

**Commissioned Officers Association of the  
United States Public Health Service  
MEDIA OUTREACH PRIMER**

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**Overview**

There is tremendous competition and change in the media industry today and media outlets and reporters are stretched thin. Daily newspapers are increasingly falling back on national news services and syndicated columnists for content, so they do not have as many local beat reporters covering issues or space for local commentary on their opinion pages.

All of these industry pressures make the job of the local reporter harder. In addition to following events and reviewing information they have sought out on their own for planned stories, they must filter through hundreds of unsolicited emails and faxes from companies and organizations eager to tell their stories.

To get their attention, you must answer the question they will ask themselves: “Who cares?” Once they care, you need to help make their job easier by giving them access to information and perspective they could not get as easily on their own.

The COA has an interesting and important story to tell, but it is a matter of timing. Absent a “hard news” story (something of immediate impact or consequence) or an advocacy position (taking sides on an issue or debate), COA media outreach should be geared around providing background information to local media so that they will view you as a source for their future coverage of related issues. The goal is not to get an immediate story as much as it is to have a better chance of being a part of more future stories.

Because newspapers are still the major drivers of other news and because they have more room for in-depth stories and analysis, we are focusing this primer on outreach to local newspapers. The same basic principles can be applied to television, but what you provide them needs to be geared to their end product – a short segment with video and sound-bytes.

**What Makes News?**

- Consequence – educates and informs; is important to lifestyle or has moral or social importance; it is “should know” material
- Interest – is unusual, entertaining, has human interest, is something people are talking about
- Timeliness – material is current; is a new angle on events, a trend
- Proximity – pertains to local issues or events
- Prominence – concerns famous people or events, is related to other media coverage

## **Press Releases**

Press releases are how organizations report their news to media outlets. A good press release will read like a newspaper article, making the reporter's job easier. It should have a strong lead paragraph that answers the questions Who, What, When, Where and Why. Subsequent paragraphs should include supporting facts and figures as well as a quote or quotes from individuals who can provide a unique perspective or point of view that adds interest to the story.

A press release is an opportunity to tell your overarching story, but it must have a timely "hook" or driving event that makes it newsworthy.

Press releases should be sent via email or fax to the assignment desk and/or the beat reporter (e.g. health reporter). It is appropriate to include a brief factsheet with additional background material as an attachment.

After you send a release, you should place a follow-up call to offer additional information and interview availability.

All press releases issued by COA branches must include a disclaimer statement that neither COA nor the local branch is part of the federal government or that we purport to speak for or represent the official views of the federal government, DHHS, or any of its operating divisions or agencies.

**Suggested Action:** Send out a press release either immediately before or immediately after the May conference. Attach the two-page fact sheet. Place a follow-up call afterwards to offer a briefing on the USPHS and what was discussed at the conference.

## **Background Briefings and Interviews**

An interview is usually geared around a specific story that a reporter is working on. Background sessions, on the other hand, are where a reporter gathers general information to become more familiar with issues for future stories. You do not need a hard news driver to reach out to reporters to offer a background briefing, but a hook of some sort does not hurt.

Tips when talking to a reporter:

- Consider obtaining clearance from DHHS Public Affairs before speaking with a reporter. National COA will assist in seeking such clearance. Unless prior clearance from DHHS PA is obtained, ensure that the reporter understands that you are not commenting in your official capacity – only as a member of the Commissioned Officers Association, representing the views of the Association only.
- Think ahead of time about the story you want to communicate – focus on key message points that you can easily remember and go back to those points often (repetition is effective).
- Use facts and figures to help back-up the story. Never guess. If you do not know something they are asking about, perhaps you can steer their research in the right direction.

- Use anecdotal examples. Numbers alone do not tell a story, people do. Whenever possible, help put a face on the story.
- Consider the audience. The reporter is just a conduit to the general public. Use language and terminology that anyone can understand. Think about how you would explain the USPHS to your family or friends. What would interest them? What level of detail would they need to understand?
- Whenever you talk to a reporter, talk as if the tape recorder is running. What you say, even in a casual setting, is fair game for them to print.

**Suggested Action:** If the local branch will be represented at the conference, then use the press release as a hook for a background briefing. If not, then look at other news coverage of public health issues. Call the reporter and mention that you have been reading their work and that you think it is important for them to be familiar with the USPHS.

### **Editorial Board Meetings**

An Editorial Board is a group of editors, editorial (opinion) writers and reporters at a newspaper. Politicians running for office and organizations with advocacy viewpoints will meet with Editorial Boards to provide an overview of their perspective on a campaign or issue.

- The same considerations outlined above regarding DHHS clearance for speaking with reporters applies even more so in seeking meetings with Editorial Boards.
- **Suggested Action:** Requests for meetings would be appropriate immediately following the May conference to share perspective gained there. Meetings can also be requested based on other locally relevant issues or events. Editorial Boards will press for your point of view, so only spokespeople who are comfortable with this sort of interaction should seek such audiences.

### **Letters-to-the-Editor**

Letters-to-the-editor are a forum for people – anyone – to comment on news stories and issues that are in the news. If you see a story that has a public health angle that you think was missed, write a letter that fills in the gaps. The letter does not need to be critical of the coverage, it just needs to add a new perspective.

- All officers have the right to write a letter to the editor, including identifying information that you are a member of the PHS Commissioned Corps. Just be sure to make it clear that you write as an individual, not in your official capacity, and that views you express are your own and not the federal government's.

**Suggested Action:** The draft letter provided does not need a news story or event to justify sending it, but finding a link increases the chance of it being printed. Find an opportunity to submit a letter.