



General Order 54.1 - Public Information

PURPOSE: To establish an Office directive governing the release of information to the public and to enhance relations among the Office, the community, and the news media.

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ISSUED BY : Sheriff Jeffrey Easter

REVIEWED BY: Investigations Division Commander

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54.1.1 INFORMING THE COMMUNITY AND NEWS MEDIA

- A. It is the policy of the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office to inform the public and the news media of events involving the Office and its members. A cooperative climate in which the media may obtain information of public interest shall be maintained. However, certain information must be withheld from the news media in order to protect the constitutional rights of the accused, to avoid interfering with an investigation, or because it is legally privileged.

54.1.2 PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

- A. **(R)** The Sheriff, or a designee, shall perform the duties of a public information officer (P.I.O).
- B. **(R)** A specific designee may be assigned by the Sheriff during certain high profile incidents, or due to event(s) that affect more than one division or bureau within the Sheriff's Office. Personell contacted by the media during such times should refer the inquiring media to the specific designee.

54.1.3 RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

- A. **(R)** Responsibilities of the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office public information officer(s) include, but are not limited to:
 - 1. **(R)** Serving as a central source of information for release by the Office and responding to requests for information by the news media and the community;
 - 2. **(R)** Assisting the news media in their coverage of routine news stories and assisting them at the scene of incidents;
 - 3. **(R)** Providing a weekly news brief;
 - 4. **(R)** Preparing and distributing media releases;
 - 5. **(R)** Arranging for and assisting at news conferences;
 - 6. **(R)** Releasing non-restricted information about victims, witnesses, and suspects of crimes that occur within Sedgwick County;
 - 7. **(R)** Coordinating and authorizing the release of non-restricted information concerning confidential investigations and operations;
 - 8. **(R)** Arranging interviews with investigators and other employees at the request of the news media and assisting in crisis situations within the agency.
- B. A specific designee may be assigned by the Sheriff during certain high profile incidents, or due to event(s) that affect more than one division or bureau within the Sheriff's Office. In order to better fulfill the Public Information Function, personnel contacted by the media during such times should refer the inquiring media to the specific designee.
 - 1. It is the responsibility of each individual contacted by the media to determine if a specific designee has been assigned, prior to releasing any information in regards to the incident or event.

54.1.4 AUTHORITY TO RELEASE INFORMATION TO NEWS MEDIA

- A. The administration of the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office recognizes that situations may arise when the sheriff or his/her designee is not available, or events at the scene of an incident or other fast-breaking events require an immediate agency spokesperson.
- B. In order to ensure accurate and timely dissemination of information when the sheriff or the designee is not available, the following procedures will be used when releasing information to the media:
 - 1. At the scene of an incident:
 - a. In the absence of the sheriff or staff duty commander, the ranking deputy at the scene is authorized to release specified information to the news media.
 - 2. From the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office files:
 - a. Shall only be done in accordance with policy and state and federal law.
 - 3. Concerning an ongoing criminal investigation:
 - a. Shall be done in accordance with [section 54.18](#) of the Policy and Procedure Manual.
 - 4. At any time the sheriff is not available, the designee may release information.

54.1.5 WRITTEN MEDIA RELEASE

- A. The Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office uses written media releases as a means of providing the community with information about a specific event or incident within the jurisdiction of the organization.
- B. After normal business hours, the watch commander may determine when a media release is warranted.
- C. Because a media release is by its very nature public information, any member of the public may obtain a copy of a media release from the sheriff, or a designee, after the release has been properly documented in the media release file.
- D. Copies of each media release shall be placed in the media basket located at a centralized location in the Sheriff's Office for easy access by the media.
 - 1. Copies will be distributed to all department members via e-mail.
 - 2. Each division will maintain a file of media releases that are prepared by that division.
- E. When a member of the media inquires about a specific incident for which a media release has been made and the sheriff or his/her designee is not available, any supervisor may respond to said requests. However, all such responses shall be limited to the information as contained in the media release.
- F. Media releases may also be read over the telephone or transmitted by facsimile machine or e-mail.

1. Media FAX distribution is available on the Records Section, Investigations Division, Detention Division, and County Communications FAX machines.

G. Media Releases shall be posted on the department web site.

54.1.6 WRITTEN MEDIA RELEASE GUIDELINES

A. In order to provide consistency in format, the following guidelines should be used when preparing a written media release:

1. Media releases will be prepared on Sheriff's Office letterhead;
2. The release should be doubled spaced.
3. The following header will be used on the letterhead:

MEDIA RELEASE FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Month, Day, Year

AGENCY: SEDGWICK COUNTY SHERIFFS OFFICE

LOCATION: WICHITA/SEDGWICK COUNTY, KANSAS

TELEPHONE: (316) XXX-XXX

CONTACT: RANK, NAME

4. On multiple page media releases, the footer will state: **M-O-R-E** (centered) on all but the last page. The last page will contain a footer of: #####.
5. In the upper right of each additional page of a press release, the following header and page number should be displayed:

Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office.

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- B. Written media releases should be approved by a division commander or higher authority prior to release.
- C. Distribution and filing of written media releases may be found in [section 54.1.4](#).

54.1.7 SCENE ACCESS BY THE MEDIA

- A. News media representatives shall not be allowed to interfere with law enforcement operations at the scene of an incident or engage in any activity that could interfere with the operations of the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office at the scene of a major crime, fire, natural disaster, or other catastrophic event.
1. The news media will not be allowed access to any area or scene where such access would obviously disrupt operations or where there is a possibility that

evidence may be damaged, altered, destroyed, or otherwise prejudiced by its existence being published or portrayed.

2. Once evidence has been processed, removed, or secured by investigators, the media may be allowed to enter by authority of the scene commander.
 3. Any time the news media are denied access to an area or to information, the media representative will be given a courteous explanation of the reason for the denial.
- B. The ranking member at the scene of a crime, fire, natural disaster, or other catastrophic event may establish a perimeter line, which members of the media and general public may not cross.
1. The perimeter line shall be a reasonable distance from the scene in order to ensure the protection of the scene however, consideration shall be given to the interests of the media.
 2. At the discretion of the ranking deputy, a perimeter line which is in closer proximity to the scene than the line for the general public may be established for the media. When establishing such a line, consideration shall be given to the following factors:
 - a. Security of the scene;
 - b. The impact on the admissibility of evidence when publicized; and
 - c. General safety of all persons.
- C. Personnel may not infringe on the right of the news media to photograph or talk briefly to persons in custody while in public places, unless security considerations dictate otherwise.
1. The news media shall not be allowed access to photograph persons in custody in areas which are generally considered off-limits to the general public.
- D. Except as authorized by the sheriff, once an individual has been arrested and the case turned over for prosecution, media inquiries shall be directed to the office of the appropriate prosecuting attorney..

54.1.8 ONGOING CRIMINAL INVESTIGATIONS

- A. Release of information to the news media in reference to an ongoing criminal investigation shall conform with the following guidelines. For purposes of this general order, arrest is defined as when the suspect(s) have been booked into the detention facility.
1. Information which may be released pertaining to victims, witnesses, and suspects prior to any arrests includes:
 - a. A description of the exact offense including a brief summary of events;
 - b. Location and time of offense;

- c. Type of property loss, injuries sustained, or damages resulting from the action;
 - d. Identity of the victim, unless such information is restricted pursuant to section 2 below of this [section 54.1.9](#);
 - e. Information about unidentified suspects such as physical description and vehicle description when the information will not hinder an investigation; and
 - f. Identification of fugitive suspect(s) for whom arrest warrant(s) have been issued.
 - g. Identity of persons wanted for investigation.
2. Information not to be released pertaining to victims, witnesses, and suspects prior to any arrests includes:
- a. Identity of suspects who are interviewed but not charged;
 - b. Identity of witnesses, including a victim who can positively identify the suspect;
 - c. Identity of the victim of a sexual offense;
 - d. Identity of any juveniles when restricted by law;
 - e. Specific, detailed information about the weapon or other physical evidence;
 - f. Any information that could be known only by the guilty party;
 - g. Conjecture about suspects or fugitives;
 - h. Misleading or false information;
 - i. Mug shot of a suspect, unless appropriate;
 - j. Identity of a victim who is deceased when the next-of-kin has not been notified by the Sheriff's Office; and
3. Information that may be released after the arrest of a suspect(s) fourteen (14) years of age or older includes:
- a. Location and time of the arrest;
 - b. Defendant's name, age, residence, and employment;
 - c. The exact charge or charges;
 - d. Facts and circumstances relating to the arrest, such as resistance, pursuit, and use of a weapon;
 - e. Identity of the agency responsible for the arrest;
 - f. The name of the arresting deputy, only if there is no reasonable belief that the deputy would be jeopardized;

- g. Pre-trial release or detention arrangements, including amount of bond and location of detention; and
 - h. Scheduled dates for various steps of the judicial process.
 - i. A mug shot may be released on suspects if it will not adversely affect an ongoing criminal investigation. Some restrictions on the release of mug shots apply. For release guidelines, refer to [82.2.19](#).
- 4. Information not to be released after the arrest of a suspect(s) includes:
 - a. Comments about the character or reputation of a defendant;
 - b. Information about the existence or content of a confession, admission, or statement by the suspect;
 - c. The refusal or failure of the suspect to make a statement;
 - d. The refusal or failure of the accused to submit to tests or examinations;
 - e. Results of any exam or tests;
 - f. Description or results of laboratory examination and/or testing of physical evidence;
 - g. Re-enactment of the crime;
 - h. Information that the suspect directed investigators to the location of a weapon or other evidence;
 - i. Comments about the credibility of testimony or other merits of the case or quality of evidence gathered;
 - j. If the information for the arrest was obtained from an informant;
 - k. Opinions of agency members regarding the guilt or innocence of the suspect; and
 - l. Juvenile or adult criminal history information.

54.1.9 NOTIFICATION OF THE SHERIFF

- A. The Sedgwick County Sheriff shall be notified by the chain of command of newsworthy events involving the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office that occur within its jurisdiction. Such information should be conveyed to the sheriff in a timely fashion.
- B. When a media release is written by someone other than the sheriff, a copy of the media release will be forwarded to the sheriff as soon as possible.

54.1.10 MEDIA RELEASE INVOLVING MULTIPLE AGENCIES

- A. Release of information during combined operations with other agencies will follow these guidelines:

1. Whenever an agency other than the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office initiates an activity within the unincorporated area of Sedgwick County, the outside agency may be responsible for releasing information about its activity to the news media, regardless of the degree of activity of the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office.
2. When multiple agencies are involved in a law enforcement action in conjunction with the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office, all involved agencies will be consulted during initial strategy meetings regarding the release of information to the media.
3. In any death investigation jointly conducted by the Sheriff's Office, the coroner, and the district attorney, the primary responsibility for releasing information to the media regarding the investigation lies with the Sedgwick County Sheriff's Office. The release of information may be coordinated with the coroner and/or district attorney so as not to jeopardize the investigation.

54.1.11 SPECIAL RESTRICTIONS

- A. The owner and/or persons in control of private property make the determination as to whom shall be allowed upon the premises.
- B. PERSONNEL SHALL NOT RELEASE A SHERIFFS OFFICE EMPLOYEE RESIDENCE ADDRESSES OR RESIDENCE PHONE NUMBERS TO THE NEWS MEDIA.
- C. Personnel shall not release to the news media any information concerning the construction of explosive or incendiary devices, the manufacture of toxic substances or details of specific investigative techniques or equipment.

54.1.12 COMMUNITY INFORMATION SERVICE

- A. A community information service (ex. Nixle) is designed to update the community by way of various technologies including text messaging and email.
- B. Messages can be sent via this service for various events or situations, including:
 1. Alerts – Missing person, Health Alert, Severe Weather Warning, Dangerous Situation
 2. Advisory - Weather Advisory, Police Activity, Cancellations/Change/Reminders
 3. Community – Media Releases, DUI Checkpoints, Road Construction, Graduations
 4. Traffic - Accidents, Road Closures
- C. An employee holding the rank of sergeant and above can authorize a message to be sent via the community information service.

- D. After hours, or when a supervisor does not have access to a computer, the Records Section will be contacted and given the needed information so they can release a community information service message.
- E. Employees will receive training on the community information service program prior to utilizing the service. The training will include what messages can be sent via this service as well as how to send a message.