

Media Policy for Sarasota County

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

Working With the News Media

The news media is a vital link in keeping Sarasota County citizens informed. It is in the county's best interest to work with the news media. We respect the roles and responsibilities of professional journalists and strive to establish and maintain a positive and professional relationship with them.

Returning Calls From Media

Any county employee contacted by the news media should assist the reporter in meeting his or her deadlines to ensure that our point of view is included in news stories involving Sarasota County Government. If, as a county employee, you have received voice mail from a reporter seeking information, return the reporter's phone call promptly -- at least within one hour. If you are a colleague taking a reporter's message for a county employee and are aware that your colleague will be unable to respond within an hour, return the call and direct the reporter to an appropriate spokesperson or Public Communications.

Disseminating Accurate Information

Misinformation shared with the media can have negative effects on the public, as well as on our credibility and the credibility of the news media. Speak to reporters only about topics that you know and understand. Never speculate. When reporters' questions go beyond your expertise, refer them to the appropriate source or Public Communications staff.

People Have a Right to Know

We work in an environment of open access to public information. We provide to the news media all information that is offered to the public. When legal or ethical issues arise, we rely upon public records laws to clearly define what is and is not public information. In cases where the release of information requested by a reporter is prohibited, we explain the basis for not releasing the information as stated in the statutes. If applicable, it may be helpful to give the reporter copies of the laws and regulations governing what can and cannot be discussed publicly. Remember, responding to a reporter's question with "No comment" is not appropriate.

Keeping Public Communications Informed

The Public Communications Office and communications coordinators in business centers are key media contacts, answering routine inquiries and guiding reporters to the information they seek. Often, however, a reporter speaks directly to a county staff member who is more likely to have the most recent and most accurate information on the issue in question. To keep Public Communications staff abreast of media inquiries, send an e-mail message to the business center communications coordinator and Public Communications after speaking to a reporter. Provide the reporter's name, news affiliation and a brief description of the

questions asked and information shared with the reporter. This step is important to ensure a coordinated and complete response and to provide the media with updates on the issue.

Distributing News Releases

Public Communications provides news release templates, current media distribution lists and training in news release fundamentals. A standard format and style are required for all news releases. Please note that the media distribution list includes the county's Internet editor for inclusion on the county web site news page, and Access Sarasota Television for coverage of newsworthy events.

In an Emergency

In an emergency such as a hurricane, wildfire, 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 is available from the Emergency Management or Public Communications office.

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