



Media Guide

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Introduction

Children Services agencies are charged with an incredibly important and difficult mission – protecting children from abuse and neglect. Few things draw more attention, sympathy and outrage than the abuse or neglect of children. And few missions are as complex as dealing with, and helping, families in crisis.

For the agency to attain success, it needs the support and involvement of the community that surrounds it. Whether it is a call to the child abuse hotline, a neighbor willing to step up as a foster parent or a system of community supports willing to aid a family, the community and the agency must work hand in hand for the successful protection of children. Community support is not a luxury; it is a necessity.

To earn that support, a children services agency must be as open as possible about its actions and accountable for the consequences of those actions. The public supports the work of children services agencies when it has information upon which to gauge and agency's decisions and effectiveness. Support comes with trust, and trust is earned.

As representatives of the public, media outlets are conduits of information to inform and influence the community. Answering to the media is not only an obligation required by law, but a necessity to build support for the good work children services agencies do. An educated reporter is more likely to provide accurate information, be fair and cover stories that present the agency in a positive light.

This media guide is designed to assist Ohio's children services agencies in understanding the media, how they operate and how to build relationships with the media. It outlines basic steps for telling positive stories and dealing with crises. It was created with input from the public, the media and public information officers throughout the state of Ohio. It draws from their experience and expertise to outline basic best practices for effective media communication.

A good reputation takes years to build and can be destroyed overnight. And what happens in one county can affect the reputation of children services agencies throughout the state. A mutual obligation exists for each children services agency to gain and maintain a positive reputation so the state's child protection system is perceived as effective as possible in pursuing its mission of protecting children from abuse and neglect.



Dealing with Confidentiality

The ethics of the children services profession are often not valued by the media, even though the professional media places a very strong value on their own ethic of maintaining confidential sources. Agency lawyers seem to prefer a minimal response level since they take potential future litigation into account. The public and media view this silence under the cloak of confidentiality as covering up mistakes. In this day and time, "No Comment" is a dirty word.

Agency leaders need to think about when and how they cite "confidentiality" as a reason for keeping information from the media. If the information is out there and incorrect, there may be an ethical responsibility to set the information straight. Also, media representatives understand state and federal confidentiality laws and also understand the Ohio Public Records Law. The media expect to be provided with the information they are legally entitled to. An agency's reputation may depend on knowing what can be provided and what cannot.

Know the laws. Know what is confidential and what is not. Know that employee personnel records are open records, except for certain information, such as employee addresses and medical records. Know that children services records are confidential, but, in the case of a child's death, it is appropriate, with prosecutor permission, to write a synopsis of the agency's actions in the case and present it to the media.

Government agencies serve the public and reporters represent the public. They are entitled to access certain information on the public's behalf. What's more, the public expects this information to be available. At the same time, children services agencies must protect the confidentiality of the people they serve. When information is shared, share as much as possible in writing. If a record is public, provide the reporter a copy. If a record is not public, cite the law that you are using when declining the request for information. This adds credibility to your position.

Here are some laws to consider when dealing with the media:

First Amendment of the U.S. Constitution

"Congress shall make no law respecting an establishment of religion, or prohibiting the free exercise thereof; or abridging the freedom of speech, or of the press; or the right of the people to peaceably assemble, and to petition the Government for a redress of grievances."

Ohio Public Records Act

"Any document, device, or item, regardless of physical form or characteristic, created or received by or coming under the jurisdiction of any public office of the state or political



subdivisions which serves to document the organization, functions, policies, decisions, procedures, operations, or other activities of the office is public information.” For more on the state’s laws governing public records, see [Ohio Revised Code Chapter 149](#).

Maintenance of Children Services Records

Ohio Revised Code 5153.17 reads “The public children services agency shall prepare and keep written records of investigations of families, children, and foster homes, and of the care, training, and treatment afforded children, and shall prepare and keep such other records as are required by the department of job and family services. Such records shall be confidential, but, except as provided by division (B) of section 3107.17 of the Revised Code, shall be open to inspection by the agency, the director of job and family services, and the director of the county department of job and family services, and by other persons upon the written permission of the executive director.”



What is News?

What is newsworthy? Dog Bites Man is not news. Man Bites Dog is. One happens all the time, the other rarely. News is determined by how unusual something is; what impact it will have and on how many people; how timely it is; how prominent it is; how much conflict there is around it. These are the questions reporters, editors and producers ask themselves in determining what stories to report. Reporters in major cities receive dozens of press releases a day – they constantly evaluate each story on its own merits and in relationship to other stories in determining which to pursue. Agency leaders should ask themselves the same questions when wondering if a situation will garner media attention or deciding best ways to pitch stories to the media.

Reporters often look for controversy. They search for victims or villains. They want emotion. Abused children are generally newsworthy because they are sympathetic victims and the public is outraged at the way they've been treated. Their stories are emotional. If they die because of that abuse they are even more newsworthy because that adds the "unusual" element – it is still a rare occurrence in most communities when a child dies from abuse. If the type of abuse afflicted on the child is unusual, i.e., malnutrition while locked in a cage, that will make the story even more newsworthy to a journalist.

Here are examples, courtesy of the *Dayton Daily News*, of traits that make something newsworthy:

- **Prominence** - Something that happens to a politician, public servant or a celebrity is more interesting than if it happens to someone not known by many. The marriage of the mayor, or the star player on the local university football team being arrested for fighting outside a local bar at midnight, are news. If this happens to someone not known to many, it is likely not news.
- **Timeliness** - An event that happened recently is more newsworthy than something that happened long ago. A story about the prevention of sunburn is more timely at the beginning of summer than in November. Most stories in a newspaper, especially on the news pages, have a sense of timeliness. The word "news" implies information that is new or timely.
- **Impact** - Something that will affect a large number of readers. A bill passed in the state senate that requires all eighth graders to pass a test before they will be allowed to advance to the ninth grade has a great deal of impact on many readers. Likewise, a new manufacturing plant coming to town that will employ 1,400 workers is also news.



- **Conflict** - Events that denote a difference of opinion that puts parties in conflict are often newsworthy. Conflict usually involves surprise, tension and/or suspense. Some typical events in conflict are: sporting events, political campaigns, social issues and crime.
- **Novelty** - Events that are unique, strange or odd. A unique event might be that a local person wins \$1 million in the lottery. A strange event could be a deer running through the downtown area of a large city or a fire station catching fire.



Who are the Media?

Media outlets are representatives of the public. Not every citizen can spend time with a children services agency, learning the intricacies of how it does business and ensuring it is achieving its mission. Many ordinary citizens rely on the media to serve that role for them and to act as a watchdog on how taxpayer money is spent. It is incumbent upon children services agencies to develop relationships with the media to ensure the right information is reaching the right people. Educating the public about child welfare will help gain the support needed for successful child protection.

Each county has its own media landscape. Some smaller counties have only one or two reporters to deal with on a regular basis. Larger counties will deal with multiple reporters and multiple mediums on a rotating basis. It is important for agencies to recognize how each medium operates and who makes the decisions on how stories are generated and presented. While a reporter may have the power to shape the individual story he or she is reporting, the power to decide what stories get reported, how long they are, how and where they are presented and even what “spin” is put on them, often lies with those in higher places.

Here’s a quick look at the different types of media outlets that might report on a public children services agency and the people who work for them:

Media Outlets

- **Newspaper:** The most traditional of all media outlets. Newspaper reporters consider themselves to be the ultimate watchdog when it comes to government and holding it accountable for its duties and how it spends tax money. While tough times have led to newspapers rapidly losing resources, newspapers are still the most likely to investigate and dig into an agency, its people and its data. Agency representatives dealing with newspaper reporters should be prepared with depth of knowledge on the subject.
- **Radio:** This medium, along with television, will require agency representatives to learn the art of the sound bite. Radio reporters must tell a story through a person’s spoken words. When dealing with radio, answers should be as clear and succinct as possible. Those speaking on behalf of the agency, if possible, should practice their answers. With little resources and constant deadlines, radio reporters may not have the luxury of spending a lot of time digging into a subject. A topical explanation of the subject with good sound bites is often sufficient.



- **Television:** A medium requiring sound bites and a calm, cool appearance. Agency representatives should practice short, succinct answers and the ability to remain calm under pressure. Also, television often requires visuals. If possible, bring brochures, posters, videos, etc. to interviews or press conferences with television reporters.

“If it bleeds, it leads” is often a motto heard in the television industry, meaning quick, shocking stories are the order of the day. Abused children fall into that category. Because newscasts are short in duration, there is often a focus on the most extreme news, which is often the most negative news. Getting television reporters to concentrate on positive stories that require a time investment is a difficult task. They’re in search of a quick hit that will draw widespread attention.

- **Internet:** The new media is the quickest media. Nearly every news outlet, as well as bloggers and other private individuals, employ Web sites to disseminate news in the quickest way possible. What an agency official says at noon can be on a news outlet’s Web site – or YouTube – by 3 p.m. But the new media has also offered agencies with a chance to take its messages directly to the public through its own Web site, e-mail blasts, podcasts, streaming video, Youtube and more. Bloggers, in particular, are less constrained by the requirements of fact-checking and balanced point of view that “mainstream media“ must adhere to, and often present information that may not necessarily be factually accurate.

Media Members

- **Reporters:** Each media outlet employs news gatherers known as reporters. Their main job is to track down and report news. Sometimes, these reporters are assigned “beats.” They might cover health care or crime or the school board or county government. Others are general assignment reporters, covering breaking news of the day. A children services agency might deal with a regular reporter who covers the agency as part of their beat, a general assignment reporter, a reporter off of another beat or all of the above. The challenge in dealing with reporters, especially those who do not cover the agency on a regular basis, is to educate them on how the agency operates and makes daily decisions. Education will ensure they report the stories accurately and fairly. Also, keeping them informed of agency activities will increase the chances of more positive features showing up in their media outlets.
- **Editors:** Newspaper reporters answer to editors. While some reporters come up with their own story ideas, especially those covering beats, many stories are generated by editors. They’re the generals; reporters are the foot soldiers. Editors ultimately make the decision on whether a story makes it into the newspaper,



what the angle of the story is, where it appears, etc. Agency officials trying to make inroads with a newspaper will want to try just as hard to establish relationships with editors, especially in smaller counties.

- **Copy Editors:** Newspapers employ copy editors to review stories for errors (spelling, typos, missing information, incorrect facts) before they appear in the paper or on the Web. Their importance to agency officials is that they write the headlines appearing on newspaper stories, not the reporters themselves. A negative headline is often not the fault of the reporter.
- **Columnists:** A newspaper columnist is denoted by a picture appearing on top of the story. Columnists often appear in the same spot in the newspaper (many are in the editorial section) on the same days. The main difference between a reporter and a columnist is that a columnist is supposed to provide opinion, while a reporter is supposed to remain objective and provide the facts of the story. The columnist is providing his or her opinion only; he or she does not speak for the reporter or anyone else at the newspapers.
- **Editorial Writers:** An editorial writer speaks for the newspaper. He or she writes an opinion on the editorial page that explains the newspaper's position on a topic or subject.
- **Photographers/Videographers:** Employed by newspapers and television stations, these people often accompany reporters on their stories to visually document the story. However, with media outlets experiencing dwindling resources and the call for video to be displayed quickly on Web sites, many reporters are shooting their own photos and videos. More and more media outlets are also soliciting audio and video from private citizens, in essence turning anyone with a cell phone camera into an "I-reporter."
- **Assignment Editors:** Television reporters answer to assignment editors. Just as with newspaper editors, these are the people who make the decisions on whether stories are broadcast, what the angle is, where they appear in the newscast, etc. They're important people to have relationships with, because they start each morning deciding what news will be covered that day. And because newscasts are short in duration, only so much news can be covered. They can make or break a story that day.
- **Producers:** Sometimes synonymous with assignment editors. These people help put the story together, editing it and making decisions about the information included, the angle, where it falls in the news program, etc.





How Do They Operate?

Reporters want a story. In many cases, they are an unstoppable force when it comes to getting that story and, if someone stands in their way, they are going to get run over. Children services agencies have an obligation to keep confidential much of the material reporters are seeking. This often creates conflict between agencies and the media.

No matter how unfair it seems, fighting the press is often a losing proposition. The best tact for a representative of a children services agency might be to find middle ground. Plus, children services agencies want something from reporters – fairness, the ability to tell their side of the story, the chance to educate the public and positive coverage of their work. Working to meet the reporter halfway will help attain those goals.

Therefore, it is imperative agency representatives who deal with the media have some knowledge of how they think and operate. Understanding the unwritten rules of dealing with the media will improve the relationship between an agency and a reporter and could even help protect the agency from unfair criticism.

Here is a look into some of the motivations and unwritten rules reporters operate by:

The Reporter's Mission

Remember that reporters consider themselves the public watchdog. They feel it is their duty to watch over a government agency and make sure the agency is doing its job and spending its money effectively. This is generally the approach the reporter brings to reporting on a children services agency. That does not mean the reporter will not be fair; it just means they'll ask questions to ensure they are doing their "duty." Agency representatives who realize this will be better able to anticipate stories and questions and react appropriately.

Remember Their Deadlines

Reporters are constantly working to meet deadlines. They appreciate someone who understands that and helps them meet those deadlines. It helps the agency, too, because it ensures it gets its side of the story in print or on air. If a reporter has an 8 p.m. deadline and the agency calls at 10 p.m. to give its side of the story, there is a good chance "Agency leaders could not be reached for comment" will be in the next day's newspaper or in the story for that night's newscast. Always ask a reporter when his or her deadline is and make sure to respond in time to meet that deadline, or explain why not. And always make sure you are available to reporters via a 24-hour-a-day system.



Being First is Important to Them

Reporters are in competition with each other. Being first with news wins them accolades from their peers and bosses and will ultimately translate into awards, better jobs and more money. Agency officials must be aware of this. It means reporters will rush things, perhaps without having all the facts. The agency should go out of its way to make sure the reporter has as much truthful information as quickly as possible to avoid false or incomplete stories being published or broadcast.

This also presents an opportunity for the agency representative to use the “being first” carrot when cultivating relationships with reporters. Providing a reporter with the ability to beat his or her peers will result in a more positive relationship with that reporter.

Understand Their Definition of Fair

Fair and balanced reporting does not necessarily equate to the truth for reporters. “Fair and balanced” often means presenting all sides of the story and letting the reader/viewer interpret what is right. If a parent accuses the agency of wrongdoing and the agency offers a detailed response – but not undeniable proof -- that seems to show it did nothing wrong, that will not necessarily kill the story. The reporter may not take the time to reach an undeniable conclusion and simply present the parent’s accusation and the agency’s response and consider the reporting fair and balanced because both sides were presented. This happens all the time in political stories, where one candidate lobbies one charge and the other responds...both sides are presented, rather than a lengthy review of the candidate’s record to see if the argument can be proven one way or another. This is often a source of frustration for those being reported on, but standard operating procedure for the media.

The Meaning of “Off the Record”

When speaking to the media, agency officials should always assume what they say is on the record and will be published or broadcast. Unless otherwise agreed upon, reporters consider everything discussed to be fair game for their reports. Some public relations officials would recommend always being “on the record.” But, there might be times when an agency wants to discuss something “off the record.” It is important to understand what that means to most reporters.

First, when going “off the record,” remember to get the reporter to verbally agree that you are doing so. Simply stating “this is off the record” will not suffice. The reporter must agree to it. Then, discuss with the reporter what “off the record” means to them. According to the Associated Press, here are its definitions of the meaning of “off the record” and other ways of supplying information to the media:

- **On the Record:** The information can be used with no caveats, quoting the source by name.



- **Off the Record:** The information cannot be used for publication.
- **On Background:** The information can be published but only under conditions negotiated with the source. Generally, the sources do not want their names published but will agree to a description of their position. AP reporters are told to object vigorously when a source wants to brief a group of reporters on background and try to persuade the source to put the briefing on the record.
- **Deep Background:** The information can be used but only without attribution. The source does not want to be identified in any way, even on condition of anonymity.

In general, information obtained under any of these circumstances can be pursued with other sources to be placed on the record.

The Meaning of “No Comment”

Saying “no comment” should be a rare occurrence for a public agency simply because of the effect it has with readers, listeners and viewers. Even an innocent “no comment” will be publicly perceived as either wrongdoing or a cover up. While children services agencies often deal with confidential information that cannot be stated publicly, explaining why you cannot speak on the subject to the reporter -- or directly to viewers, listeners and readers -- is much better than a simple “no comment.” Also, even if confidential information cannot be discussed, the process surrounding that information, or a general scenario, might be something that could be discussed to explain the situation. For example, while an agency may not be able to discuss it is providing drug treatment to a parent in a high-profile case, it may be able to explain that parenting classes, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health counseling and a myriad of other services are available to parents who find themselves in similar circumstances.

To a reporter, “no comment” indicates the agency is hiding something and he or she is likely to accept it as a challenge to uncover the truth, resulting in something that could turn a one-day negative story into a series of negative stories or even worse, a one-man crusade against the agency.

Admitting a Mistake

If an agency makes a mistake, or if there is overwhelming public perception the agency made a mistake, it is sometimes best to admit it and explain how the situation is a learning experience that will result in new policies/processes to help prevent it from reoccurring. Admitting a mistake will often result in the situation being limited to a one-day story, while refusing to admit a mistake draws the situation out as the reporter tries to ensure the agency is accountable, not only for that situation, but in any other area where the agency does business.



Building Better Media Relationships

Children Services agencies that have regular reporters covering them have solid opportunities to build positive long-term relationships. Other agencies must deal with reporters who “parachute” in with little knowledge of the subject or concern about damaging relationships. In these instances, the agencies must act quickly to educate and influence the reporter.

Most reporters are committed to the story, not the relationship. They see the two as mutually exclusive. They feel a negative story should not be construed as damaging to the relationship and a positive one should not serve as an endorsement. They’re interested in building relationships, but mostly to get the stories they need.

Agencies must recognize this and not be sensitive to the ups and downs of reporting. The important thing is to develop a relationship where the reporter is educated about how the agency operates and feels an obligation to be fair. There are a number of things children’s services agencies can do to build better relationships with the news media.

Create a Written News Media Policy

Every Children Services agency, no matter how small, should have a written news media policy. All staff members should be familiar with it. In most cases, the policy will dictate who in the agency has the responsibility to talk to the media and requires other agency employees to funnel questions to that person.

Create a Media Contact List

Every agency should have a list of media contacts that can be quickly e-mailed or phoned in a crisis or as a matter of disseminating press releases and other routine information. The larger the list the better, because reporters may be absent or tied up on other stories and miss the communication. Copying their colleagues will ensure the communication is received by each media outlet. Also, something that lacks appeal to one reporter might catch the attention of another and generate positive coverage for the agency.

Provide for 24-Hour Communication

With Web sites, news is posted on an around-the-clock schedule, in addition to important daily deadlines. News media outlets will not wait long on reaction or comment. A “no comment” or “could not be reached for comment” could be perceived as uncaring or evasive in an attempt to hide something. Agency leaders must provide 24-hour contact information to the media and be prepared to respond quickly to breaking stories.



Establish Personal Contact

The Executive Director, and others responsible for dealing with the media, should be a familiar name and face to editors, reporters, producers and other media members who will regularly report on the agency. This puts a “public face” on the agency. It also ensures the media stays educated on how the agency operates. Finally, it is more difficult for a reporter to attack or write a negative story about someone he or she knows personally, as opposed to a faceless agency.

Those responsible for media contact should make an effort to introduce themselves to these media members, pledge their cooperation and ensure they have contact information. Invite the media to the agency for a tour and to learn more about daily operations, take them to lunch or agree to meet on their turf. After the initial meeting, plan for regular formal or informal meetings with those media members so familiarity grows.

Develop a Media Kit

Help educate the media about what you do and provide them the information they need to do their job quickly. Include an annual report, an explanation of how child welfare works, an agency table of organization; possible subjects the agency’s experts can speak about, key definitions, agency funding sources and key local agency data on caseloads, funding, children in care, reports of abuse, neglect, etc. Keep the information updated.

Invite Reporters on Ride Alongs

Nothing shows the true nature of child protection like a day in the field. Invite reporters to watch staff do their work. This is the only way outsiders can truly understand the nature of the business and the hard work and skill required to make daily decision on how to protect children. Negotiate with the reporter terms which will protect the confidentiality of clients.

Educate Staff

Talk to staff about the importance of media coverage. They need to understand why communication with the public through the media is critical to success. Ask them to always be polite with the media and to make sure media members quickly are put in contact with someone who can answer their questions in a timely manner.

Identify Subject-Matter Experts

Neither the Executive Director or any designated media representative will be able to know the intimate details of every program or situation occurring within the agency. There is the option of identifying subject-matter experts who are authorized to speak on certain subjects because of their great knowledge on the subject and their ability to deal with the pressure of media interviews. If possible, provide these experts with training to increase their skill at dealing with the media.



Be Creative in Explaining What You Do

Taxpayers want to know how their money is being spent, and how local services compare to other counties and states. Find real-life examples of the services provided -- put a face on the statistics. If foster care recruitment is a problem, tell the story of Susan, the 14-year-old, who had to be placed an hour away from her family and friends because no local foster homes were available. Also, statistics must contain perspective. Even a simple statistic such as number of children served can be given perspective by researching the number of children in the county and presenting the statistic as “we served 1 out of every 10 children in the county last year.” Also, many statistics are easier to understand when presented in graphics format.

Think Like a Reporter

When a situation arises, think about how the media will handle it. What angles might they take? What questions will they ask when they call? Who else will they call to comment on this situation? How big will this story be? Be prepared with the right information and key messages that fit the situation.

Understand the Media Outlet’s Audience

Key messages should be targeted to the right audience. Reporters, editors, producers and other media contacts appreciate those who understand their audience and tailor messages and pitches to that audience. Every media outlet reaches a different audience. Cemetery plots won’t sell well on a hard rock radio station, and acne medicine won’t generate a lot of discussion on an oldies-but-goodies station. Newspapers reach older readers; the Internet younger. A local advertising agency can draw a fairly accurate demographic profile of the people who read, watch and listen to each local media outlet. The sales department within the media outlet can also supply you with this information.

Admit Mistakes and Move On

The media and the public are much more accepting of someone who admits a mistake, holds themselves accountable and says they will learn from the experience than they are of someone who is either defiant or evasive. If the agency makes a mistake, the best course of action is often to acknowledge the mistake and pledge to learn from it. This often makes it a one-day story. Not acknowledging a mistake or offering a “no comment” will look as if the agency is hiding something and the media will continue to dig, drawing the story out much longer than needed.



Telling Your Story

Reporters have a duty to be fair and tell both sides of a story, but there are many instances where they ignore that duty or one side of the story is overwhelmed by the other. Likewise, reporters tend to focus on the negative and ignore the positive things taking place at a children services agency. Agency leaders can help ensure their side of the story is told and that positive news about the agency is disseminated by learning the art of telling their story. There are certain things an agency representative can do in responding to a reporter's inquiries or pitching a story that will help grab the reporter's attention.

Create a Plan

If there is time, agency representatives who need to tell their story through the media should develop a communications plan with key messages, key audiences and the best way to reach those audiences. This is a blueprint for ensuring messages reach the right people at the right time. Components of the plan include:

- **Key messages:** Develop two or three key messages that help tell the story. In any interview or other communication on the subject, ensure these messages are prominent and repeated, if necessary.
- **Key audiences:** Who is your targeted audience? What group or groups are you trying to reach? How will your agency benefit the most from reaching these people? Understanding who your audience is helps to develop tactics to reach them.
- **Tactics:** What is the best way to reach your key audiences? Talking to a heavy metal radio station may not be the best way to reach foster parents because they might be listening to other stations. Conversely, agencies with a large number of African American foster children might target African American radio stations for outreach efforts. Each key audience should have a tactic or two that is best for reaching them.

Provide Basic Information

Even when responding to a breaking and confidential matter, provide some basic information to avoid the "no comment" scenario. Conduct an internal investigation of the situation and issue a statement that reflects your best understanding at the time. Discuss the agencies you are working with so the reporter realizes the agency is not the sole decision maker. Describes the steps that a case goes through from the receipt of a report through the juvenile court. Providing this type of information allows the reporter know you are cooperating as much as possible.



Stay Positive

Even most negative stories have a positive side. Acknowledge the pain, hurt or negative of a story, but also emphasize the positive. If a mistake is made, the positive is the learning experience that will come from it, the changes that will be made. If possible, keep your core messages centered on the positive and return to them repeatedly while telling your story.

Put a Face to a Statistic

Stories are best told through statistics and “real people.” Reporters like numbers because they validate a story. Telling someone that you need foster parents is one thing, showing them that you have had to send 30 percent of your foster children out of county because you don’t have enough in-county parents helps to illustrate the problem. Adding a story about 8-year-old Susie, who has been placed an hour away from her neighborhood, school, friends and biological family makes for an even better story. Always try to find statistics and real people to help you pitch your story.

Find the Emotional Element

This is often as simple as finding the “real person,” but if that is not possible, search for an emotional way to tell the story. If the agency needs to pass a levy, don’t talk about the money, talk about the bruised and battered children who need help. Discuss some of the terrible things that happen to them and how your services can help them turn their lives around.

Tie the Story to the Daily News

Reporters are always looking for stories that tie to ongoing trends. Search daily news stories for topics that fit what your agency is doing and try to tie your work to that trend. If gas is \$4 a gallon, that can be a great way to pitch a story about how the agency’s new neighborhood substations allow clients to walk for services, instead of spending a lot of money on gas.

Look for Hooks

Connect stories with holidays, such as Mother's or Father's Day. Also, children services agencies have several built-in opportunities to develop a sustained public information campaign. April is Child Abuse and Neglect Prevention Month; May is Foster Parent Month, November is Adoption Awareness Month, etc. These are naturals for getting media coverage. Then, when the levy campaign comes up or the inevitable crisis arises, both the media and public know the children services agency and what it does.

Establish Partnerships

Enlist the media in a cause. Media organizations are always looking for good causes to rally around. Conduct a telethon with a television station to sign up more foster parents. Arrange regular appearances on a family-friendly radio station to discuss children



available for adoption. Getting the media to partner with you provides you with free, unfiltered opportunities to spread key messages.

Conform to Your Medium

Before an interview, attempt to tailor your material to the medium. Television cameras require visuals. Is there a poster or brochure that helps tell your story? Radio needs audio. Have you developed a few short, powerful sound bites? Are there photos that can be taken for newspaper? Think ahead so you are at your most effective.



Spreading Your Message Directly

A children services agency can't always rely on the media to tell its stories. In a time when media agencies are cutting back on resources, there is much competition for the attention of the few reporters who remain. Often times, those reporters are attracted to negative stories. Fortunately, there are many ways for a children services agency to spread positive news to key stakeholders in the community without relying on the media. Taking your message directly to stakeholders allows an agency to present it without an outside filter.

Newsletters

Create a regular newsletter with important information about agency programs, policies, personnel changes and other news. This can be easily disseminated by mail or e-mail. If using e-mail, educate yourself on opt-out and spam regulations.

Speaker's Bureau

Identify subject-matter experts and solicit speaking engagements from community groups, schools, professional associations, etc. This is a great way to disseminate positive information about the agency. Provide the speakers with a general PowerPoint about the agency, brochures to pass out and training if they need it. Record and track the speaking engagements so follow-up appointments can be made to discuss the same or different topics in the future.

E-mail Blasts

Use regular community meetings, speaking engagements and other gatherings to collect e-mail addresses from key stakeholders. Send them regular "blasts" with information about the agency. This can also be an effective tool in responding to unfair or incorrect media coverage...a quick e-mail can be sent to set the record straight.

Public Access Television

Look for public access programs and other free mediums to employ in disseminating key messages. Schedule regular appearances. Prepare topics and Interview Q and As to make efficient use of the appearances.

Web site

Keep the agency Web site up to date with all the latest news and events of the agency. A Web site should not be used just for detail on programs. Take advantage of the "hits" with frequent updates of key messages about the agency.

Podcasts and Videos

The world is changing. Many today would rather listen or watch news than read it. Create agency videos or weekly audio podcasts to be placed on the Web site or disseminated via e-mail to help get key messages to key stakeholders.



YouTube.com

Post all agency videos on YouTube. This not only helps you get key messages out, but it counterbalances the negative news videos searchers might find when punching in the name of your agency.



Crisis Communications

Create a Plan

Be prepared. Have the who, what, where, when, why and how covered. Know where you will go, who will speak, etc. in a pre-made plan. Fill in the blanks when the crisis occurs. Practice the plan on a regular basis.

Designate a Spokesperson

Have one point of contact for the media and someone to act in that person's place if necessary. Channel all questions through that person. Ask employees to refrain from talking to the media and to direct them to the designated spokesperson.

Develop Nuggets of Information

Develop those two or three key messages that are repeated throughout any interview. Stay on your message.

Show Empathy

If the crisis involves a tragedy, show upfront your sympathy for those involved. Show the human side of the agency. Draft a pre-made statement that BEGINS with a statement of empathy. The very first thing you must do is make sure that your sympathies for those who have suffered loss of any kind are expressed and are genuine. Details can be sorted out, but if people, animals or property are hurt – express your shock and sympathy. It's a human reaction. Your audience will understand that you, too, are shaken up, and they'll start to empathize *with you*. This is the opposite of defensiveness. It allows you to show your humanity in a positive way and starts the communication off on the right note.

Deal with it head on

Do not hide out. Do not offer "no comment." This leaves the impression you do not care, or that you are incompetent. Attack the crisis.

Brief the Media Often

During a crisis, keep the media informed. This can be done with fact sheets faxed or hand-delivered to the media; media briefings with reporters; an answering machine (on a dedicated phone line that only reporters know about) with a message which gives the media up-to-the-minute reports and announcements of upcoming events; or an Internet web site that may be available to the general public, with certain pages restricted to journalists who know the password.

Remember to "Go Direct"

While dealing with the media, don't forget the Web site, e-mail blasts, Speaker's Bureau, etc. These are excellent ways to get the message out in a crisis, and to get it out



unfiltered. Don't let yourself so get tied up with the media that you forget other conduits to the public.

Tell the Truth

The cover up is worse than the crime in most people's eyes. We've all seen it: a scandal erupts. Instead of acknowledging mistakes, taking responsibility and supplying information about how and why it won't ever happen again, management hedges. Bits of the story dribble out, day after day, week after week. Not telling the truth makes the crisis last longer and leaves a deeper negative impression in the minds of the public. The companies and individuals who come forward and show a good faith effort to bring everything out for scrutiny are the ones who survive with reputation intact and sometimes even enhanced.

Never Underestimate a Crisis

At the beginning of a crisis, most managers are tempted to minimize the problem. If you do this with the media - and it turns out to be worse than you said - you look like a liar or incompetent. If you overestimate the crisis, and it is solved quickly, you look like a masterful manager. On the other hand, do not "cry wolf" unless you are sure the wolf is at the door.



Public Information Campaigns

This information was collected by PCSAO from focus groups facilitated by Triad Research Corporation in an effort to help children services agencies understand what information is most helpful when conducting public information campaigns on subjects in the children services arena. The following are key messages on each topic.

Child Abuse and Neglect

- The job of children services agencies is to protect children from abuse and neglect when the child's family is unwilling or unable to do so. The public believes this is the mission of children services agencies.
- The telephone number to call to report child abuse and neglect (should be included on all communications to the public.
- All reports of suspected child abuse and neglect are thoroughly investigated.
- Detail the stages of a case. If the children services agency does not find evidence of abuse or neglect, the case is closed. If allegations are substantiated, the children services agency tries to provide appropriate services. If the family refuses services, the agency can turn to the juvenile court for help.
- Children will be kept in their own homes as long as they are safe. Children do best in familiar surroundings, with family, friends, neighbors, etc. who love them. Communications should include information that agencies are required by law to make reasonable (not extraordinary) efforts to keep children in their own homes. However, the first responsibility of the children services agency is the safety of the child and they will be removed if it is in their best interests.
- Discuss the various types of services available to families, such as parenting classes, drug and alcohol treatment, mental health counseling, etc.
- The police and county prosecutor determine if parents should be charged with a crime as a result of their alleged abuse or neglect of their children. The Children Services worker only makes a recommendation concerning the removal of a child from his/her home. However, a judge makes the final decision as to whether the child remains or is removed from his/her home.



- Casework follow-up takes place, but if the family situation improves, no further problems arise, and the child is safe, the case is closed.
- Police officers do not accompany social workers unless the situation calls for it.

Foster Care and Adoption

- All foster parents are thoroughly investigated before they become foster parents. Extensive training is required to become a foster parent.
- The need for foster parents is great at all times. Stress this by comparing the number of foster children in care to the number of homes.
- Many of the children who are in foster care are able to safely return home after the children services agency has provided services and education to their parents. The public wants to know that children are in stable situations and their first choice for the child is with the birth parents.
- The public would like to know that children who are eligible for adoption are being adopted. Therefore the number of children eligible and the number of children placed should be communicated to the public. Remember, the public is using this information to evaluate the performance of the agency.

Children Services Agencies

- Social workers are hard working, competent public servants. They receive many hours of in-service training before they are hired and more each year after they are hired. A great percentage of them have master's degrees in social work.
- Caseload ratios, when compared to the Ohio standard, have high importance for most of the public. However, there is risk in using these figures. While the ratios may demonstrate need, they may also indicate that the social workers may not be doing a good job if they have a high caseload. If the ratios are used, they should be coupled with information demonstrating worker competence such as in-service training.
- The annual budget figure should be included in all communication campaigns. However, the figure only has intermediate or low importance, so it will do little



good to emphasize it. The source of funds appears to serve little purpose because the public feels that these are all “their” dollars no matter where they originate.

- Services provided by children services agencies are not part of “welfare” should be emphasized in communications campaigns to eliminate any confusion that might exist in the public's mind.

Juvenile Court

- The decision to remove a child from the home is made by the Juvenile Court, not the caseworker. However, a caseworker can remove a child in an emergency situation, but a judge still hears the case within 24 hours.
- The Court demands proof of abuse and neglect prior to removing the child from the home. The public wants assurance that the decision to remove the child is not made unless there is proof that the allegations are true. Many focus group members expressed concern that children were removed from their homes based on "hearsay" or because of a misinterpretation of a situation.
- If parents are unwilling or unable to change the pattern of abuse and neglect, the Court can decide to remove the child from the home. There are several important points to this statement. Above all else, the public wants to know that children are safe. However, it also wants to know that the families have the opportunity to solve their problems. If the family cannot solve its problems, the public wants to know that the child will be removed from the home because a judge has proof that the situation is unsafe for the child. Finally, the public wants to know that the Court, not the social worker, has the final say in this type of decision.
- Any decision made about the removal of a child from the home is based upon the best interests of the child. This is what the public cares most about -- the child.
- When a case appears in Court, the judge listens to all sides and all parties are represented by legal counsel. Both the social worker and the parents are allowed to present their viewpoints.
- Many focus group members said that information given to them in the focus groups about the Juvenile Court surprised them. Prior to reading the statements, they did not know anything about the Court's role in situations involving abuse and neglect. The Juvenile Court's role should become a standard part of any communications effort.