

Communicating with the Media

One of the most effective ways to get the word out about your agency's work is to coordinate with your local media resources. In this handout, we have included helpful hints and sample templates for a letter to the editor and a press release.

It's important to connect with local news stations. This includes TV and radio. In many rural areas, TV and radio will cover an entire region. So it's not uncommon for reporters to be willing to travel to you to get a story on the air, especially breaking news or human interest pieces.

We recommend building a strong relationship with your local news media—even inviting them out for coffee or lunch to get to know and vice versa.

A letter to the editor is submitted to the opinions editor of a newspaper publication in response to a story. It's submitted to the news publication either by mail or online through the publication's website.

Even in rural towns, you can submit a letter to the editor to your local newspaper to help spread the word about the services your agency provides survivors. This is an effective way to reach a large audience with your message. The letter to the editor is usually printed on the editorial page of your newspaper, which is one of its most read sections. It's also very common for a copy of your letter to the editor to be published online as well.

Here are some useful tips to submit a letter to the editor:

1. Respond to an article in the paper for a higher chance of publication, and follow the paper's directions. Many news publications have guidelines for submission, including a word count and information needed from the recipient like name, address, and phone number.
2. Be timely and relevant with your topic. Respond to something that is happening in your community right now.
3. Share your expertise. What qualifies you to discuss this topic? If you are a sexual assault advocate writing about bystander intervention at community bars, then note this in your letter to the editor.

4. If relevant to your topic, refer to your local lawmakers by name. It's a known fact that policymakers commonly read editorial pages, especially if their names are mentioned.
5. Keep your letter brief and focused. Try to stay under 200-250 words to increase likelihood of publication.
6. Include a call to action of some kind. Wrap up your letter to the editor explaining what you want your readers to do or how they can help.

Sample Letter to the Editor¹ (146 words):

In yesterday's newspaper, your reporter and editors publicly included the name and photograph of a survivor of sexual violence on the front page.

As an advocate who works regularly with survivors, I understand how this kind of publicity can be devastating to a victim and causes added trauma to an already horrific crime.

I implore your paper to stop printing the names of survivors. Survivors have already been through enough without experiencing further scrutiny and humiliation by having their names and photographs listed on the front page of your newspaper. This is especially true within our rural community, where so many of us know and work with one another.

It is already common practice for major publications not to publish the names of survivors to protect the victim's privacy. It is time for our own newspaper to take a step in the right direction and follow suit.

Press releases are a key element to any kind of communications strategy. It should be short and compelling, detailing a newsworthy event in the community or informing reporters (and therefore community members) about an interesting topic.

A press release can be submitted as a mass email to local members of the media. This is why it's always a good idea to keep an up-to-date record of your local news media. Many reporters are listed on news websites, although in rural areas this is not always

¹ This letter to the editor is based upon something that really happened in a rural community. The local newspaper commonly printed survivors' names along with descriptions of their experiences. When direct service providers contacted the local newspaper, the editors immediately changed their policy to no longer print victims' names.

the case. Whenever speaking to a reporter, ask for her or his card to help you keep record.

Here are some helpful tips when writing a press release:

1. An engaging headline will grab the attention of a reporter. Think about the last article you read in your local newspaper. The headline likely had a role to play. As such, a good headline in your press release will serve the same purpose.
2. Don't waste words—get right to the point in your first paragraph. Even rural reporters are busy and up against numerous deadlines. Be mindful of their time. A reporter should have a good idea of what you're trying to “sell” them after reading the first few sentences of your press release. Every paragraph after that should be supporting information. Keep paragraphs short and concise.
3. Check your grammar and look for errors. Have co-workers and leadership check over the document multiple times before sending to reporters.
4. Include relevant quotes. Quotes are the human element to your press release. If you're lucky, reporters will reprint the quote directly from your press release. Quotes should come from Executive Directors, Associate Directors, or someone within your agency who is an authority on the topic you are addressing.
5. More than one page is too much. As with writing a letter to the editor, shorter is usually better when writing a press release.
6. Include access to more information. This may be a link to your website, or a link to a resource you reference in your press release. Help the reporter get as much information as possible.

What content should I include in my press release?

1. A release date at the top of your release. This is commonly the date you intend to push out your press release.
2. Contact information. Who do you want the media to contact if they have any questions about your press release? This is usually an Executive Director or a communications person.
3. Headline and, if absolutely necessary, a subheading. Your headline should be one of the most engaging pieces of your press release. A subheading may include additional information, like the date, time, and place of an event.
4. Location and the lead. The location is simple: where are you writing from? The lead is your first paragraph—the who, what, where, when, and most importantly *why*. Avoid jargon words or acronyms that reporters may not understand. Use plain English.

5. Support information. This will be your follow-up paragraphs that help support everything in the first paragraph. This is also where you would include quotes.
6. Your organization’s “boilerplate” and access to more information. A boilerplate includes the name of your agency, your mission, your website, and whatever additional information you feel is relevant to your topic. Keep it brief, but informative.

Sample Press Release:

January 30, 2020

Contact: Jane Smith, Executive Director

(515) 244-7424, jane.smith@organization.org

For the Dogs: Comfort Dog Donated to Domestic & Sexual Violence Services² *Special ceremony February 1 at 2:00 pm at program headquarters*

RURAL TOWN, NY—A golden retriever comfort dog trained by Canine Performance Center in Rural Town will be donated to the Domestic & Sexual Violence Services this Saturday at a special ceremony. The dog, Jasper, will help provide support for survivors of sexual violence who seek services through the Domestic & Sexual Violence Services. The ceremony will take place at 2:00pm on February 1 at the program’s headquarters, located at 3030 Rural Road Place, Rural Town, NY.

The animal is part of the Canine Performance Center’s K-9 comfort team. Canine Performance Center has recently teamed up with Domestic & Sexual Violence Services to provide this free service.

“A significant number of survivors experience PTSD after a sexual assault,” says Jane Smith, Executive Director for Domestic & Sexual Violence Services. “We are so grateful to Canine Performance Center for providing this special service. This will have a profound influence on the services we are able to provide survivors.”

Comfort dogs can help alleviate stress and anxiety, and provide a calming presence for survivors who come into the program’s office to seek services. It is estimated that 30% of all sexual violence survivors experience some form of post-traumatic stress disorder.

² This fictional press release can help illustrate the points outlined in the previous page.

The special ceremony is open to the public. For more information, visit www.orglink.org. For more information about Canine Performance Center, visit www.cpc.com.

Domestic & Sexual Violence Services is a private nonprofit organization. Its mission is to promote a society free from sexual violence and to meet the diverse needs of survivors. More information at www.orglink.org.

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