



# GUIDELINES FOR UTILIZING THE MEDIA WHEN INVESTIGATING A MISSING PERSON

The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children recommends the following when a jurisdiction is investigating a missing person and interacting with the media.

It is important to remember that you should be in control of your messaging and align with all involved parties from the beginning of the investigation. The points below are guidelines that you may want to consider, however every investigation is unique and can present its own set of challenges.

The media and public can be powerful tools when searching for a missing person. When asking the media to cover a missing person in your jurisdiction, these elements may increase your chances of coverage:

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| » <b>Something to show:</b><br>Photos of the missing person, video clips of missing person, surveillance images. | » <b>Something to say:</b><br>Who will talk on behalf of the missing person?<br>Law enforcement?<br>Family member? | » <b>Something to do:</b><br>If you see the missing person report it to X agency, the community is being asked to check their property, etc. |
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Keep these in mind as you utilize the media to further your investigation and try and gain coverage for the missing person.

## PHOTO

When a person is reported missing it is important to obtain a good quality photo and preferably several photos of the missing person. The photos should include a full-body picture as well as a head-shot. The photo should be of the person smiling. Try to stay away from driver's license pictures as they can give the perception that the missing person has done something wrong / illegal.

## SET EXPECTATIONS WITH A FAMILY

Having a missing loved one is possibly the worst thing a family has ever endured. They may want to be updated several times a day or may expect phone calls from the investigating agency on an hourly or daily basis. In the beginning of the investigation set expectations. Give the family a point of contact within your agency. How often should they expect updates? Daily, weekly? What can you tell them is being done? Remember, this is their loved one – *be kind*.

Give the family options about ways they can help and be proactive. Telling a family that “We will call you when we know something,” often can lead to frustration for everyone.

## **FAMILY SPOKESPERSON – IS THIS NECESSARY?**

Depending on the media coverage and scope of the missing person's investigation the family of the missing person may want to consider selecting a family spokesperson to be the buffer for any media that is calling. The family spokesperson may also want to read a statement from the family on their behalf, run and monitor a social media page for the missing person as well as schedule and vet all interview requests.

It is important that the family spokesperson is giving out accurate and consistent information and that they are in sync with law enforcement, as to not jeopardize the investigation. Your relationship with the family spokesperson is as important as your relationship with the family.

## **NEGATIVITY ON SOCIAL MEDIA**

While there is almost nothing you can do to stop negative comments AKA trolls on social media and beyond you can take steps that will build in a wall of protection:

- » The family of a missing person should appoint a family friend or relative that is not an immediate family member, such as an aunt or uncle or cousin, to facilitate and monitor a social media page for the missing person. This facilitator can show the family what is happening on social media while protecting them from the negativity.
- » As law enforcement, you can remind the public that negative comments can detract from the focus of the search and that the focus should be on the missing person and anything beyond that is not helpful.

## **BE A UNITED FRONT!**

This applies to all the investigating agencies as well as the family and law enforcement. If there are disagreements, try and keep them private. Disagreements or 'name calling' can be distracting from the goal at hand – which is to locate the missing person. This can also lead to the media covering the disagreement and NOT continuing coverage for the actual missing person.

## **WHERE CAN THE PUBLIC AND MEDIA GO FOR UPDATES?**

Utilize social media to let the public know that you have a missing person in your jurisdiction.

Post one or more pictures of the missing person and give information about:

- » When the person went missing
- » What the person was wearing
- » Other important information such as vehicle or companions they may be traveling with

## **ENDANGERMENT**

Communicate with the public that the missing person could be in danger. This could mean the difference between the news covering the missing person or choosing not to. If you do not know where the person or child is, then they are considered missing; therefore, they could be in danger. This applies to any missing person, even those who are believed to have left voluntarily.

## STICK TO THE FACTS

Often times there is little information available on the missing person, or there is more information available but releasing the information could jeopardize the investigation – be upfront; “At this time, we are not at liberty to give out more information but be assured we need the public’s help to find {missing person} and we are looking at every possible situation.” You can say something without giving out any investigative information.

## BREAK YOUR OWN NEWS

Utilize your agency’s social media pages to give daily updates to the public. Let the public and news know that your agency’s Facebook / Twitter page will be updated daily. Assign this task to someone within your agency. You may want to consider the same person that is the spokesperson for press conferences, to ensure consistency.

Even if there is no substantial update to your investigation, use social media as a way keep the public and media engaged. “We are continuing to search for {missing person} – we ask that the community continue to share his/her photo and report any possible information to us.” – Consistency counts. Your agency can do a daily update on social media with minimal time and effort.

*The family should be briefed privately about any and all information that will be given to the media, released on social media or at a press conference before it’s announced to the public. The family should NOT be finding out information about their loved one from the news. The news and the public are great resources for an investigation but briefing the family should take priority over briefing the public.*

## PRESS CONFERENCE

If your agency decides to hold a press conference, make sure all the investigating agencies are in agreement about what information will be released. Select one spokesperson that will represent your agency. This spokesperson should remain consistent throughout the investigation, ensuring uniformity of information released. If one or more agencies need to speak at a press conference, determine in advance what each agency will say and what information each agency will give out.

*And as a reminder once again, the family should be briefed privately about any and all information that will be given to the media, released on social media or at a press conference before it’s announced to the public. The family should NOT be finding out information about their loved one from the news. The news and the public are great resources for an investigation but briefing the family should take priority over briefing the public.*

## HOW CAN I GIVE A TIP?

Give the public a way to provide information. What phone number should they call? If your agency has social media, do you want the public sending information over Facebook? Probably not. Be clear and consistent about how and where the public can provide tips.

## COMMUNITY IMPACT

The impact a missing person has on a community can be traumatic. If there is no public threat, let the community know. Also let the community know they can help locate the missing person. Give specific call-to-actions:

- » Go check your property
- » Review your personal security video / images, if available
- » If available, save the security video and images from the day or night of X date and let us know so we can review it.

This will also give the media more to report on while the person is still missing. The longer a person is missing, the harder it may be to get media coverage.

## LONG-TERM MISSING

When a child has been missing for several weeks, the news interest may dwindle. Here are some ways to keep the story relevant in the news cycle for months and even years:

- » Continuing to engage with the public, even if no “new” information is available.
- » Do you have security imagery or video that you never released to the public? Releasing “new” security imagery even if it does not benefit / enhance the investigation can get you media coverage.
- » Asking the family to release a statement or make a public plea for information. Family can release new photo(s) of missing person.
- » Use the missing person’s birthday or missing date to remind the public that they are still missing.
- » Use billboards in your area to draw attention to the case.

You need to let the public know that your agency is still searching and that you continue to need the public’s help. Together with a missing person’s family, you can hold a candlelight vigil, memorial walk/run, host a press conference on the anniversary of the missing date or the missing person’s birthday.

When you, as law enforcement, continue to publicly speak about the missing person, this lets the media and the public know that you are still working, still care and are still seeking answers and justice.

Families of long-term missing people often say “no one cares anymore” or “no one is searching.” Continuing to ask the public for assistance and talk about the missing person publicly can lead to a break in your case and it can also foster good will with the missing person’s family.

## WHEN AN INVESTIGATION ENDS / CONCLUSION

If your agency asked the media and the general public for help, they need to know that the investigation is over, and you appreciated everyone’s help.

- » Be sure to give the public and the media an update when the investigation concludes. Consider having the family issue a statement of thanks and appreciation to everyone who shared the missing person’s picture and provided information.
- » Your agency should put out a statement saying, ‘thank you.’ Even if details can’t be released, your agency can say – “For the privacy of the family, we will not be releasing any more information” or “This is still an on-going investigation” etc...

**Every situation is unique and may have different challenges.** The National Center for Missing & Exploited Children is available to assist or provide consultation.

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