



PROTECT AND SERVE

Handling Tough Conversations

There are some situations that may make communicating with the public and media difficult.

- Officer-involved shootings
- Pursuits
- Incidents involving use of force
- Police misconduct
- Other crisis situations

WHAT CAN YOU DO?

Be present immediately. Make a comment and be available and accessible for questions. Even a “holding statement” is always better than “no comment” or ignoring requests. For example, “We’re aware of the incident and are actively investigating it at the present time. We will release more information in the near future once we have a chance to gather it.”

Provide information. Give as much information as you can, as early as possible, as long as you are not compromising the investigation or officer safety. Withholding basic information may erode trust and cause further issues within the community.

Formulating a Response. As soon as you become aware of an incident that is going to attract significant attention, gather the necessary people at the table and quickly formulate talking points. The necessary personnel may be a public information officer, command staff members, city/county manager, city/county counsel, investigators, etc. Everyone will have a different perspective and insight, but the collective wisdom and knowledge of all will help frame a measured and articulate response.

Avoid “cop speak.” Speak in clear language and avoid jargon or legalese. Express empathy for the incident, not to take blame, just be willing to say you are sorry it happened and express concern for those involved.

Explain the process. Be prepared to explain department policy regarding internal and investigative processes. Have subject matter experts handy if necessary to further explain situation-related details.

Listen. Especially at community meetings. Ask for people’s opinions, and then listen to them and don’t interrupt. Take questions from the audience and then earnestly give the most honest answer you can in the circumstances.

Don’t hide. If there is a mistake, admit it, learn from it, implement measures so that it does not happen again, and move on. “Bad news” will eventually be uncovered, and it’s always better for an agency to “break” the “bad news,” frame the message, and get out in front of the story.

