

TITLE: Public Information & Media Relations

I. PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of this Policy is to: ensure useful and accurate information is provided in a timely and professional manner regarding City business, service, and special events; ensure information is presented in a manner that is consistent with Avondale City Council's policies and philosophies; ensure as much as possible that consistent information is being disseminated by the organization; ensure that the City Council, staff, media, and general public are aware of any communications issues; ensure a cooperative working relationship is fostered between the City of Avondale and the media, and to ensure the media is being used as a resource particularly in emergency, disaster or crises situations; and to establish procedures for responding to media inquiries, including identifying a City spokesperson. This Policy applies to all City employees.

II. POLICY STATEMENT

The City of Avondale, to the best of its ability, will ensure the accurate and prompt exchange of information with the news media in accordance with this policy. The City will generally provide a response to media inquiries within 24 hours.

III. DEFINITIONS

A. Spokesperson: Individuals designated to speak on the City's behalf.

IV. POLICY PROVISIONS

A. Spokespersons

1. In most cases, there will be one spokesperson designated for response to each inquiry.
2. Individuals designated to speak on the organization's behalf are: the City Manager, Assistant City Manager, City Attorney, Community Relations & Public Affairs Director and/or Public Information Officer (PIO), Intergovernmental Affairs Manager, the Police Chief, Fire Chief, and others specifically designated by the City Manager and/or Community Relations & Public Affairs Director to address a particular issue or incident. No one other than these individuals (with the exceptions noted below) should represent the City's position to the media.

3. Exceptions

- a. When inquiries require a technical explanation, a spokesperson may be designated to address a particular issue. That spokesperson will usually be a department director, a senior staff person or a staff member proficient in a certain area or subject matter (such as water conservation or recycling), or an outside expert who is qualified to speak on the City's behalf on the issue in question. Whenever possible, staff should have the PIO present at person-to-person interviews in order to evaluate the effectiveness of the staff, evaluate the interaction with media, and offer assistance to staff and media.
- b. The Police Chief and Fire Chief may also designate their own department spokespersons to handle media inquiries related specifically to public safety (for example crimes, investigations, fires, accidents, etc.) Staff members who provide emergency medical care to the public should refrain from speaking to the media and refer them instead to their department's designated Public Information Officer (PIO).
- c. Routine media requests: Employees may respond to the media when inquiries are of a routine nature, involving a response of a factual, incidental or inconsequential nature, for example, the time and location of a meeting or special event; the process for applying for a business license or permit; the number of people employed by the City. The employee should subsequently notify the Community Relations & Public Affairs Director/PIO of the media contact.
- d. Non-routine requests should be forwarded to the Public Information Office prior to response. These may include responses that require interpretation of policy, employee information and emergency situations.

V. PROCEDURES

A. Media Relations Procedures

1. Media inquiries, whether verbal or written, are to be directed to the Community Relations & Public Affairs Director who will evaluate the request and provide an answer, or direct it as appropriate to the following:
 - a. To the City Manager, Assistant City Manager, City Attorney, Intergovernmental Affairs Manager, or a designated senior staff member, if the inquiry involves City policy or positions; or
 - b. The Mayor or City Council, if the inquiry pertains to Council policy or opinions.
2. All media contact should be immediately reported to the Community Relations & Public Affairs Director for tracking purposes.

3. Errors in reporting will be brought to the attention of the Community Relations & Public Affairs Director and/or PIO.
4. News Releases: All news releases—with the exception of public safety alerts and advisories from the Police and Fire departments—will be issued as deemed necessary and relevant by the Community Relations & Public Affairs Director.
 - a. The City Manager will approve all news releases prior to distribution.
 - b. The Community Relations & Public Affairs Director or PIO shall have discretion to re-write draft news release submitted by a department.
 - c. Department staff who initiates a news release and department directors shall have the opportunity to review any edits before its release.
5. News Briefings may be conducted to educate the news media about potentially controversial issues and provide reporters with an opportunity to ask in-depth questions. In most briefings, the City will provide background materials, fact sheets and explanatory materials.
6. The Community Relations & Public Affairs Director and/or PIO will be responsible for scheduling any such briefings.
7. News Conferences will be held at the discretion of the City Manager or Mayor (or designee) to announce or respond to an issue of significance or controversy with a united voice pertaining to facts, information, rules, and emergency or crises situation or the established policy/rules of the City. A news conference allows city officials to effectively respond at one sitting rather than responding individually to many media contacts. A news conference also conveys the City's willingness to openly discuss an issue. A news conference may be called when:
 - a. The issue to be announced is best conveyed at a news conference.
 - b. Major participants of a project are available to highlight their participation and respond to media inquiries "together."
 - c. The issue is likely to produce controversy.
 - d. News conferences will be planned in advance and coordinated by the Community Relations & Public Affairs Director or PIO. A spokesperson for the news conference will be selected by the City Manager, or if appropriate by circumstances, the Mayor. Additional personnel may be required to attend who can provide background information and details.
8. Emergency Media Relations In the event of a disaster or emergency that requires the City of Avondale Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to be activated, the City PIO (or designee), the Avondale Police and Fire PIO's (or designees) will be responsible for primary media relations, including

preparing for news conferences and media briefings, and arranging for media interviews with elected officials and key participants.

9. Editorial responses from staff: The PIO will monitor the editorial column of local newspapers and if deemed necessary by the City Manager, forward them to the appropriate staff for response.
 - a. Editorial responses shall be reviewed by the City Manager and PIO in advance. These may be shared in draft with the City Council if appropriate. Council shall be advised of editorial responses prior to publication.
 - b. "Letters to the Editor" may be submitted to clarify the City's position, educate readers about a city service, or express the city's gratitude to the community. Such letters shall be submitted to the media through the PIO.

B. Guidelines for Employees Acting as Private Citizens

1. The following guidelines are offered for employees who may choose to contact the media as a private citizen. These guidelines do not prohibit such contact but support other city policies regarding improper use of city equipment and property. These guidelines also apply to employees responding to or initiating media contact as official representatives of employee groups.
 - a. Letters to the Editor may not be prepared on city time, printed on city letterhead stationery, or mailed at city expense.
 - b. Telephone contact may not be made on city time using city telephones.
 - c. Use of city email is prohibited.
 - d. Use of city facilities or supplies is prohibited.
 - e. Responses or letters should not include the employee's official title or imply that the response is on behalf of the City of Avondale organization.
 - f. Statements made to the media shall not disrupt public meetings or interfere with the City Manager or designee in carrying out the day-to-day management of responsibilities of the City.

C. City Employees/Department Director Guidelines

1. Significant Events
 - a. It is the responsibility of employees to immediately notify their supervisor or Department Director, who should in turn notify the City Manager or PIO, of significant issues that occur and may be of major interest to the general public.
 - b. The City Manager will determine the appropriateness of contacting the City Council. Examples include, but are not limited to:
 - i. Injury, termination, serious illness, or death of an employee.

- ii. Major malfunctions of city equipment, city facility or infrastructure that could impact the general welfare of the public, environment or ability to provide service.
- iii. An unexpected work stoppage or inability to provide critical city service.
- iv. The arrest of an employee.
- v. Programs and employees receiving awards.

2. Media Contact Guidelines

- a. Respond to inquiries within your purview. Do not respond to matters that do not directly relate to your professional responsibility for the City.
- b. Do not make judgmental comments, particularly about individual councilmembers, council actions or official city policies.
- c. Do not offer legal opinions on city policies or activities.
- d. Do not discuss employees or personnel actions.
- e. Do not speculate about what action the City will take.
- f. Media inquiries shall be responded to within 2 to 4 hours of receiving the request.
- g. Inquire of the story's focus, the reporter's deadline and story publication date.

D. Distribution

1. The PIO shall maintain a media contact list.
2. City news releases will be distributed to the City Council and staff.
3. News releases shall be distributed electronically (email) and via facsimile to appropriate media (newsprint, television, and radio).
4. News releases shall be posted on the City's official website.

E. Violations of the Media Policy

Any employee found to be in violation of the City's media policy will be subject to disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal.

VI. APPROVAL



David Fitzhugh, Acting City Manager

June 24, 2014
Date of City Manager's Approval