

**Pennsylvania State Coroners Association**  
**Administrative Guideline**

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First, we need to define the following: Standard, Guideline, and Best Practice

A **Standard** is the minimum level of acceptable performance

A **Guideline or Principle** is a suggested level of performance, but not a standard

A **Best Practice** is the most rigorous level of performance and is based on current knowledge without resource limitations. (Shall; cannot deviate from; required)

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**Handling the Media / Media Relations**

The purpose of this guideline is to establish the proper procedures for dealing with the media and issuing press releases.

A well-informed society is essential to the existence of a democratic nation. The free press serves the public with needed information, stimulating thought and by providing a medium for expression.

The Office of the Coroner is regularly involved in events which becomes newsworthy and normally the news media are present in performing their task of gathering information.

The Office of the Coroner needs to establish a professional and cooperative relationship with the news media outlets. While Coroners and their Staff have a definitive job to perform, so does the media. The news media needs to obtain information on matters of public interest in a professional manner which will not hamper investigations. However, certain information may/must be withheld from the news media in order to protect the integrity of the investigation, protect the constitutional rights of an accused and avoiding any interference of the investigation or it is legally privileged information.

When on the scene of a death investigation and the media is present, media representatives will often seek information from a Deputy Coroner/Investigator. If the Coroner or Coroner's Supervisor is present on the scene, refer the media requests directly to them.

The Coroner **SHOULD** establish a written policy within the office regarding the release of vital death information to the media. It is recommended that only authorized Coroner's staff members who are trained in Public Information Officer courses offered through PEMA and FEMA or similar courses handle media relations. Staff members should be authorized by the Coroner or Chief Deputy Coroner to handle media inquiries including social media statements on behalf of the office.

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Any information released by the Coroner's office to the media can be used in future civil or criminal court proceedings including any information proven to be inaccurate after it's communicated.

The general public has a strong interest in the Office of the Coroner and the investigations you conduct. During the course of normal daily operations, the media may contact the office for any information on a variety of subjects such as follow up questions, new investigations or on a specific decedent. The media may also try to obtain information on criminal matters that law enforcement or a District Attorney may not and can not release. Be extremely careful with these types of questioning. Refer the media back to the DA or Police handling the criminal investigation.

It should be an established policy of the Office, that all media releases be in writing for consistency. When speaking with multiple outlets, information may be translated and publicly released differently. ***BE CAREFUL WITH YOUR WORDS.***

At times, the media may request an interview from the Coroner or staff member pertaining to a certain investigation. Based on the facts and circumstances of the death, the Coroner may grant the interview. All interviews should be handled solely by the Coroner or an individual authorized by the Coroner.

In the event the Coroner is unavailable for media requests or releases, he/she may assign a staff member to handle the release of information. When this occurs, the Coroner should advise the member of the information that can be released. Again, this release should be completed in a written media release.

***REMEMBER, NOTHING IS OFF THE RECORD!***

Some ways to protect the integrity of a death investigation when releasing information:

<b><u>Cause of Death</u></b>	<b><u>Released Information</u></b>
Gunshot Wound to the Head	Gunshot Wound to the Body
Gunshot Wounds to Head, Chest & Neck	Multiple Gunshot Wounds
Stab Wound(s) to Chest	Multiple Stab Wounds to Body
Multiple Traumatic Injuries due to Motor Vehicle Accident - Can be the same wordage	

**Example of Media Release:**

John J. Doe – 30 Years Old  
Anytown, PA

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Deputy Coroner Smith pronounced Mr. Doe dead at the scene, on Wednesday, April 26, 2023, at 1645 hours.

The cause of death is attributed to multiple gunshot wounds. The manner of death was ruled Homicide. An autopsy will be performed on Thursday, April 27<sup>th</sup>, to determine the exact cause of death.

The incident occurred on April 26, 2023, at approximately 1615 hours, at the intersection of Fifth and Union Streets, Anytown.

The (NAME) County Coroner's Office is conducting the investigation along with the (NAME) Police Department with the assistance of the (NAME) County District Attorney's Office.

NO further comment at this time!

Remember, the legal next of kin **SHALL** be notified of the death prior to releasing the decedent's name and information.

In the event of searching for the legal next of kin, then the decedent's information maybe released to the media, in an effort to locate the family member(s).