

# Understanding How Law Enforcement Shares Information with the Public

Transparency is a vital component of a healthy community-police relationship. Sharing information is one way a law enforcement agency can be transparent, but there are instances when information cannot be shared. Knowing how, when, and what types of information cannot be publicly shared by law enforcement agencies can help create a better understanding of what law enforcement officers do and why they do it. It is critical for communities and police departments to understand each other's needs and create mechanisms that allow both to get the timely support and information they desire. Because laws governing the release of information vary from one jurisdiction to another, contact your local department for further guidance about their policies and procedures.

## Why Can't I Know?

While many law enforcement agencies understand that transparency can help develop legitimacy and foster community-police trust, there are times information cannot be shared. The following situations may restrict the public sharing of information:

- **Active Criminal Investigation**—Information may not be released that could hinder an investigation. Typically, only minimal information is released until an investigation is closed. At times, basic descriptions of the crime, the victim(s), the suspect(s), or stolen and damaged items may be released at the discretion of the agency.
- **Serious Injury or Death of a Community Member or Officer**—To protect the privacy of victims and their families, only limited information can be released until the victim's next of kin has been notified of the injury or death.
- **Juvenile Arrest**—Juveniles involved in a criminal investigation are generally protected from public release of their information, including names, addresses, and basic identifying information. In most circumstances, it is legally prohibited to release juvenile criminal records to the public.
- **Informants or Undercover Officers**—Some criminal investigations use confidential informants or undercover law enforcement officers to collect and provide information about a crime or series of crimes. For their safety and protection, the identity of informants or undercover officers, and certain information they have provided, is not shared with the public.
- **Internal Police Investigations**—Details of the investigation and the identity of those involved may need to be withheld temporarily to protect privacy and allow a fair investigation. Law enforcement agencies will typically release information about an investigation if doing so will help move the investigation along, or once doing so will no longer impede the investigation. Employment laws and officer contracts also guide what information may be publicly released.

## How Do Police Share Information With Me?

- **Website**—Agency websites vary depending upon the technical capacity and goals of the agency and community, but may contain policies, staff information, events, frequently asked questions, and other pertinent information or services for the community.
- **Social Media**—Social media platforms are typically more interactive than the agency

Law enforcement agencies use various forms of communication including press releases, websites, social media, public meetings, and media interviews to share different types of information.

website. Often these platforms are managed by the agency's Public Information Officer and feature relevant information for the community. Many agencies also choose to highlight instances of officers interacting with the community, requests for assistance in identifying a suspect or stolen property, or other announcements. Social media platforms are an easy way for law enforcement agencies

to connect with the community and humanize the profession.

- **Meetings**—Public meetings have a variety of purposes and structures, some might include a community event; a meeting focused on a single issue or topic, a neighborhood or civic association convening, or larger public forum held at city hall.

## How Do I Communicate With My Police Agency?

Some police departments also conduct community satisfaction and police-contact surveys; these are important ways that people can give feedback to their department. Knowing how the police connect with the community will help you understand the best channels of communication to use to allow your questions or concerns to reach the appropriate agency officials. Sign up for your agency's emails, emergency

Law enforcement agencies want to hear from you, the communities they serve. Many agencies' websites explain how you can provide suggestions to the department such as contact information for connecting to a law enforcement officer, upcoming events where people can share their experiences, and tip-lines for investigations or public safety concerns. Some agencies respond directly to inquiries and posts on social media, while some are more accessible via email.

alert system, and their social media channels to stay informed and engaged with your law enforcement.

Open channels of communication between law enforcement agencies and community members go both ways and should be used by community members to express concerns or submit inquiries to law enforcement agencies. Understanding these channels of

communications, guidelines, policies, and laws which dictate how law enforcement share information with the public is crucial to understanding the roles and responsibilities of police departments, and can help improve how community members engage with law enforcement to develop trust, transparency, and respect, as well as enhance public safety for all.

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*This project was supported, in whole or in part, by Cooperative Agreement Number 2017-CK-WX-K004 awarded by the U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Community Oriented Policing Services. The opinions contained herein are those of the author(s) or contributor(s) and do not necessarily represent the official position or policies of the U.S. Department of Justice. References to specific individuals, agencies, companies, products, or services should not be considered an endorsement by the author(s) or the U.S. Department of Justice. Rather, the references are illustrations to supplement discussion of the issues. The Internet references cited in this publication were valid as of the date of publication. Given that URLs and websites are in constant flux, neither the author(s) nor the COPS Office can vouch for their current validity.*