

Policy and Procedure
BUNCOMBE COUNTY HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES/DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

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3.1. The policy of Buncombe County Department of Health (BCDH) is to ensure that individuals from the public or the media requesting information from BCDH staff receive accurate and relevant information in a timely manner.

4.0 Definitions

- 4.1. **Media**—includes reporters/journalists, camera people from television, radio, newspaper outlets.
- 4.2. **Media contact checklist**—is a form used by a spokesperson before an interview to identify the main points they would like to share with the reporter and prepare for any other questions a reporter may ask.
- 4.3. **Public Information Officer (PIO)**—is designated by the Health Director. In the PIO’s absence, the role is designated to other trained staff. The PIO’s role is **to be the primary** contact with the media, schedule interviews, assist staff who are being interviewed, and coordinate media contacts with program managers and the Health Director.
- 4.4. **Media Phone Line and email contact** – A dedicated cell phone number, 828.775.1321, media & staff use to contact the PIO to request information. The Media phone line is monitored seven days a week. There is a dedicated email for media communication needs: hhspio@buncombecounty.org
- 4.5. **Workforce**—the word staff is used in this policy to refer to the workforce. Staff includes employees, volunteers, trainees, students, and other persons whose actions, in the performance of work for BCDH , whether or not they are paid by the BCDH.
- 4.6. **News release** – is a written document, approved by the Health Director and sent to the media to convey important information to the public.
- 4.7. **Communications Team- comprised of representatives across Health and Human Services who work collaboratively to develop communications materials and strategies that address agency public relations needs**

5.0 Responsibilities

- 5.1. All members of the workforce who are authorized to communicate with the general public and the media will utilize this policy.
- 5.2. The Health Director will determine which members of the workforce are authorized to communicate with the public / media and will provide procedures to enable the workforce to support this policy as needed.
- 5.3. Designated staff will serve as “back-up” to the PIO and perform duties during the PIO’s absence. If more than one person serves as back-up during the PIO’s absence, then a schedule of coverage must be developed and followed.
- 5.4. Staff responding to any request for health information should always do so in a timely manner and with careful attention to HIPAA and Title VI policies.

6.0 Procedure

6.1. Requests from Media for Information or Interview

- 6.1.1. Agency staff approved by the Health Director, who have completed the agency’s Media Spokesperson Training or Public Information Officer training are authorized to serve as spokespersons, arranged by the PIO or designee.
- 6.1.2. Authorization for untrained BCDH staff to speak or provide information to reporters is made on a case-by-case basis in cooperation with the PIO and approval by the Health Director.
- 6.1.3. If you are authorized to speak to the media, respond according to the following guidelines:
 - 6.1.3.1. If a reporter calls staff directly, refer him or her to the PIO by calling the designated **media phone line (828.775.1321)**. The PIO will determine what the reporter’s needs and coordinate with the Health Director to identify the appropriate person to assist with agency response to media request. Do not ignore a reporter's call. PIO or designee should acknowledge reporter’s request within 15 minutes if possible.
 - 6.1.3.2. Fill out a media contact checklist (available on Health Intranet) before each interview and forward it to the PIO after the interview. Use this form to develop the key messages for the reporter. PIO will file checklists on H:Media by fiscal year.
 - 6.1.3.3. Staff who are approved to be interviewed by a reporter can communicate directly with the reporter unless questions or requests are not related to the key messages approved by the Health Director. If this should happen, consult with PIO.

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- 6.1.3.4. Reporters sometimes leave messages on voice mails or emails with employees other than the PIO. If an employee is going to be out of the office for a day or more, then voice mail and email should indicate that absence. That way a reporter won't expect a call back and will pursue other options for gathering information or requesting an interview.
- 6.1.3.5. Reporters are not allowed in clinical areas unless escorted by trained staff. If a reporter enters a BCDH or DSS public area (i.e. waiting areas), staff at the reception desk should inform the reporter that County Ordinance prohibits filming on the premises and ask reporter to wait and call PIO for an escort.
- 6.1.3.6. IF YOU ARE IN DOUBT ABOUT WHETHER YOU SHOULD RESPOND TO ANY MEDIA QUESTION, OR NEED ADVICE ABOUT HOW TO RESPOND, CHECK WITH THE PIO BY CALLING 828.775.1321.**

6.1.4. Basic guidelines to remember when talking with the media:

- Make sure that reporter's calls are returned promptly (within 15 minutes).
- Always assure any contact with the media is approved by the PIO.
- Prepare for the interview by completing the Media Checklist form to be filed with PIO.
- Avoid bureaucratic language, jargon and acronyms; explain in layman's terms.
- Explain complex programs in simple, easy to understand terms.
- Give facts, not opinions or speculation.
- Don't comment about things outside of your area of expertise.
- Never lie.
- Stay on the record. Assume that anything you say while with a reporter can be shared with the public.
- Never say "no comment." If you can't answer a question, tell the reporter why.
- Never be condescending.
- Be patient.
- Never be argumentative, confrontational or lose your temper with a reporter.

6.2. Inquiries from the public about Policy, Budget, Legislative Issues, Personnel Issues or Controversial Topics

- 6.2.1. If a request comes from a member of the public, refer the request as indicated in 1 through 5. The BCDH PIO or designee handles all requests *from the media* about the subjects listed in 1 through 5 below. If staff are unsure of how to handle the request for information contact PIO or Health Director.
 - (1) Refer budget questions to the Health Director or a Senior Leadership Team member.
 - (2) Refer questions about program/department policy to the program/department director. If the program or department director is not available, refer the call to the Health Director.
 - (3) Refer questions about legislative issues to the Health Director.
 - (4) Refer questions about a legal issue to the Health Director.
 - (5) Refer questions about personnel matters, to the Health and Human Services Human Resources (HR) Director. If the HR Director is not available, refer the call to the Health Director
- 6.2.2. If staff are dealing with a particularly controversial issue, please consult with the Health Director, Medical Director, or PIO about the proper response.

6.3. Release of Information or Data

- 6.3.1. All releases of information, including data, must follow North Carolina General Statute 132 (Public Records) and BCDH HIPAA and Title VI policies. (see 7.0) Information dissemination must also be culturally and linguistically appropriate and accessible to special populations when appropriate.
- 6.3.2. Health information in the form of fact sheets, news releases, health reports, posters, brochures, and description of services that are developed by the Communications Team is available at the Health and Human Services building in public and clinic areas. Information is also posted on the Buncombe County Government website: www.buncombecounty.org/health. All information posted on the web is also available by contacting the number listed on the webpage. Selected critical Health information is available in Spanish and Russian on the website as well as copies available in areas accessible to the public. All

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information posted on the website or printed for distribution must be approved by Health Director prior to dissemination.

- 6.3.3. If an individual requests data related to health or human services the following steps should be taken:
- (1) The program supervisor should determine the reason for the request (grant, research project, personal interest, etc) and determine best source of information (support from IT, health promotion staff, HSST Planner Evaluators, NC State Center for Health Statistics, etc).
 - (2) All requests for information & proposed responses should be approved by Health Director before data is provided.
 - (3) All requests must be answered within 24 hours.
 - (4) Data that is provided should be accurate and replicable (should be able to find it again if needed).

6.4. News Releases and Publications

- 6.5.1. All news releases and publications must go through the PIO or designee and get approval from the Health Director or designee. BCDH staff do not have the authority to issue news releases or publications without Health Director's/designee's review and approval.
- 6.5.2. If you have a need for a news release, please contact the PIO as soon as possible. The Media Coordinator will also distribute the release and complete appropriate follow through with the media.
- 6.5.3. BCDH information disseminated to the public, such as fact sheets, news articles, program information, BCTV, county website, etc., must be approved by the Health Director or designee before being released or submitted.

7.0. Legal Authority

- 7.1. NCGS 132
- 7.2. HIPAA Privacy Rule 45 CFR 160 and 164
- 7.3. Title VI of the Civil Rights Act
- 7.4. NC Local Health Department Accreditation