

PRINCE WILLIAM COUNTY POLICE DEPARTMENT MANUAL OF GENERAL ORDERS			
General Order: 17.01	Effective: 11/11/2019	Supersedes: NEW G.O.	Number of Pages: 6
PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICE: GENERAL GUIDELINES			

The purpose of this chapter is to establish the Police Department’s public information policies, outline procedures, and define staff responsibility for releasing information to the news media and community.

A. Policy

It is the policy of the Prince William County Police Department to be as open and transparent as possible when relaying information to the public and news media. The Public Information Office assumes the primary responsibility for releasing information outside of the agency, to non-law enforcement entities, regarding criminal investigations. Withholding information should only be considered in cases where the release of such details would jeopardize the investigation and/or tactics, is legally prohibited under law, would violate the rights of an involved party, or otherwise be considered prohibited in this chapter or another General Order.

B. Public Information Office (PIO)

1. PIO staff is comprised of sworn and civilian members serving in full-time and part-time capacities at the discretion of the PIO supervisor and Chief of Police. PIO staff are appointed by and report directly to the Chief of Police.
2. A PIO staff member will be available at any time to respond to or be consulted about incidents in the field. The PIO supervisor will provide the Office of Public Safety Communications with an updated on-call calendar for reference.
3. In order to conduct business, the Public Information Office will maintain routine operating hours of 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday through Friday. The office may be open on some County recognized holidays at the discretion of the PIO supervisor. The office will not be staffed afterhours, on weekends, or major holidays unless deemed necessary.
4. Members of the **public** who contact any department member regarding a matter to be handled by the PIO shall be directed to the main PIO number at 703-792-5123 or the main department email address at policedept@pwcgov.org.
5. Members of the **news media** needing to reach a PIO should be directed to the main PIO number at 703-792-5123 during business hours as outlined above or the PIO email address at pwcpcpio@pwcgov.org. Afterhours, members of the **news media** may be provided the on-call PIOs department issued cell phone number.

6. When an incident of public interest occurs during business hours as outlined above, the on scene supervisor should promptly notify the PIO supervisor, or full-time PIO as soon as reasonably possible. During all other times, the supervisor should request contact with the on-call PIO through the Office of Public Safety Communications supervisor.
7. If the on-call PIO is unable to be reached, the PIO supervisor should be contacted, or the incident supervisor should make themselves available to the media to provide information in accordance with this chapter.
8. When called afterhours, the PIO supervisor will determine the need for PIO personnel to respond to the scene.

C. PIO General Overview Responsibilities

The Public Information Office is responsible for:

1. Any external, non-law enforcement, release of information regarding criminal investigations to the public and news media in accordance with General Order 17.02.
2. All public-facing mediums including the Police Department website, the main Police Department email address (policedept@pwcgov.org) and social media, unless that responsibility has previously been assigned to another unit.
3. Informing the public on events, campaigns, safety tips, crime alerts, and ceremonies which may be of public interest.
4. Coordinating news conferences and facilitating any media interviews involving other Police Department personnel.
5. Coordinating with the Chief of Police or designee in releasing information on confidential investigations, confidential operations, or any crisis within the Police Department.
6. Any internal communications, as needed, including but not limited to: the Roll Call newsletter.
7. Serving as the spokesperson and primary point of contact for news media outlets.
8. Providing guidance to Police Department staff in matters of public interest or concern.
9. Keeping command staff and necessary County personnel advised of national, regional, or local concerns related to law enforcement trends and activity.
10. Providing photography services for Police Department events, ceremonies, etc.
11. Soliciting input from the news media, as needed, regarding proposed policy and procedural changes relating to the police/news function.

12. Establishing media staging areas and informing news media of the location.
13. Handling all news media correspondences regarding an incident or event.
14. Maintaining the Police Department tip-line.
15. Preparing written press releases on police incidents, events, and investigations for distribution to the news media and public.
16. Serving as a liaison to other County communications and public information offices, including the County Communications Office, Department of Fire & Rescue, and County Public Schools.
17. Conducts training, as needed, to Department members and new supervisors.
18. Sending out Public Alerts and Notifications as outlined in General Order 17.04.

D. Call-Out Procedures

1. Afterhours, major holidays, and weekends, a PIO is always on-call for emergencies and significant breaking news events. These incidents can include, but are not limited to:
 - a. Homicide/Murders
 - b. Fatal vehicle crash
 - c. Officer-involved shooting (OIS)
 - d. Signal 1/officer injury
 - e. Shootings with life threatening injuries
 - f. Incidents deemed a public safety threat
 - g. Hostage barricades
 - h. Random sex assaults
 - i. Violent crimes of a significant nature
 - j. Incidents in which multiple news media inquiries have been received
 - k. As directed by the PIO supervisor, watch commander, or command staff

2. Release of information in accordance with General Order 17.02 will be the responsibility of the PIO member, or the incident supervisor, in consultation with the PIO supervisor. Any information released shall be vetted by the on-scene ranking supervisor or case agent for accuracy prior to public dissemination. No information will be disclosed which jeopardizes the investigation or violates law. Information in breaking events should be collected and released expeditiously.

E. Internal Notification

1. The on-call PIO or PIO supervisor should be contacted on any matter that may be of potential public interest. Communication of information can be done by phone or email.
2. During the time of a major incident or event, the PIO supervisor will be contacted to coordinate the appropriate PIO response to the scene. Communications staff or the incident supervisor will contact the on-call PIO and/or PIO supervisor as soon as reasonably possible. The PIO member will report to the incident supervisor and gather information for release to the public and news media.
3. PIO will be notified as soon as reasonably possible of all significant incidents, including but not limited to: signal 1/officer injury, hostage or barricade situations, random sexual assaults or rapes, homicides, explosions or bombings, riots, plane crashes, disasters or catastrophes, shootings involving injuries, incidents of public safety concern, fatal crashes, and police-related shootings.

F. Member Expectations

1. Members and their respective supervisors will ensure reports are submitted in a timely manner through the respective electronic means, including those mentioned in a rundown. This will allow PIO members to access the information contained in the report for the purpose of release to the public and news media.
2. If reports are not able to be submitted promptly, all necessary information will be emailed to the PIO staff at the end of the member's shift which includes a synopsis of the event or incident, who was involved, what action was taken, and contact information for the member in the event follow-up is needed.
3. Members will not release any information unless authorized to do so. Additionally, members will refrain from making any statements or releasing information which would:
 - a. Be controversial and must be decided by a court.
 - b. Serve to weaken or, in any way, hinder an investigation.
 - c. Have bearing upon a change of policy within the Police Department.

4. Information will be conveyed to the PIO on all violent or significant property crimes related felonies, accidental deaths (including fatal motor vehicle crashes), violent felony arrests (bank robberies, murder, etc.), unusual events (freak accidents, storm damages, etc.), or any other event the member thinks would be of interest or concern to the media and public.
5. Members are prohibited from posting any information obtained within the course of their employment to any social media or social networking platform, blogs, “vlogs”, photo- or video-sharing sites, e-mail, instant messaging, or text messaging service which has not been approved by the Chief of Police or previously distributed to the public by the Public Information Office. Members will also ensure they are adhering to and complying with the County’s Social Media Policy. (Cross reference with General Order 28.11.)
6. Members are prohibited from releasing stories or statements to magazines, periodicals, or other similar publications without the written approval of the Chief of Police.
7. The PIO supervisor, with necessary consultation with the Chief of Police or designee, must approve any request for a member to be interviewed by any media outlet as it relates to their employment with the Police Department.
8. Members should inform PIO of any relevant events of public interest or recognition awarded to fellow members or the Police Department.

G. Procedures

1. Inquiries regarding Police Department policies or procedures, personnel, functions or activities of any component, statistical data, or criminal investigations shall be processed through PIO with consultation from the Chief of Police or designee.
2. When authorized to release information, members must recognize there are limitations on what may be disseminated. Adherence to the guidelines contained throughout this General Order will materially protect the Department in judicial review of cases and, at the same time, permit continuing cooperation with the public and news media while fulfilling basic responsibilities.
3. The Police Department PIO staff will coordinate and provide assistance as necessary with the County Communications Office whenever the Emergency Operations Plan is activated. The County Communications Office will have primary responsibility at such times and the Police Department PIO staff will act in a supporting role.
4. In any incident where this Department does have primary jurisdiction, it shall retain the responsibility for the release of all police-related information to the public and news media. In all other times where another agency is primary, the Police Department should limit any release of information to only include the specific involvement and actions of its own members.

H. Private Resident Photographs/Video

Private residents may legally photograph or videotape police incidents from **lawful** vantage points. Residents shall not have unrestricted access to areas of those incidents, including the crime scene.

1. When feasible, police tape should be used to easily identify those areas where restricted access is in place.
2. If a resident is violating a State law or County ordinance, such as trespassing or impeding traffic, a Department member shall inform the individual they are not in a lawful position and ask them to relocate. At no time should a member restrict the photography or filming and will verbalize the reasoning for the request to the resident.
3. Members encountering any problems with residents regarding this action should inform a supervisor.
4. PIO shall be notified if there is a potential for a photograph or video to be released depicting concerns of public-police encounters.