.3.7 **Background Briefings** are critical for complex, involved subjects. They allow the City to provide in-depth explanations that will assist the reporter with clarification, and ensure a more thorough story because reporters understand the information. They are most effective when accompanied by significant amounts of reference material that the reporter can refer to when later preparing his or her story.

4.3.8 **Media Tours** are an effective method of telling an involved, visually interesting story. They usually guarantee extensive news coverage by multiple media outlets. A media advisory or a press release explaining the event should precede a media tour.

## 5.0 ADMINISTRATIVE NOTIFICATIONS

5.1 When major incidents or crises occur, administrative and/or legal support procedures are required to be initiated as soon as possible. In addition, administrators who are likely to receive media or citizen inquiries and/or citizen complaints should be made aware of the incident. Such notifications should generally be initiated through the chain of supervision within the involved department as soon as possible.

5.2 Major incidents requiring notification are:

- death or serious bodily injury of an employee, any person in a city facility, or any person alleged to be caused by a city employee
- significant damage to City property
- significant damage to non-City property alleged to be caused by a city employee
- severe weather conditions or disasters
- events requiring significant deployment of City personnel and/or equipment; and
- any other incident or event that is likely to generate significant media or community inquiries.

5.3 General Order of Notification: A Telephone Tree or other broad based network should be used to notify individual employees or departments.

5.3.1 Crisis Event

- 911
- Immediate Supervisor
- Division Supervisor
- Department Director
- Department Public Information Officer or Designated Spokesperson
- Administrative Services department

5.3.2 General Event

- Immediate Supervisor
- Division Supervisor
- Department Public Information Officer or Designated Spokesperson
- Department Director
- Administrative Services department

**6.0 EMERGENCY/DISASTER RESPONSE**

6.1 During emergency situations, the community needs detailed information about protective action to be taken for minimizing loss of life and property. The City provides information on hazard awareness and how to deal with hazards to the public through publications, public education presentations to the community, and through the news media.

- 6.2 In the course of an actual emergency or disaster when the City's Emergency Operations Center is activated, public information efforts will be provided as detailed in the City's Emergency Preparedness Plan. In a situation where the Emergency Operations Center is not activated, public information efforts will be directed by the City department having primary operational responsibility for the incident, with assistance from the Administrative Services department as necessary.