

Board of County Commissioners

Okaloosa County, Florida

Title: Okaloosa County Media Policy

Date Adopted: April 7, 2015

Effective Date: April 7, 2015

Revised: April 4, 2017/May 1, 2018

Okaloosa County Government exists to serve the public and it is the responsibility of County government to provide citizens with information about policies, programs and decisions that affect the public. The County fosters an open and honest environment in which to disseminate public information on a consistent and timely basis.

Building Relationships with the Media

The news media is a vital link in keeping Okaloosa County citizens informed. It is in the County's best interest to work with the news media. The roles and responsibilities of professional journalists are respected by the County, and it is our goal to establish and maintain a positive and professional relationship with them.

Responding to the Media

1. The Public Information Officer ("PIO"), the County Administrator and his/her designee, as designated in writing, may respond to media requests for general information. (See also Disseminating Information.) Requests for documents shall be coordinated through the Risk Management Department in accordance with the County's Public Records Request Policy.
2. Members of the media soliciting County participation for topics pertaining to County-wide issues, on-camera interviews, editorial boards or similar activities, shall be directed to the PIO.
3. Unless the media requests to speak to a specific County Commissioner, members of the media seeking official comments from the Board of County Commissioners will be directed to the Commission Chairman, or in his or her absence, the Vice-Chairman. Inquiries on matters within a specific district should be addressed by the Commissioner of such district.
4. Calls or messages from the media seeking information should be returned promptly, preferably within one hour.
5. The PIO shall be kept apprised of all communications with the media.

Disseminating Information

1. Following any media communication, the department director or designee notifies the PIO, who promptly notifies the County Administrator and members of Commission, preferably by email, with details of the inquiry, the response to media and when the information is scheduled to be printed in the newspaper, and/or to be aired through radio or television.
2. Misinformation shared with the media can have negative effects on the public, as well as on the County's credibility and the credibility of the news media. Any designee should speak to reporters only about topics about which they are familiar and understand. When reporters' questions go beyond required expertise, never speculate and refer them to the appropriate source or the PIO.

In an Emergency

In an emergency such as a weather event, bioterrorism threat, or any other natural or man-made disaster, this media policy is superseded by the County's Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan, which centralizes media relations functions under Emergency Support Function 14 – Public Information. A copy of the plan can be found on the County website, on Public Safety web pages and is available from the Emergency Management Division or by following this link:

http://www.co.okaloosa.fl.us/sites/default/files/doc/dept/public_safety/comp.pdf

When the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is activated, the EOC PIO acts as the single point-of-contact for non-law enforcement public information. The PIO will coordinate and get authorization on press releases with the Incident Commander in accordance with the Okaloosa County National Incident Management System (NIMS)/EOC Interface, and work within the Okaloosa County NIMS/EOC Interface structure in all duties.

Public Information Officer (PIO) Responsibilities

The PIO conducts and coordinates public relations functions for Okaloosa County and serves as liaison between the commissioners, County Administrator, departments and the media. Additionally, the PIO coordinates interdepartmental communication, to include the production of the employee newsletter, as well as oversees Internet and Intranet content and maintenance in collaboration with the IS Department.

Okaloosa County ribbon-cuttings, press conferences, special events and news releases are coordinated by the PIO. All news releases are maintained on the County website.

Okaloosa County Website

1. All Okaloosa County departments, divisions and offices who utilize the County website may designate a staff person or utilize the PIO to regularly update the content on department web pages and ensure the accuracy of all posted information.

2. County departments, divisions and offices are encouraged to maximize the use of the department and/or County website to provide timely information to the general public. Public access to current County forms, procedures, event information, meetings, workshops and program information should be readily available to the greatest extent feasible.
3. Information posted on Okaloosa County's website must relate to programs and/or events managed or primarily sponsored by the Board of County Commissioners or Constitutional Officers.

Social Media

Social media is another way to broadcast messages and information to a larger audience. To address the fast-changing landscape of the Internet and the way residents and businesses communicate and obtain information about Okaloosa County, the County may use social media to provide information on topics related to Okaloosa County governance, events managed or sponsored by the County, or information from federal, state, or other local government agencies. Social Media is also a way to reach the public directly, with a factual message written and edited by Okaloosa County.

Okaloosa County, through the PIO and the County Administrator's Office, shall exercise sole authority to decide what is "announced" or "spoken" on behalf of the County on the County's web site and on social media sites. The following procedures apply to the use of social media:

1. Departments that use social media are responsible for complying with applicable federal, state, and County laws, regulations, and policies. This includes, but is not limited to, adherence to established laws and policies regarding copyright, records retention, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), First Amendment, privacy laws and information security policies established by Okaloosa County.
2. Include the following disclaimer: "all content is subject to Florida public records laws and may be retained and produced upon request."
3. In general, all of the County's social media content will be subject to approval by the PIO or designee, except for departments utilizing promotional accounts such as Tourist Development and Airports. The County's website (www.okaloosafl.com) will remain the primary and predominant internet presence.
4. Wherever possible, content posted to the County's social media sites will also be made available on the County's website.
5. Wherever possible, content posted to the County's social media sites should contain hyperlinks directing users back to the County's official website for in-depth information, forms, documents or online services necessary to conduct business with Okaloosa County.

6. Employees representing the County via social media outlets must conduct themselves in a professional manner at all times. Social media includes Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, etc.
7. General Rules when utilizing social media:
 - a. Stay factual – leave opinions to elected officials. Do not engage in hostility; take criticism in stride.
 - b. Use concise responses.
 - c. Downsize any photos for web use, to prevent slowing down internet servers.

Other Mass Media Communication

All other types of mass media communication on behalf of Okaloosa County shall be coordinated through the PIO and approved in advance by the County Administrator. Mass media communication includes, but is not limited to, newspaper columns, editorials, radio announcements, blogs, etc.

Training Requirements

All County staff who are designated to speak to the media must annually complete a Public Records and Sunshine Law training course that has been approved by the County Attorney.

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Revised 4-4-17, 5-1-18