

Okaloosa County Media Policy

Okaloosa County Government exists to serve the public and it is the responsibility of County government to provide citizens with information about policies, programs and decisions that affect the public. The County fosters an open and honest environment in which to disseminate public information on a consistent and timely basis.

Building Relationships with the Media

The news media is a vital link in keeping Okaloosa County citizens informed. It is in the County's best interest to work with the news media. The roles and responsibilities of professional journalists are respected by the County, and it is our goal to establish and maintain a positive and professional relationship with them.

Responding to the Media

1. Department directors or their designees may respond to any media request for general information, but must also notify the Public Information Officer (PIO) following the interview. (See also Disseminating Information.) Requests for documents are coordinated through the Risk Management Department in accordance with the County's Public Records Request Policy.
2. Members of the media soliciting County participation for topics pertaining to County-wide issues, on-camera interviews, editorial boards or similar activities, should be directed to the PIO.
3. Unless the media requests to speak to a specific County Commissioner, members of the media seeking official comments from the Board of County Commissioners will be directed to the Commission Chairman, or in his or her absence, the Vice-Chairman.
4. Calls or messages from a reporter seeking information should be returned promptly, preferably within one hour. Staff should be informed to direct a reporter to an appropriate spokesperson or the PIO if the call cannot be returned in one hour.
5. The news media may be provided with all information that is available to the public. When legal or ethical issues arise, public records laws are relied upon to clearly define what is and is not public information. In cases where the release of information requested by a reporter is prohibited, the basis for not releasing the information is provided as stated in the Florida statutes. If applicable, it may be helpful to give the reporter copies of the laws and regulations governing what can and cannot be discussed publicly.

Disseminating Information

1. Following any media communication, the department director or designee notifies the PIO, who promptly notifies the County Administrator and members of Commission, preferably by email, with details of the inquiry, the response to media and when the information is scheduled to be printed in the newspaper, and/or to be aired through radio or television.
2. Misinformation shared with the media can have negative effects on the public, as well as on the County's credibility and the credibility of the news media. Any designee should speak to reporters only about topics about which they are familiar and understand. When reporters' questions go beyond required expertise, never speculate and refer them to the appropriate source or the PIO.

In an Emergency

In an emergency such as a weather event, bioterrorism threat, or any other natural or man-made disaster, this media policy is superseded by the County's Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan, which centralizes media relations functions under Emergency Support Function 14 – Public Information. A copy of the plan can be found on the County website, on Public Safety web pages and is available from the Emergency Management Division or by following this link: http://www.co.okaloosa.fl.us/sites/default/files/doc/dept/public_safety/cemp.pdf.

When the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is activated, the EOC PIO acts as the single point-of-contact for non-law enforcement public information. The PIO will coordinate and get authorization on press releases with the Incident Commander in accordance with the Okaloosa County National Incident Management System (NIMS)/EOC Interface, and work within the Okaloosa County NIMS/EOC Interface structure in all duties.

Public Information Officer (PIO) Responsibilities

The PIO conducts and coordinates public relations functions for Okaloosa County and serves as liaison between the commissioners, County Administrator, departments and the media. Additionally, the PIO coordinates interdepartmental communication, to include the production of the employee newsletter, as well as oversees Internet and Intranet content and maintenance in collaboration with the IS Department.

Okaloosa County ribbon-cuttings, press conferences, special events and news releases are coordinated by the PIO. All news releases are maintained on the County website.

Okaloosa County Website

1. All Okaloosa County departments, divisions and offices who utilize the County website may designate a staff person or utilize the PIO to regularly update the content on department web pages and ensure the accuracy of all posted information.
2. County departments, divisions and offices are encouraged to maximize the use of the department and/or County website to provide timely information to the general public. Public access to current County forms, procedures, event information, meetings, workshops and program information should be readily available to the greatest extent feasible.
3. Information posted on Okaloosa County's website must relate to programs and/or events managed or primarily sponsored by the Board of County Commissioners or Constitutional Officers.

Social Media

Social media is another way to broadcast messages and information to a larger audience. To address the fast-changing landscape of the Internet and the way residents and businesses communicate and obtain information about Okaloosa County, the County may use social media to provide information on topics related to Okaloosa County governance, events managed or sponsored by the County, or information from federal, state, or other local government agencies. Social Media is also a way to reach the public directly, with a factual message written and edited by Okaloosa County.

Okaloosa County, through the Public Information Officer and the County Administrator's Office, shall exercise sole authority to decide what is "announced" or "spoken" on behalf of the County on the County's web site and on social media sites. The following procedures apply to the use of social media:

1. Departments that use social media are responsible for complying with applicable federal, state, and County laws, regulations, and policies. This includes adherence to established laws and policies regarding copyright, records retention, Freedom of Information Act (FOIA), First Amendment, privacy laws and information security policies established by Okaloosa County.
2. Include the following disclaimer: "all content is subject to Florida public records laws and may be retained and produced upon request."

3. In general, all of the County's social media content will be subject to approval by the Public Information Officer or designee, except for departments utilizing promotional accounts such as Tourist Development and Airports. The County's website (www.okaloosafl.com) will remain the primary and predominant internet presence.
4. Wherever possible, content posted to the County's social media sites will also be made available on the County's website.
5. Wherever possible, content posted to the County's social media sites should contain hyperlinks directing users back to the County's official website for in-depth information, forms, documents or online services necessary to conduct business with Okaloosa County.
6. Employees representing the County government via social media outlets must conduct themselves in a professional manner at all times. Social media includes Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, LinkedIn, etc.
7. General Rules when utilizing social media:
 - a. Stay factual – leave opinions to elected officials.
 - b. Do not engage in hostility; take criticism in stride.
 - c. Use limited, concise responses.
 - d. Downsize any photos for web use, to prevent slowing down internet servers.