



Policy Number: 319 – Media Relations
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Approved By: Denis Otterness, Chief of Police

319.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

This policy provides guidelines for the release of official Montana State University Billings Police Department (Department) information to the media. It also addresses coordinating media access at scenes of disasters, criminal investigations, emergencies and other law enforcement activities.

319.2 POLICY

It is the policy of this Department to protect the privacy rights of individuals, while releasing non-confidential information to the media regarding topics of public concern. Information that has the potential to negatively impact investigations will not be released.

319.3 RESPONSIBILITIES

The ultimate authority and responsibility for the release of information to the media shall remain with the Chief of Police. In situations not warranting immediate notice to the Chief of Police, and in situations where the Chief of Police has given prior approval, the Assistant Chief of Police may prepare information for release to the media in accordance with this policy and applicable laws regarding confidentiality. The Chief of Police will coordinate all media press releases through the Director of University Communications and Marketing, or their designee.

319.4 PROVIDING ADVANCE INFORMATION

To protect the safety and rights of Department members and other persons, advance information about planned actions by law enforcement personnel, such as movement of persons in custody or the execution of an arrest or search warrant, should not be disclosed to the media, nor should media representatives be invited to be present at such actions except with the prior approval of the Chief of Police.

Any exceptions to the above should only be considered in furtherance of a legitimate law enforcement purpose. Prior to approving any exception the Chief of Police will consider, at a minimum, whether the release of information or the presence of the media would unreasonably endanger any individual, or prejudice the rights of any person, or is otherwise prohibited by law.

319.5 MEDIA REQUESTS

Any media request for information or access to a law enforcement incident shall be referred to the Chief of Police, or when unavailable, the Assistant Chief of Police. Prior to releasing any information to the media, Department members shall consider the following:

- a. At no time shall any member of this Department make any comment or release any official information to the media without prior approval from the Chief of Police.
- b. In situations involving multiple agencies or government Departments, every reasonable effort should be made to coordinate media releases with the authorized representative of each involved agency prior to the release of any information by this Department.
- c. Under no circumstance should any member of this Department make any comment to the media regarding any law enforcement incident not involving this Department, without prior approval of the Chief of Police. Under these circumstances the member should direct the media to the primary agency handling the incident.

319.6 ACCESS

Authorized media representatives shall be provided access to scenes of disasters, criminal investigations, emergencies and other law enforcement activities as required by law.

Access by the media is subject to the following conditions:

- a. The media representative shall produce valid media credentials that shall be prominently displayed at all times while in areas otherwise closed to the public.
- b. Media representatives should be prevented from interfering and may be removed for interfering with emergency operations and criminal investigations.
- c. Based upon available resources, reasonable efforts should be made to provide a safe staging area for the media that is near the incident and that will not interfere with emergency or criminal investigation operations. All information released to the media shall be coordinated through the Chief of Police, or their designee.
- d. Media interviews with individuals who are in custody should not be permitted without the approval of the Chief of Police.
- e. No member of this Department who is under investigation shall be subjected to media visits or interviews without the consent of the involved member.

319.6.1 CRITICAL OPERATIONS

A critical incident or tactical operation should be handled in the same manner as a crime scene, except the media should not be permitted within the inner perimeter of the incident, subject to any restrictions as determined by the supervisor in charge.

Department members shall not jeopardize a critical incident or tactical operation in order to accommodate the media. All comments to the media shall be coordinated through the Chief of Police.

319.7 CONFIDENTIAL OR RESTRICTED INFORMATION

It shall be the responsibility of the Chief of Police to ensure that confidential or restricted information is not inappropriately released to the media. When in doubt, authorized and available legal counsel should be consulted prior to releasing any information.

319.7.1 EMPLOYEE INFORMATION

The identity of an officer(s) involved in a shooting, or other critical incident, may only be released to the media upon the consent of the involved officer or upon a formal filed request.

Any requests for copies of related reports, or additional information, including the identity of an officer(s) involved in a shooting or other critical incident, shall be referred to the Chief of Police.

Requests should be reviewed and fulfilled by the Chief of Police, or their designee. Such requests will be processed in accordance with the provisions of public records laws (e.g., Public Records Act).

319.8 RELEASE OF INFORMATION

The Department may routinely release information to the media without receiving a specific request. This may include media releases regarding critical incidents, information of public concern, updates regarding significant incidents, or requests for public assistance in solving crimes or identifying suspects. This information may also be released through the Department website or other electronic data sources. The Department will coordinate with University Communications and Marketing for all media releases.