



## Media Relations Policy

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#### 1. **Purpose**

Buncombe County Government is committed to working cooperatively and transparently with the media to disseminate information of public interest and concern in an accurate, complete and timely manner. This policy provides framework and guidelines for how County Government Employees interact with the media.

#### 2. **Applicability**

This policy applies to all Buncombe County Government departments and employees. Where there is conflict with any department-specific policy, this document will supersede.

#### 3. **Policy**

##### 3.1. **Media Inquiries/Requests for Records**

3.1.1. Inquiries from the media are to be given a high priority by Buncombe County Government and should be responded to as quickly and efficiently as possible. Every reasonable effort should be made to meet media deadlines when possible and to ensure that all information released is accurate and complete.

3.1.2. The media should be treated like a customer of Buncombe County Government and all County employees who engage with the media shall do so in a courteous, polite and professional manner.

3.1.3. Any media inquiries received by County staff will be referred to the appropriate Public Information Officer (PIO) for response. Buncombe County Government shall designate three PIOs that will serve as liaisons between the media and Buncombe County Government. The three PIOs are as follows, and they or their designees will serve as the point of contact and/or spokesperson for all media requests specific to their organizations:

- Health and Human Services (HHS)
- Sheriff's Office
- Buncombe County Government– all other requests outside of HHS and the Sheriff's Office

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3.1.4. To assure that the County's elected officials have accurate, complete and timely information to fulfill their responsibilities to represent the public, the Director of Communications and Public Engagement or their designee shall inform County elected officials of significant media inquiries by email.

3.1.5. All department directors shall receive media training to help ensure that they have the skills to successfully communicate across the spectrum of media outlets.

### **3.2. County Spokespersons**

Authorized County spokespersons that the County PIO, in their judgment, may designate for a particular response are:

- The Buncombe County Manager
- Assistant Buncombe County Government Managers
- All Buncombe County Department Directors
- Buncombe County Sheriff's Office PIO
- Buncombe County Health and Human Services PIO
- Buncombe County employees with expertise on a specific issue

The Chair of the Board of Commissioners may also serve as a spokesperson if they so choose.

### **3.3. Record Requests**

3.3.1. All media requests for records will be handled in accordance with this policy, to the extent it is consistent with Chapter 132 of the North Carolina General Statutes.

3.3.2. PIOs will be responsible for managing media record requests within their given purview, the exception being media requests for 911 records, for which the PIO will partner with Emergency Services to provide the requested public records. Media requests for 911 records should be made through the record request portal.

3.3.3. Best efforts are to be made to ensure that all record requests are completed in an accurate and timely manner.

### **3.4. Privileged and Private Information**

3.4.1. When a media request for an interview or for records involves a subject matter that may be privileged or private, the PIOs and/or the Director of Communications and Public Engagement should consult with the County Attorney prior to responding.

Examples of such subject matter being:

- Litigation or the threat of litigation
- Personnel issues
- DSS inquiries
- Real estate transactions
- Protected health information
- Confidential as protected by North Carolina General Statute

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- Any documents in draft form

### 3.5. **Personal Points of View**

3.5.1. Unless serving as elected officials, Buncombe County Government employees who present personal or individual views must make clear that they are presenting their personal and/or individual views—not the views of Buncombe County Government—and they should not be sourced as a Buncombe County Government representative or make reference to their official title or position in the piece. This provision includes authorship of letters to the editors and opinion-editorial columns. In addition, such letters to the editors or opinion-editorial columns should not be provided on Buncombe County Government letterhead.

### 3.6. **Media Engagement**

3.6.1. Proactive contact with the media on behalf of the County will be carried out through the County PIOs and/or Director of Communications and Public Engagement – this includes but is not limited to press releases, media advisories, personal contacts with reporters, and editors for coverage.

3.6.2. Departments seeking publicity for events or activities, or needing to collaborate with the media to communicate important information to the public, will coordinate with the County PIOs and/or Director of Communications and Public Engagement.

### 3.7. **Public Safety Issues** – *steps included in procedures document*

### 3.8. **Crisis or Emergency Issues**

3.8.1. During a crisis or major emergency (i.e. flooding, tornado, mass casualty incident, pandemic, etc.), the procedure for communicating with the media is outlined in the County’s Crisis Communications Plan.

## 4. **Policy Non-Compliance**

Employees willfully violating the terms and conditions of this policy may be subject to appropriate disciplinary action, up to and including dismissal. This policy does not apply to employees serving Buncombe County Government as elected officials.

## 5. **Audit**

All policies for Buncombe County may be subject to audit or review as outlined in the [Internal Auditor’s Statement](#).

## 6. **Definitions**

6.1. Media outlet - a publication or broadcast medium that transmits news, feature stories, entertainment, or other information to the public through various distribution channels-

6.2. Public Information Officer (PIO) - the individual responsible for communicating with the public, media, and/or coordinating with other agencies, as necessary, and providing requested information as required by law.

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6.3. Record Requests - North Carolina’s public records law provides a broad right of access to records of public agencies. The main statutes that define the scope of the law are contained in Chapter 132 of the North Carolina General Statutes.

**7. Approval and Revision History**

Policy Origination Date:	August 26, 2021
Requires Board Approval:	No
Board Approval Date:	Click for Date
Revision History	Date: Explain changes (by whom)

**8. Background**

Buncombe County Government maintains relationships with print, video, broadcast, and audio media outlets locally, regionally, and nationally for the purpose of providing transparent, timely, and accurate information to the public.

Chapter 132 of the North Carolina General Statutes - G.S. 132-1 establishes a broad definition of public record, and G.S. 132-6 entitles any person to examine and have a copy of any public record. The North Carolina state supreme court has concluded that these statutory rights extend to all documents meeting the definition of public record, unless the General Assembly has enacted a statute that limits or denies public access to a category of record. As a result, the great bulk of material held by local governments in North Carolina is public record and therefore open to public access. Financial records, leases and contracts, insurance policies, reports, agency minutes, permit applications, emails, and information in computer databases are all examples of records that generally must be made available to the public upon request.

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