



NAVIGATING MEDIA RELATIONS

A QUICK REFERENCE SHEET FOR PROSECUTORS

INTRODUCTION

Effective media relations are essential for prosecutors to ensure accurate public understanding of the justice system and maintain community trust. This reference sheet provides guidance aligned with the criminal justice standards on pretrial publicity and incorporates best practices for Public Information Officers (PIOs) and prosecutors.

BEST PRACTICES FOR PROSECUTORS

- **Designate a Spokesperson/ PIO:** Identify a knowledgeable and media-trained individual as the primary spokesperson to ensure consistent messaging. If a dedicated PIO is not available, the chief prosecutor or another designated prosecutor should take on the role.
- **Stay Informed:** Keep abreast of high-profile cases and potential media interest areas to proactively manage media relations.
- **Craft Clear Messages:** Prepare clear, concise, and factual statements for public release, avoiding legal jargon and inflammatory language.
- **Engage Proactively:** Build relationships with local media through regular briefings and background information sessions, fostering trust and understanding.
- **Coordinate with Law Enforcement:** Ensure that all public statements are coordinated with law enforcement agencies to present a unified message.

BEST PRACTICES FOR PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICERS (PIOS)

- **Establish Clear Protocols:** Develop and adhere to protocols for media interactions, ensuring consistency and accuracy in all communications.
- **Provide Training:** Regularly train staff on media relations, focusing on ABA guidelines and the importance of maintaining the integrity of the judicial process.
- **Prepare Media Kits:** Create comprehensive media kits that include background information, fact sheets, and contact details to facilitate accurate reporting.
- **Monitor Coverage:** Track media coverage to identify inaccuracies and address them promptly, maintaining the office's credibility.

GUIDANCE ON PRETRIAL PUBLICITY

Industry standards for criminal justice outline the following key principles:

- **MAINTAIN PROFESSIONALISM:** All interactions with the media should be conducted with the utmost professionalism to uphold the integrity of the judicial process.
- **PROTECT CONFIDENTIALITY:** Sensitive information, particularly related to ongoing investigations, should be kept confidential to protect the rights of all parties involved.
- **AVOID PREJUDICIAL STATEMENTS:** Prosecutors should refrain from making public statements that could prejudice the trial's fairness ([ABA Rule 3.6](#))

AVOIDING PREJUDICIAL STATEMENTS WHILE KEEPING THE PUBLIC INFORMED

— Use Neutral Language

- **Fact-Based Reporting:** Stick to verifiable facts without implying guilt or innocence. For example, use statements like "The defendant has been charged with..." rather than "The defendant committed..."
- **Avoid Speculation:** Do not speculate on outcomes or evidence. Stick to what has been officially filed and discussed in court.

— Provide General Information

- **Legal Process Overview:** Educate the public about the legal process. Explain steps such as arraignment, trial, and sentencing without referencing specific details of the case at hand.
- **Role of the Prosecutor:** Clarify the prosecutor's role in seeking justice and upholding the law, which includes protecting the rights of both victims and defendants.

— Limit Comments on Ongoing Cases

- **Public Records:** Reference only information that is part of the public record, such as indictments, charges, and court decisions.
- **Future Updates:** Indicate when further updates will be available, emphasizing the importance of allowing the judicial process to unfold without undue influence.

— Utilize Press Releases and Statements

- **Prepared Statements:** Issue prepared statements that are carefully reviewed to ensure compliance with legal standards and avoid prejudicial content.
- **Press Releases:** Provide written press releases that outline the facts of the case, legal procedures, and relevant law without delving into specifics that could be seen as prejudicial.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- **BALANCE TRANSPARENCY & CONFIDENTIALITY:** While transparency is crucial, safeguarding the confidentiality of ongoing investigations and the rights of the accused is paramount.
- **RESPECT FOR ALL PARTIES:** Communicate with respect and sensitivity towards victims, defendants, and their families, avoiding any statements that could be perceived as prejudicial or biased.
- **CRISIS MANAGEMENT:** Have a crisis communication plan in place to address unexpected events or media scrutiny, ensuring timely and accurate responses.