


<p>RABUN COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE</p>  <p>General Order Number: 4.34</p>	<p>Date of Issue</p> <p>2/23/2016</p>	<p>Effective Date</p> <p>2/23/2016</p>	<p>Revision Date</p>
<p>Subject: MEDIA RELATIONS</p>	<p>Amends:</p>	<p>Rescinds:</p>	
<p>Index as: Media Relations, News Media, Public Information Officer, Release of Information to</p>	<p>State Certification Standards: 5.18</p>		

PURPOSE

The purpose of this General Order is to prescribe the Rabun County Sheriff's Office policies and procedures on the release of information to the news media.

STATEMENT OF POLICY

It shall be the policy of the Rabun County Sheriff's Office to cooperate fully and impartially with authorized news media representatives in their efforts to gather factual, public information pertaining to activities of the Sheriff's Office, as long as these activities do not unduly interfere with departmental operation, or infringe upon individual rights or violate the laws of the Constitution of the United States or the State of Georgia.

DISCUSSION

The individual with the primary responsibility to approve the release of information to the media concerning the actions or activities of the Rabun County Sheriff's Office is the Sheriff of Rabun County. The Sheriff can exercise this responsibility through his designee(s) or the Public Information Officer (PIO). The department recognizes the right of the public to be fully and accurately informed on all matters of public safety and that the news media is responsible for providing this information to the public. The policy of the department, therefore, shall be to maintain a relationship with the members of the news media that is built on trust, cooperation and mutual respect and one which will generate the correct flow of information between the department and the news media. To accomplish this: the department, when requested, will provide such information within policy, legal and investigatory limitations as quickly as practicable to all accredited media representatives through the office of the PIO or a designated representative;

and the department will involve the news media in the development of changes in policies and procedures related to news media and public information function.

DEFINITIONS

CRIME SCENE — An area where a crime has occurred or where indication of a crime exists.

NEWS MEDIA REPRESENTATIVES — Those individuals who are directly employed by agencies of the electronic or print media. Freelance workers in this field are to be regarded as other members of the general public unless otherwise designated by the Sheriff, Major in charge of Police Services, or Major in charge of Sheriff's Services.

PUBLIC INFORMATION — Information that may be of interest to the general public regarding policies, procedures or events involving the Rabun County Sheriff's Office or other newsworthy information that is not legally protected, does not unduly interfere with the mission of the department, infringe upon the rights of a defendant or compromise the legitimate safety and privacy interest of officers, victims, witnesses or others.

PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER (PIO) — Person(s) designated by the Sheriff's Office as a central source of information for release by the department and responds to request for information by the news media and the community.

I. PRINCIPLES OF COOPERATION

- A. Rabun County Sheriff's Office personnel will not obstruct authorized media representatives in the lawful performance of their duties.
- B. Authorized news media representatives shall have reasonable access to the Public Information Officer, Sheriff, or his designee. When information must be denied to a media representative, the basis for that denial should be fully and courteously explained.
- C. The Sheriff's Office recognizes authorized identification from all local, national and international news organizations. Failure of media personnel to present authorized identification may provide grounds for restricting access to requested information or incident scenes.
- D. Public information shall be released to the media as promptly as circumstances allow and in as objective a manner as possible.
- E. Because of the need to maintain the identities of Rabun County Sheriff's Office personnel assigned to undercover activities, other supporting law enforcement officers, or certain individuals who may be assigned to such investigations, it will be necessary to withhold or protect their identify, especially if the media is covering actual on-scene operations. Under such circumstances, the media representative can only be requested not to release the identification or information on certain individuals.
- F. Ranking officers at crime or incident scenes must refer all news media requests for information to the Sheriff or his designee(s) or the Public Information Officer.
- G. Under no circumstances will media notes or tape/video recordings be confiscated.
- H. All written press releases shall be forwarded to the Sheriff or Public Information Officer for dissemination.

- I. In the event of serious crimes or major incidents, the Public Information Officer shall be notified. The ranking officer on duty may request the PIO to respond to the scene, if necessary, to serve as a liaison to the media representatives on the scene.
- J. Members of the Rabun County Sheriff's Office shall extend every reasonable courtesy to the news media representatives at any crime or incident scene. This may include closer access of media personnel and equipment than available to the general public, to the degree that it **does not interfere** with the Law Enforcement mission or safe movement of traffic. If such access is allowed, it will be approved by the Patrol Commander, Criminal Investigations Commander or his designee and Sheriff's Office personnel will escort media personnel.
- K. The news media shall not be allowed access to any area or scene of an incident or crime where there is a possibility that evidence may be damaged, altered or destroyed, or otherwise prejudiced by its existence being published or portrayed. Once evidence has been processed, removed, secured, and the crime scene released the media may be allowed to enter by the permission of the commanding officer at the scene.
- L. Suspects, or persons in custody, shall **not** be posed, arranged or made available to the news media for photographs, telecasts, or interviews.
- M. The authority of the Sheriff, Chief Deputy or Jail Commander, is required for the release of departmental photographs, mug shots, videotapes, film or compositions of subjects in custody. Photographs or mug shots of persons being sought by Law Enforcement may be released to the news media to help aid in locating the individual.
- N. At the scene of major incidents or crimes, the ranking officer on the scene should designate a preliminary press area as early as possible and as close to the scene as safety and operational requirements allow.
- O. At the scene of significant accidents, man-made or natural catastrophes, the principles of media cooperation shall be maintained to the degree that they do not interfere with the mission of Law Enforcement, Fire, Medical or other emergency relief workers.
- P. The Fire Department Officer in charge shall control Media access to, and movement within, fire lines. The ranking officer on the scene will coordinate with Fire Department personnel if Law Enforcement assistance is required for perimeter control.
- Q. News media representatives should not be prevented from access to an area solely because of the possibility of injury or death. The media representative should be advised of the danger and allowed to make the decision to enter on his/her own volition.

II. RESPONSIBILITIES

The Public Information Officer is responsible for:

- A. Assisting news personnel in covering news stories at the scenes of incidents;
- B. Being available for on-call responses to the news media;
- C. Preparing and distributing agency news releases;

- D. Arranging for, and assisting at news conferences;
- E. Coordinating and authorizing the release of information about victims, witnesses, and suspects;
- F. Assisting in crisis situations within the agency;
- G. Coordinating and authorizing the release of information concerning confidential agency investigations and operations; and
- H. Developing procedures for releasing information when other public service agencies are involved in a mutual effort.
- I. Response to media inquiries or release of information pertaining to department involvement in mutual efforts involving other public service agencies (e.g., fire department, medical examiner, District Attorney, etc.) will be coordinated by the P.I.O. In instances where more than one agency is involved, the agency having primary jurisdiction should be responsible for releasing, or coordinating the release of, information.

III. INVESTIGATIVE INFORMATION

- A. Information that may be released in connection with an investigation of an event or crime includes:
 - 1. Type or nature of an event or crime;
 - 2. The location, date and time, injuries sustained, damages, and a general description of how the incident occurred;
 - 3. The type and quantity of property taken;
 - 4. The identity and approximate address of a victim with the exception of sex crime victims, and in other cases where reprisals or intimidation may be employed;
 - 5. Request for aid in locating evidence, a complaint, or a suspect;
 - 6. Numbers of officers or people involved in an event or investigation, and the length of the investigation; and
 - 7. Name of the officer(s) in charge of the case, their supervisor, and division or unit assignment (**Exception:** names of undercover officers will not be disclosed).
- B. Information that **MAY NOT BE RELEASED** in connection with an investigation of an event or crime, unless authorized by the Sheriff, Patrol Commander or Criminal Investigations Commander:
 - 1. The identity of a suspect prior to arrest, unless such information would aid in apprehending the suspect or serve to warn the public of potential danger;
 - 2. The identity of any victim of a sex crime or any related information which, if divulged, could lead to the victim's identity;

3. The identity of victims or witnesses if such disclosure would prejudice an investigation to any significant degree or it would place the victim in personal danger;
4. The identity of any juvenile who is a suspect or defendant in a case subject to the jurisdiction of the Juvenile Court;
5. The identity of any critically injured or deceased person prior to the notification of next of kin. If notification cannot be given within a reasonable time (24 hours) the reason will be determined and the news media advised of the circumstances and the identification of the victims. The responsibility for disseminating names of the victims to the public will then be that of the news media;
6. The results of any investigative procedure, such as line-ups, polygraph tests, fingerprint comparison, ballistics tests or other procedures (The fact that these tests have been performed may be revealed without further comment);
7. Information which, if prematurely released, may interfere with the investigation or apprehension, such as the nature of the leads, specifics of an Method of Operation (M.O.), details of the crime known only to the perpetrator and Law Enforcement, or information that may cause the suspect to flee or more effectively evade arrest;
8. Specific cause of death, unless officially determined by a medical examiner; and
9. The home address or telephone number of any member of the Rabun County Sheriff's Office;

IV. ARREST INFORMATION

- A. Following an arrest, the issuance of an arrest warrant or receiving an indictment, it is permissible to release:
 1. The accused's name, age, residence, occupation, and family status;
 2. The time and place of arrest, whether pursuit or resistance was encountered, charges placed against the suspect, and description of contraband seized;
 3. The identity of the arresting officers and the duration of the investigation unless the officers are engaged in undercover operations;
 4. The amount of bond and scheduled court dates; and
 5. The location of where the suspect is being detained (unless for security reasons may be authorized by the Sheriff, Patrol Commander or Criminal Investigations Commander;
- B. Following arrest and formal charging of a suspect, but prior to adjudication, the following types of information **SHOULD NOT** be released without express permission of the Sheriff, Patrol Commander or Criminal Investigations Commander;
 1. Prior criminal conviction record, character, or reputation of a defendant;

2. Existence or contents of any confession, admission, or statement of a defendant or their failure or unwillingness to make a statement;
3. Performance or results of any tests, or a defendant's refusal to submit to tests such as a polygraph;
4. Identity, statement, or expected testimony of any witness or victim;
5. Any opinion about the guilt or innocence of a defendant or the merits of the case; and/or
6. Any opinion or knowledge of potential for plea bargain or other pre-trial action(s).

V. SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS

A. Incidents of Reported Child Abuse/Neglect

Names, addresses and phone numbers of individuals involved in the reporting or witnessing of an incident of child abuse or neglect shall be deleted from any information being released to the public unless the court determines otherwise and authorizes the release of information. The name of victims of reported incidents of child abuse or neglect shall not be open to public inspection.

B. Names or Identity of Sexual Assault Victims

Names, addresses and phone numbers of victims of incidents of sexual assaults shall be deleted from any information being released to the public unless authorized by the Sheriff. Victims of rape or an assault with intent to commit the offense of rape shall not be released to the public in accordance with Georgia law.

C. Sensitive and Confidential Operations

Information concerning activities of the Internal Affairs Unit or any special operations necessarily deemed to be confidential by the officer in charge of the operation shall not be disclosed, except after the express permission of the respective officers in charge, Chief Deputy or Sheriff.

D. Suicide Notes

The contents of a suicide note or electronically recorded message is to be considered personal and confidential. No member shall make such written or recorded statements public. The fact that a suicide note exists may be reported without further comment and may become secured evidence.

E. Withholding Information

At the time information is denied to the news media in the face of a legitimate inquiry, the denial shall be supported by a courteous, logical and adequate explanation that can be justified upon further inquiry. Failure to do this can unnecessarily damage the positive efforts to build good media relations.

F. Weather and Road Conditions

Members on patrol observing changes in highway or weather conditions that would endanger or interrupt traffic shall immediately notify the Shift Supervisor of such conditions. This information shall be made available to the public and the news media.

G. Recognition of Department Members

Names of members of the department should be incorporated into news releases if the PIO determines that the members are deserving of special attention due to their actions relating to an incident.

H. Publication by Department Personnel

Members of the sheriff's office are prohibited from releasing stories or statements concerning the policies and/or operations of the Rabun County Sheriff's Office to magazines, periodicals, or other similar publications without the written approval of the Sheriff.

VI. DENIAL OF INFORMATION

Media representatives shall be denied access to the contents of Investigative Reports or Incident Reports where release of the information would:

- A. Violate existing state and federal laws;
- B. Interfere with pending investigations;
- C. Constitute an un-warranted invasion of privacy;
- D. Reveal the identity of confidential information; and/or
- E. Endanger the life or physical safety of any person.



By Order of the Sheriff: **Chad K. Nichols**
Sheriff, Rabun County