

# UPPER MERION TOWNSHIP POLICE DEPARTMENT

## POLICY AND PROCEDURE

No. 1430

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### **PUBLIC INFORMATION AND MEDIA RELATIONS**

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- I. **PURPOSE:** To establish guidelines for providing the public and the news media with timely and accurate information regarding department activities, while at the same time protecting the rights of individuals in police custody and preventing the disclosure of confidential police information.
- II. **POLICY:** The Upper Merion Township Police Department is committed to operate effectively by obtaining support from the public. In order to ensure public trust and support, the Department is committed to informing the community, through the news media, of events within the public domain that are handled by, or involve the Department. The Department will, however, control the dissemination of public information to protect the constitutional rights of an accused, to avoid interfering with a Department investigation, or because it is legally privileged.
- III. **CROSS-REF:** Policy #1400, RECORDS MANAGEMENT  
Policy #1410, RELEASE OF DOCUMENTS AND MATERIALS  
Upper Merion Township Policy #A1-105.04, RELEASE OF DOCUMENTS/  
MATERIALS
- IV. **PROCEDURE:**
- A. PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER:
1. Press relations are normally the responsibility of the Command Officer with supervisory responsibility for the incident.
  2. During special events or emergencies, the Chief of Police or his/her designee may appoint a Public Information Officer (PIO) to handle media relations during the event. The designated PIO shall assist news personnel at emergency incidents, but shall only release information with the authorization of the incident commander.

3. While the PIO is designated as the primary news media contact for a special event or emergency, it does not preclude command officers or supervisors from speaking on behalf of the Chief of Police to news media representatives regarding investigations or other incidents that fall within the scope of their assignment.
  - a. Police officers who are approached by members of the news media for information concerning official activities of the department are to refer all such inquiries to either their supervisor or the PIO.
4. When public information concerning a special event or emergency is disseminated by someone other than the PIO, that person will notify the Chief of Police and the PIO as soon as practical as to the content of the disseminated information, who released it, when it was released, and to whom it was released.
5. Responsibilities of the PIO include:
  - a. Assist news personnel at the scene of incidents.
  - b. Respond to news media inquiries.
  - c. Prepare and distribute press releases.
  - d. Arrange for news conferences as required or requested.
  - e. Release information about victims, witnesses and suspects as allowed by law and this policy.
  - f. Coordinate the release of information with other public service agencies when involved in a mutual effort.

## B. RELEASE OF INFORMATION:

1. In the absence of an appointed PIO, the supervisor or his/her designee shall be responsible for preparing a press release when necessary (refer to Section IV-B-3). Whenever a press release is prepared by someone other than the supervisor, it shall be reviewed and approved by a supervisor or command officer prior to release of the information to the media. The press release shall be carefully checked for content, grammar, spelling and sentence structure prior to release.
2. Press releases may be prepared concerning all occurrences of the following:
  - a. Serious crimes and/or arrests
  - b. Serious or fatal traffic crashes
  - c. Serious incidents or unusual situations that, by their nature, have demonstrated a need to be publicized
  - d. Special events

- e. Departmental programs
  - f. Other newsworthy items.
3. Press releases shall be prepared as soon as practical after the incident. Press releases shall be prepared on the official department Press Release Form, which can be found in the Departmental Forms Folder on the Police Computer Network.
  4. When a crisis situation develops, the assistance of the news media may be requested where the broadcast of information may benefit the mitigation and/or successful resolution of the situation. Any such media assistance shall be approved by a command officer or supervisor, and be documented in the incident report.
    - a. Emergency information may be disseminated to the public via the Comcast Emergency Alert System (refer to the Emergency Management Plan on the Police Computer Network for details).
  5. If the department plans to contact the media, the PIO or contacting officer shall ensure that all agencies contacted are given the same information.
  6. In those incidents where the Upper Merion Township Police Department assists other agencies, the department will only release information to the media when the incident occurred in Upper Merion Township. The information will be reviewed with the other agencies prior to release.

C. GUIDELINES FOR THE RELEASE OF INFORMATION:

1. The following represents information that may be included in a press release:
  - a. Pertinent facts related to crimes, traffic crashes and other incidents such as location, time, injuries, damages and/or losses (except in the case of an armed robbery) and a brief description of the incident.
  - b. Names of deceased or seriously injured persons, but only after their family has been notified and only if the release of such information will not impede the investigation.
  - c. Names of persons involved (if they are not juveniles), their age, general residence (not including actual street address), employment, and other similar background information. The identity of witnesses and complainants shall not be released. A victim's address, telephone number or social security number may not be released in compliance with the Victims's Rights Law.
  - d. Suspect information necessary to aid in his/her apprehension or warn the public of potential danger, unless it would impede the investigation. Suspects should not be identified until formally charged with a crime. Juvenile suspects shall not be named unless they have been adjudicated to adult status prior to, or as a result of the present charge.
  - e. Requests for aid in locating a complainant, witness, suspect or evidence.

- f. Photographs may be released only if they serve a valid law enforcement function, such as identifying a victim or to enlist public assistance in the apprehension of a fugitive for whom a warrant has been issued.
  - g. Names of investigating or arresting officers unless release of this information would endanger the life or physical safety of the officers.
  - h. Facts and circumstances of an arrest, including the name and general residence of the person(s) arrested, the date, time and place of the arrest, resistance if any, pursuit (do not include details), use of weapons, a description of items seized at the time of the arrest (such as illegal contraband), and the nature of the charges, if any.
  - i. Announcements concerning the scheduling or result of any stage in the judicial process.
  - j. The prior criminal record of the accused, subject to the provisions of the Criminal History Record Information Act, Title 18, Chapter 91 (see Policy #1410, RELEASE OF DOCUMENTS AND MATERIALS, section V-A).
7. The following represents information that **may not be included** in a press release:
- a. Names of juveniles (see section IV-C-2-d).
  - b. Information on the victims of sex offenses, including information that might reveal the identity of the victim.
  - c. Identity or location of any seriously injured assault victim admitted to a hospital if the assailant is not in custody and release of the information may further endanger the victim.
  - d. Identity of informants.
  - e. The location of any victim of abuse or domestic violence seeking shelter from further acts of abuse or violence.
  - f. Information concerning an on-going investigation if such release would jeopardize the investigation. Confidential intelligence or operations will not be disclosed except with permission of the Chief of Police.
  - g. Opinions or other statements as to the character, reputation, credibility, guilt, innocence of the accused or other persons involved, or to the merits of the case or evidence in the case.
  - h. Alleged admissions, confessions, or the content of statements attributable to the accused, except a statement that the accused denies the charges made against him/her.

- i. Statements pertaining to the possibility of a guilty plea to the offense(s) or to a lesser offense(s).
- j. Reference to the performance or result of investigative procedures or tests such as fingerprints, polygraph examinations, ballistic tests, or other laboratory tests, or to the refusal of the accused to take a test.
- k. Any information which would be known to be inadmissible in court.
- l. Information received from other law enforcement agencies without their approval to release that information.
- m. The deliberate posing of a person in custody for photographing or televising by representatives of the news media is prohibited.
- n. The interviewing of a person in custody by representatives of the news media is prohibited unless he/she requests or consents to an interview, in writing, after being adequately informed of his/her right to consult with counsel and of his/her right to refuse to grant an interview.
- o. All information not associated with the police investigation, and information ordinarily accessible only to members and employees of this department, is to be released to the news media only with the permission of the Chief of Police or Command Officer.
- p. Information pertaining to internal investigations without the permission of the Chief of Police.
- q. Information on matters currently in litigation, unless authorized by the township solicitor's office.

#### D. GUIDELINES FOR DISTRIBUTION OF PRESS RELEASES:

1. The original press release shall be placed by the preparer in the Records Bin in the Communications Center for placement in the case file. An additional copy should be provided to Communications Center personnel.
2. The preparer shall place a copy of the press release in the Press Bin in the upstairs Conference Room (#254) for distribution to the media.
3. A Command Officer, Supervisor or PIO may release public information via the township's group media e-mail list ([newsmedia@umtownship.org](mailto:newsmedia@umtownship.org)) accordance with the provisions of this policy.
4. The preparer is responsible for notifying the Chief of Police, Command Officers, and the Township Manager of the issuance and contents of any press releases.
5. The supervisor, or his/her designee, is responsible for ensuring that a copy of the press release is saved in the Press Release Folder on the Police Computer Network.

E. NEWS MEDIA ACCESS

1. The incident commander, or his/her designee, will coordinate the activities of the media at the scene of a crime or other serious incident.
  - a. The incident commander shall designate a media staging area as a part of the event's operational plan.
2. Police lines may be established to prevent persons from entering the area of a serious incident or crime scene. Media representatives have only the same right of access to this inner perimeter area as the general public. Media coverage will be permitted adjacent to and outside of any police barriers.
3. The media will be denied access to areas where:
  - a. The owner of private property requests it.
  - b. There is a possibility that evidence will be damaged, tampered with or removed from the scene of a crime, or the investigation will be hampered.
  - c. There is a tactical police operation in progress and the media's presence would disrupt operations and/or place a citizen or police officer in risk of injury or loss of life.
4. The department does not issue media credentials; however, the department may deny access to a crime scene or area of a serious incident to any member who cannot present official identification as a representative of a public news service.
5. Media members will be provided information about the crime or serious incident at the scene by the department's PIO if he/she responds, or by the PIO designated by the incident commander for the event.

APPROVED: \_\_\_\_\_

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

APPROVED: \_\_\_\_\_

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

TO BE REVIEWED: ANNUALLY

DISTRIBUTION: All police officers  
All police dispatchers  
Township Manager  
File