



ANN ARBOR FIRE DEPARTMENT

Standard Operating Procedures – 1.04 Media Relations



MEDIA RELATIONS

Effective: April 5, 2024
 Scheduled Review: April 5, 2027
 Approved: Fire Chief Mike Kennedy

I. PURPOSE

To establish a process for the flow of information with the media to ensure factual and timely release of information. This SOP shall be used in conjunction with City of Ann Arbor Administrative Policies and Procedures 102, “Guidelines for City Communications.” The City of Ann Arbor policy shall override this procedure if there is a conflict. For larger incidents, the City Communications Office shall fill and / or coordinate the public information officer function.

II. ACCESS TO INCIDENT SCENES

The First Amendment to the “Constitution of the United States” protects freedom of the press. The media and public are legally allowed to take photographs and record video of incidents from any vantage point in a public space outside of Incident Commander’s designated incident perimeter. This perimeter is best delineated with caution tape.

Fire department personnel have no authority to instruct the public or media not to record something when the media or public are in a public space and outside of the incident perimeter. Law enforcement shall be requested to remove the media or public who are within the incident perimeter.

When media is on an incident scene, fire administration shall be notified.

III. INCIDENT MEDIA INQUIRY

The follow positions may answer media inquiries related to a specific incident that the person has knowledge. An example may be verifying a fire department response to an apartment fire and sharing incident information such as incident times, units responding, fire department actions, if there were any injuries, mutual aid resources, damage estimate, etc.

- A. Fire chief
- B. Assistant fire chief
- C. Battalion chief
- D. Fire marshal
- E. Emergency management coordinator

Any media inquiries received by someone not listed above shall be referred immediately to the fire chief. An appropriate response to the media would be, “I am sorry I do not have the full information regarding that issue. I will give your request to the fire chief, who will respond to you as soon as he/she is available.” Please obtain the reporter’s name, phone number, topic of story and deadline, and contact the fire chief as soon as possible.



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IV. PROTECTED HEALTH INFORMATION

The Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act of 1996 (“HIPAA”) establishes the circumstances under which individuals’ protected health information (“PHI”) can be disclosed. Generally, the fire department may not disclose PHI to the news media without the patient’s written express authorization.

The fire department may not release any PHI to the news media, absent a patient’s written, signed authorization. In the event that the patient or the patient’s authorized representative signs a HIPAA-compliant authorization form, disclosures of information, including PHI, may be made so long as they are done in accordance with the express terms of the written authorization.

If there is no written authorization from the patient, the fire department may only release information that is “de-identified.” De-identified information is information that does not identify an individual, and there is no reasonable basis to believe that the information can be used to identify a specific individual. The fire department may only release the following types of “de-identified” information to members of the media where appropriate:

Name of hospital – The fire department may provide the name of the hospital to which patients have been transported, e.g., The media calls about “the accident at Third and Main earlier this afternoon.” The fire department may inform the media that, “A patient was transported from the accident scene to University of Michigan Hospital.”

Number of patients – The fire department may provide the total number of patients involved in an incident or transported to a facility. The fire department may not indicate specifics, such as the type of vehicle a patient was driving or which patient went to a particular facility, e.g., The fire department may inform the media that, “Four patients were transported from the fire at the apartment building.”

Age and Gender – The fire department may provide the age of a patient and the gender of the patient, unless it could reasonably be used to identify the patient, e.g., The fire department may inform the media that, “A 39 year / old male was transported from the crash on I-94.”

Designation of crew members – The fire department may state, for example, that three firefighter / EMTs were involved in caring for the patients involved in a motor vehicle crash. The fire department may identify the names of the personnel who responded, e.g., The fire department may inform the media that “Ann Arbor Fire Department personnel on the scene of the incident included two firefighter / EMTs and basic life support was administered.”

V. NON-INCIDENT INQUIRY

Requests by the media for information not of an incident nature, e.g., statistical information, personnel information, interviews with employees, or any facet of fire operations including department procedures will be referred to the fire chief.



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VI. OFFICIAL INCIDENT MEDIA RELEASE

The fire chief or an assistant chief will coordinate any official media release with the City of Ann Arbor Communications Director Lisa Wondrash. Personnel will not proactively send media releases directly to the media. Going through the Communications Office ensures that city leadership is aware of incidents. Additionally, the Communications Office maintains a master list of media contacts to ensure equity of media release distribution. The Communications Office will format the release and will ensure only appropriate information is released.