
LAURENS COUNTY LAW ENFORCEMENT CENTER

STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES

SOP# A-140

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SUBJECT: PUBLIC INFORMATION

INDEX AS: PUBLIC INFORMATION: NEWS RELEASE

EFFECTIVE DATE: APRIL 20, 2005 REVISED DATE:

I. **PURPOSE:**

To establish guidelines which will assist Laurens County Law Enforcement personnel in making news releases and in providing cooperation and assistance to news media with regard to cases and/or incidents over which the Laurens County Law Enforcement Center has primary responsibility and jurisdiction.

II. **POLICY:**

It is the policy of the Laurens County Law Enforcement Center to cooperate fully and impartially with properly identified representatives of the news media in their efforts to gather and disseminate factual information that is consistent with established procedures and where such individual rights or privacy, or upon individual rights to a fair and impartial trial.

III. **DEFINITIONS:**

A. News Media:

Includes properly identified representatives of local, national and international news organizations.

B. News Incidents:

Includes the civil and law enforcement activities of the Laurens County Law Enforcement Center in response to newsworthy public events. News incidents do not include discussion of the internal policies of the Laurens County Law Enforcement Center or personal or private opinions concerning policy or procedures of the Laurens County Law Enforcement Center. (Only the **SHERIFF** may make official comment on internal investigations and other sensitive matters.)

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- C. Public Records:
Public information; except as specifically restricted herein, and/or by State or Federal law, traffic accident, non-traffic accident, miscellaneous incident, arrest or other criminal incident information of a routine nature are considered in the public domain and such information will be made available upon request to news media representatives.

IV. **INVESTIGATION INFORMATION RELEASE AUTHORIZATION:**

Investigation information shall be released only by the Sheriff or assigned personnel. Investigative information which may be released is applicable only over cases which the Laurens County Law Enforcement Center has primary responsibility and jurisdiction. In investigations where there is mutual effort by the Laurens County Law Enforcement Center and another agency has primary responsibility, the other agency (State or Federal) will determine guidelines and control the release of information.

- A. What may be released: Investigation information which may be released unless otherwise restricted herein, includes:
1. The type, or nature, of an incident such as fire, accident, homicide, suicide, rape, robbery, assault, or burglary.
 2. The location, date and time, injuries sustained, damages, and a description of how the incident occurred.
 3. Amount and type of property taken, including value when known.
 4. The identity and general address of a victim. See exceptions Paragraph B.
 5. Casualty figures, to include known dead or injured, may be released.

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6. The name, age, sex, race, and address of any adult charged with a crime.
 7. The fact that a juvenile has been taken into custody, including sex, age, general area of residence.
 8. Requests for aid in locating evidence, a complainant or a suspect. A person's race may be released as descriptive information in such cases.
 9. Numbers of officers, or people, involved in an event or investigation and the length of the investigation.
- B. What Should NOT be released: Information which shall not be released in connection with investigations of crimes include:
1. The identity of any victim of a sex crime, abduction, spouse or child abuse, or related information which, if divulged, would tend to lead to the victim's identification.
 2. The identity of any juvenile under the age of 17 who is a suspect or a defendant in any case over which the Juvenile Court of Laurens County, Georgia, has jurisdiction.
 3. The identity of any critically injured or deceased person prior to the notification of next of kin. (Exception will be when notification has been attempted but is not possible within a reasonable time as determined by the Sheriff.)
 4. The specific cause of death until determined by the State Medical Examiner or the County coroner.
 5. Investigative information and information of an evidentiary nature.

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6. Contents of suicide notes.
7. Personal opinion not founded in fact.
8. Unofficial statements concerning personnel or internal affairs matters.
9. Home addresses and telephone numbers of members of the Laurens County Law Enforcement Center.
10. Valuables or cash overlooked by crime perpetrators.

V. **ARREST INFORMATION:**

- A. What may be released: Certain facts may generally be released at the time of, or immediately following an arrest and formal charging. These facts include:
 1. The accused's name, age, description, residence, employment, marital status (except juveniles).
 2. The substance or text of the charge as contained in a complaint, warrant or indictment.
 3. The identity of the investigating and arresting officer (s) , or agency, and the length of the investigation. (Exception: identity of undercover officers will not be released.)
 4. The circumstances immediately surrounding an arrest.
 5. Amount of bond, scheduled court dates, place of detention.
- B. What should not be released: Arrest information which shall not be released (except by the Sheriff or his designee to aid an investigation or warn the public) generally falls into two categories.

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1. After an incident, but before arrest, or during investigations, information should not be released regarding:
 - a. The identity or location of any suspect, except that the existence of a suspect may be acknowledged without further comment:
 - b. Results of an investigative procedure, such as a lineup, polygraph, fingerprinting, lab or ballistics test. The fact that tests are performed may be acknowledged without further comment:
 - c. Information which, if prematurely disclosed, would significantly interfere with an investigation or apprehension, particularly:
 1. Unchecked leads, unverified information, specifics of "MO", or officer information which may cause a suspect to flee or avoid apprehension:
 2. Identity of a victim/witness if such disclosure would prejudice an investigation to any significant degree, or if it would place the victim in clear personal danger. (Consider "degree" and "danger" carefully, and state reasons clearly, when with-holding information)
2. After an arrest and formal charging, but prior to adjudication, certain information is restricted to ensure Constitutional guarantees of a fair and impartial trial. Also, improper disclosure could form the basis for a legal defense. Therefore, during this sensitive period, information should not be released concerning:

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- a. Prior criminal record, character, or reputation of a defendant:
- b. Existence, or contents, or any confession, admission, statement of defendant, or the failure to make such.
- c. Performance or results of any test, or a defendant's refusal or failure to submit to investigative retests such as a polygraph and other types.
- d. Identity, credibility, character, statement (s) or expected testimony of any witness, or prospective witness:
- e. Statement (s) , prospective testimony, character, or credibility of any victim:
- f. Any opinion about the guilt or innocence of a defendant, or the merits of the case, including arguments and evidence, or whether their use in court is expected:
- g. Possibility of a guilty plea, plea bargaining, or other disposition:
- h. Reports, transcripts, or summaries of proceedings from which the press and public have been excluded by judicial order.

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VI. SPECIAL CONSIDERATIONS:

A. At crime or incident scene:

1. General Access:

Laurens County Law Enforcement Center employees shall extend every courtesy to properly identified news media representatives (reporters and photographers) who are actively covering an incident at the scene. These courtesies shall permit closer access than that granted to the general public, and shall provide for vehicles and equipment to be located closer, so long as such courtesy does not interfere with either the mission or with general traffic flow. Also, where there is the danger of personal injury, access shall be restricted until the officer in charge determines the area is safe.

2. Direct access at crime scene:

Direct access by media personnel shall be allowed only after all known evidence has been processed and the on site investigation has been completed. This restriction is necessary to preserve the integrity of the scene. Permission must be obtained from owners or their representative for media access and when photographs, films or video tape are to be taken on private property.

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3. Hostage, barricade situation:

In hostage barricade situations, the officer in charge shall designate a preliminary press area immediately upon arrival at the scene and may establish it closer to the scene when safe to do so.

4. At Fire Scenes, Disaster Scenes:

Information may be released at the scene of an incident only by the officer in charge. In emergency incidents, media personnel should contact the patrol supervisor for the release of information.

B. At Fire Scenes, Disaster Scenes:

Media access to, and movement within, fire lines at commercial and residential fire scenes is controlled by the fire officer in charge. When news media arrive at such events, the ranking patrol officer on the scene shall confer with the fire official in charge and assist in establishing an observation point for the media.

Media access to disaster scenes shall be controlled by the Civil Defense Director. If he/she is absent, media access will be limited to the on-scene command post. The fact that a suicide note exists may also be acknowledged, without further comment. Contents of all such messages are considered personal and confidential and shall not be made public.

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C. Citizen Requests: Explain, Record, Notify.

Should a citizen request that information on an incident not be released or reported to the media, Deputies will explain that crime information is generally considered public information, and therefore, available to news media. Deputies will also explain that such a request will be noted, in the official report on the incident. Once so noted, the decision to publish unrestricted information about the event shall be left to the media. Deputies may also verbally advise their supervisor of such a request whenever it is considered advisable to do so.

VII. MEDIA REQUEST FOR INFORMATION:

A. Routine Inquiries:

Major cases and unusual events which generate a great amount of media interest will be handled by the Sheriff.

NOTE: Deputies needing advice, counsel, or public information assistance at an incident scene are urged to request it. Such request should be made by telephone rather than by voice radio.

B. Special Requests for Information:

Requests for information from specific Laurens County Law Enforcement Center employees which may be considered background, statistical, documentary, or of a special or feature nature will be directed to the Chief Deputy and or Sheriff. News representatives making such requests may be referred by the appropriate Laurens County Law Enforcement Center Division, and that member will be promptly notified of the pending inquiry or interview.

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When the initial request is made directly to an agency member by the media, the employee should promptly notify the Chief Deputy for coordination purposes prior to providing the information requested.

Employees of the Laurens County Law Enforcement Center may not use Departmental resources (personnel or equipment) to perform special research projects or gather extensive data in response to media requests for information not normally available to the Department. Department employees may suggest sources for the information.

VIII. **NEWS RELEASED, FEATURES, ANNOUNCEMENTS:**

Responsibility for planning, developing writing and distributing information released and articles about the programs and activities of the Laurens County Law Enforcement Center and its employees rests with the Sheriff.

Press releases shall be prepared weekly by the Sheriff, if needed, and disseminated to local newspaper and radio stations.

Newsworthy information concerning promotions, projects programs or other activities, should be forwarded in writing in advance of effective dates, or by telephone when time doesn't permit or there is an urgent need to release the information by the Sheriff.

IX. **NOTIFICATION REQUIREMENT:**

Certain particularly newsworthy incidents require immediate notification of the Chief Deputy by the Deputy in charge of an incidents scene and of the news media by Communications.

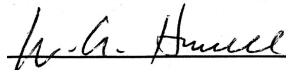
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1. Disasters resulting in loss of life or extensive property damage;
2. Fires resulting in multiple loss of life;
3. Aircraft, train accidents where fatalities occur;
4. Death of persons in custody;
5. School bus accidents involving injuries;
6. Manhunts when extensive search is involved;
7. Strikes, riots, disorders;
8. Shootings, involving law enforcement officers;
9. Bomb threats, where a device is found;
10. Hostage, barricade situations where life is threatened or endangered over an extended period of time .
11. Accident involving hazardous materials.



W. A. HARRELL
SHERIFF

04/20/2005

DATE