



# Media Relations

## Overview

In today's world, where people receive news from a myriad of sources — websites, social media, television, radio, word-of-mouth, or newspaper — it is critical that we engage our audiences where they are. The news media remain an effective way to reach a large audience quickly.

This tool will help prepare you to engage effectively with the traditional news media (television, radio, newspapers) so that you can successfully convey important information to the public. Of course, many people are turning to social media for their news, so you also should evaluate opportunities to use social media to reach your intended audience. *However, remember that social media should be used in addition to, rather than instead of, traditional news media.* (See the [Social Media](#) tool for more information.)

## Why This Is Important

Successful engagement with the media enables you to reach the public with important site information, clarify or correct reporting that contains inaccurate or misleading information, and build the credibility of the Agency and the science behind our work. This is of pivotal importance, particularly:

- In crises when the science is difficult to convey to lay audiences in a concise manner.
- During public comment periods for a site's addition to the National Priorities List (NPL), the record of decision (ROD), and other site milestones.
- When the public may be afraid of a hazardous substance harming their health.
- When information reported by the media is incomplete, biased or false.

Understanding how to effectively use the news media and maintaining good media relations are important aspects of a community involvement coordinator's (CIC's) job. Media coverage of a site often may form the public's perception of the site, potential risks and the Agency's response. Supplying journalists with timely, factual information conveyed in easy-to-understand language is crucial. In fact, this

*This and all tools in the Community Involvement Toolkit should be used in conjunction with the [Community Involvement Handbook](#), which provides guidance to EPA staff on how EPA typically plans and implements community involvement activities at Superfund sites.*

could determine whether the public has an accurate impression of conditions at the site.

## Implementation

Almost every Superfund site generates interest in the local news media at some point. When a reporter is writing about Superfund, EPA should always provide one of the perspectives. You should turn to the local news media to help disseminate information about site issues and activities.

One key to ensuring accurate media coverage of the site is to develop good relationships with local reporters and editors and establish yourself as a valuable source of information. Communicate early and often with local, regional and national journalists who cover beats relevant to Superfund, such as environment, public health, housing, infrastructure, politics and science. Doing so can help you target messaging to allay the concerns of various interest groups, get ahead of any issues that may arise, and control the narrative for your site. This requires establishing yourself as a reliable source of accurate, timely information by issuing news releases and media advisories with well-crafted messages, making members of the site team available to reporters and editors when events or issues may be newsworthy, and anticipating and responding to media inquiries promptly and accurately.

The first step in any communication is defining the key messages you want to convey. (For information about crafting effective key messages, see Attachment 1: *Developing Key Messages*). The next step is to decide the best way to convey this information to the public.

The CIC and the site team should identify the most appropriate media mechanisms through which to



convey news items to community members. You can ask about the community's preferred methods for receiving site-related news during [\*community interviews\*](#) conducted for preparation of the site's [\*community involvement plan\*](#) (CIP). This is a valuable way to learn which local news sources people use the most. Local government and community organizations also may help by identifying the news outlets they have successfully worked with to inform the community.

Consider the message you want to convey and your intended audiences when deciding which media outlets to engage. In one community, you may wish to work with reporters for one or more of the major print, television and radio outlets serving the area to deliver site-related news and information. In another community, you may decide to seek out a media organization through which you can share your information online with your target audience.

### When to Use

Generally, you will work with the media when:

- you want the media to communicate information to the public.
- journalists seek your input, usually during a crisis or breaking news event.
- a reporter is covering a story that directly or indirectly relates to the site.

Before engaging with the media, it is important to know the Regional and Headquarters policies about contacts with the media. Work closely with the relevant public affairs office, as policy dictates. Contact your Region's Office of Public Affairs to learn more about communication with the news media in your Region.

When you are disseminating information to the public, deliver your message directly to the target audiences (e.g., affected residents and local officials) first, whenever possible. Then use the media to reinforce that information and disseminate it more widely. Most people would rather receive a surprising or potentially disturbing message (e.g., their property or community might be contaminated) directly from a person they know rather than by reading about it in the newspaper.

There is an exception to this general rule of thumb: In an emergency, such as a release that would require residents to take precautions, delivering accurate information quickly and widely to everyone who

might be affected is paramount. In such situations, contact the media immediately and enlist their help alerting the community. One side benefit is that by doing so, you become the news source-of-record for information about the situation. The media will tend to come to you first for updates and expert interpretation as the situation develops.

### Working with Different Types of Media

In communities that are served by several types of media, you often can choose the best medium or media to deliver your messages to your intended audience. Consult the site's CIP to help identify the community's preferred communication outlets, which may help you make this determination. You also should consider the characteristics of each type of media — television, radio, print, digital and social media — each with its own benefits and ways of reaching your intended audience. (See box below.) For this reason, it is important to understand how each medium works and how the strengths of each medium can help you deliver information.

Working with traditional news media outlets involves understanding how each medium gathers news, how they present it, and how their needs are different. Whenever you work with the media, especially when you are a source for a news story, be aware of their deadlines. Be sure to issue your own press releases, schedule media briefings or return phone calls from reporters with their deadlines in mind. If you do not meet media deadlines, journalists will find someone else who will, and they may not consider you to be a reliable source in the future. Most importantly, the information you want to convey may not make the paper or broadcast.

When working with the media, remember:

- You will be most effective if you are an accessible source of reliable, verifiable information.
- Be available when reporters need you. Try to connect with them. Do not be evasive.
- Do not be afraid of working with the media. They rarely are out to "get" you or anyone else without provocation. However, do not let your guard down.
- Remember that a good reporter will not give you preferential treatment.
- There is no such thing as a "dead microphone," and a reporter is never off duty. Avoid making "off-the-record" comments.
- Be prepared. While you will not have control over how you will be quoted in a story, you often can



### *Deciding When to Use Different Types of News Media*

Most places offer access to several forms of media. Choose the medium that is best suited to your message and to reaching your intended audience.

**Television:** Television is powerful because it combines visual and audio messages. A typical TV news story runs for 10 to 30 seconds as part of a newscast, while a feature story or investigative report may be somewhat longer. Consider working with television news outlets when:

- you have a visually appealing message that can be delivered in a short amount of time; or
- you want to familiarize the local community with the site, and it is possible to invite a TV news crew to an event or a site tour.

**Radio:** Use the radio to convey simple information, make announcements or provide instructions. Use active voice, short sentences and stick to key messages. Consider using radio when you want a message distributed:

- through community service shows, call-in talk shows, or local college radio stations;
- during the morning and evening rush hours; and
- as short announcements during an emergency.

Many radio and television outlets also maintain websites that may provide an opportunity to also communicate more detailed information to their audiences.

**Print media and local news websites:** Print media and online news sites can offer a more in-depth look at issues and events and can be effective ways to provide more complex and explanatory information to your audiences. Most print media also have an online presence.

The following tips apply to print and digital news media outlets:

- Print media often will take the time to research and develop a story. Consider granting interviews to print reporters who can write stories with significant detail and background information.
- Print media is your best options for disseminating information that is complex, involves a long explanation or includes many numbers.
- Consider submitting letters to the editor and opinion pieces in addition to issuing press releases, granting interviews, and working with reporters on specific stories.

In addition to general-distribution newspapers and magazines, consider disseminating information in church bulletins, neighborhood newsletters, and local weeklies. Submitting information to non-English local weekly newspapers can be very effective ways to reach important segments of the community.

anticipate the hard questions and have answers ready.

- By knowing in advance what your key messages are and repeating them as often as possible, you can greatly increase the chances that your message will be delivered accurately.

### **Deciding the Best Way to Communicate Through the Media**

There are many ways to provide information to the media for dissemination to the public. These include press releases, press conferences or media availability sessions, media site visits and media interviews, to name a few. Consider what your message is and

choose an appropriate method for communicating the message to the media for dissemination to the public:

- Use a *press release* to make simple announcements or convey information that is unlikely to require significant clarification or raise many additional questions from reporters.
- Schedule a *press conference* when there is breaking news or when a question-and-answer format is appropriate. Press conferences also are an excellent way for officials from several organizations to engage with the media at the same time. The various spokespersons can describe individual roles and responsibilities.



- A *media availability* session is like a press conference but may not include prepared statements. It provides an opportunity for reporters to access an Agency spokesperson at a pre-determined time and place.
- A *media site visit* is most effective when there is something of interest going on at the site, such as a major remedy implementation or the creation of green space at a formerly contaminated area. Media site visits provide first-hand experiences and visuals to journalists and gives you and the site team the ability to explain in-person the site issues or work in progress.
- *Media interviews* are a way to communicate directly with the public. Providing interviews for radio, television or print media is one way to impart important information, and also to humanize the Agency's work and shape the conversation around an issue.

### Press Releases

The objective of a press release is to entice an editor to explore and cover the story. Remember that information about a local Superfund site will not be considered newsworthy unless it has immediacy and relevancy to the local audience. By preparing an effective press release, you will help the media accurately disseminate information about the site. EPA press releases should contain well-crafted messages delivered in a way that is tailored to each medium and to that medium's specific audiences. For example, a press release for local radio will contain factual information and will be very short, because radio news items usually are less than a minute long. A press release intended for newspapers can contain more detailed information as well as quotes attributed to Agency officials or spokespersons.

Although activity at a local Superfund site often is considered news, to garner coverage, the information needs to be immediate in nature and tied to a specific milestone or event that merits attention. An event or announcement made today is timely and likely to be considered news, while an announcement or event that happened days ago or will happen sometime in the far future generally will not be considered newsworthy.

Keep in mind that when media receives a press release from EPA, they consider it a publicity release and not news. Rarely will a print or broadcast media outlet use your press release verbatim. Although you may

think that what you are announcing is newsworthy, keep in mind your information may be crowded out by other stories.

Press releases should be prepared in collaboration with your EPA Regional public affairs office, which is a valuable resource for interacting with and connecting with media. (See Attachment 2: *Writing Effective Press Releases*.)

### Media Events

There are three main types of media events: media availabilities, press conferences and site visits. Media availabilities and press conferences are effective tools for engaging local reporters and news outlets. A site visit is an opportunity to provide reporters with first-hand experiences and visuals and allows CICs and the site team to explain in person the site issues or work in progress at the site.

The information below can help you decide which type of media event may be most appropriate for your needs:

**Media Availability Sessions:** A media availability is a simple event where the community involvement coordinator and possibly other members of the site team are available to answer questions at a certain place and time.

**Press Conference:** A press conference is a more formal event often used to issue a statement or make a major announcement to the public. Press conferences are formal, structured events that usually are expected to draw significant numbers of reporters.

When planning a media event, consider the following questions:

- Is your message really a major announcement?
- Does your message warrant the formality of the press conference?
- Is the media market large enough to sustain a formal press conference?
- Will the media market respond well to the formality of a press conference?

If the answer to any of these is "no," your message probably can be delivered more effectively via a media availability. These can be informal (on-the-record, or "on background") events, and often require simply sending a press release to media outlets indicating that the community involvement coordinator or the





site team will be available to them at a certain time and place. This can be done as a panel session, a poster session, or by having an expert speak directly to reporters with you there to monitor and keep the conversation from straying off track. These can be conducted in-person or over the phone.

For both press conferences and media availabilities, work closely with your Region's public affairs office to plan the event and ensure that all relevant media outlets are represented. Press conferences and media availabilities may be held at the site. Select a room that is large enough and prepare it by having audio-visual equipment in place before the event begins. The smoother the process, the better. Journalists who take time out to attend a press conference do not want to go through a long, chaotic sign-in process or deal with audio-visual snafus. We want to ensure that the content is the story, rather than the conduct of the press conference itself. This is also good advice for maintaining positive working relationships with the media.

**Media Site Visit:** A media site visit provides first-hand experiences and visuals. Work with the RPM to ensure that safe access to the site is available. Site visits are most effective when there is something of interest going on at the site, such as a major remedy implementation or the creation of green space at a formerly contaminated area. Before planning a site visit, consider the following questions:

- Are there safe areas to which you can take reporters on site? Are there parts of the site that are off-limits to the media?
- Will it be a simple site tour or a more involved?
- Will it be a group tour with all the media going together, or will it be a staggered tour with smaller groups?
- Before planning a site visit, be sure that all site access and safety concerns are addressed. If direct access to the site is not advised, try to identify a vantage point from which reporters will be able to take pictures or video footage easily.

## Media Interviews

Media interviews are one great way to share your key messages with the public. Be sure to emphasize your key messages. Prepare and have your talking points ready. Be professional. Talk in short, concise and easy-to-understand sentences. Avoid using jargon and acronyms. If you do not know the answer to a

question, say so, and tell the reporter you will follow up with that information.

Carefully examine any documentation shown to you by the media, but not on camera. If given a multiple-part question, answer the most important or easiest part first. When finished, ask them to repeat the others, if necessary. Before answering a question that contains a faulty premise or inaccurate or misleading information, correct any part of a question that is inaccurate. Do not repeat the wrong information — just make the correction first and then answer the question, as corrected.

When answering questions about enforcement issues, it is best to say something like: "It is EPA policy not to talk about any current or future enforcement issues." Be consistent with this response, regardless of the actual answer, because a series of negative responses interrupted by an "I cannot comment" response sounds like a "yes."

The section on "Tips" below provides some useful suggestions about how to effectively communicate your key messages in interviews with the media, and for all of your interactions with the news media.

## Tips

*Before interacting with the media:*

- Define your key messages. Have three key messages ready at all times. (See Attachment 1.)
- Use your key messages to prepare talking points in advance.
- Get ahead of the story whenever possible. If there is negative media coverage related to your site, communicating early, accurately and openly with the media will improve your credibility and the credibility of the Agency and the responders on the ground. Getting ahead of a story provides the best opportunity to control the narrative, ensure the media has accurate information, reduce miscommunication, and establish yourself as *the* source to reporters for any follow-up.

*After interacting with the media:*

- Take notes on every encounter with a reporter and enter notes into your media log.
- Meet all deadlines for providing information. Missing a deadline could mean the reporting of incorrect information, in addition to making you,



the Agency and your coworkers seem unprepared, uninformed and unprofessional.

- Save all news stories. If necessary, get a copy of the story by doing a web search for the story. If it is not available online, you can ask the reporter for a copy.

#### *Do:*

- Get the reporter's deadline and get back to them in time.
- Prepare. Have your talking points ready, along with up-to-date information about any site issues that are likely to come up. Reinforce key messages often.
- Make sure you and the reporter agree on the ground rules for your interview or comments. "Off-the-record," "on background," and "not for attribution" mean different things to different people. We advise against doing something off-the-record, but if you decide to provide information off the record or on background, be clear exactly what you mean beforehand, and make sure the reporter agrees. Here is how [the Associated Press](#) defines the various ways it handles information from anonymous sources:
  - "Off-the-record." The information cannot be used for publication.
  - "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.
  - "Not for attribution." is similar to "background," meaning that the source of the information should not be identified by name (or equivalent).
- Meet with the environmental reporter for each media outlet to build a rapport between those who cover your work and your office.
- Have something available for a slow news day. Editors frequently need filler material, and if you can provide a non-time-sensitive story, you will help them and yourself.
- Use a community bulletin board that lists community events. Many media outlets have one. Be sure to use it when you can.

#### *Do not:*

- Lie, mislead or speculate.
- Accept facts or figures from a reporter unless you know they are correct.
- Never say "no comment." Rather, explain why you cannot comment and include the reason or policy behind why you can't. For example, say: "Anything I say right now would be pure speculation, and it is EPA policy not to speculate on such matters."
- Speak on your own behalf. When you are an Agency spokesperson, everything you say reflects on the Agency. You do not speak as an individual.
- Use threatening, non-verbal behaviors: e.g., make a fist or point at the reporter.
- Be misled by a reporter's friendly manner. Be professional and always be ready to answer difficult questions.
- Offer or promise an exclusive for a newsworthy event. If you offer something to the media, it must go to all interested outlets, not just one. If an outlet comes to you with a storyline or an inquiry, you do not have to (and you should not) offer the same story to everyone else. Do not promise that you will not respond to similar inquiries from others.

#### *Be aware of:*

- Hypothetical questions. It is best not to answer hypothetical questions. Avoid giving hypothetical answers. Instead, explain that you refuse to speculate and want to be factual.
- Forced-choice questions. Use your own words and Agency-approved language, particularly regarding technical guidance.
- Needling questions, such as "Oh, come on...?" Stick to your messages.
- Ambiguous questions. Ask the reporter to clarify, then answer.
- Putting words into your mouth. Do not argue, just answer with your messages.
- Baiting for accusations. "What do you really think about...?"

## Attachments

- Attachment 1: *Developing Key Messages*
- Attachment 2: *Writing Effective Press Releases*



## Attachment 1: Developing Key Messages

Before deciding how to convey key information, carefully consider what you want to communicate to the public by developing one or more simple, clear messages.

A good key message is a brief sentence or phrase that conveys information simply and clearly. Good key messages should be appropriate to the medium: a message that is conveyed through broadcast media should be conversational in tone, while messages that will be communicated through print media should be appropriate as a written communication.

The more succinct and pointed your statements, the better the chances of having them used on the air or in print. The following examples are a few proven messages that often are useful for conveying basic information about a site:

*Examples:*

1. We have eliminated the immediate dangers.
2. Occasional contact with the site is not harmful.
3. The real danger is regular contact over many years, such as a young child playing on the site every day.
4. It is the buildup of exposure over time that presents the risk.
5. Accumulated exposure is the real danger. That is why we are here. That is what we must now address.
6. Accumulated exposure is why our people wear protective clothing — they work with it every day.

Use the template on the next page to develop key messages. Well-thought-out key messages can be used many times and conveyed in many ways across all types of media. Use your key messages when you write a press release, prepare for a media interview, press conference or media availability. You should not try to convey more than three key messages at one time.





## Template for Developing Key Messages

This template will help you identify your key messages and communicate them in brief, concise, usable statements. Keep your key messages handy and recycle them.

### Step One. Identify the overall message you want to convey to the public.

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### Step Two. Identify the main points of your message (no more than three at a time).

1. -----
2. -----
3. -----

### Step Three. List descriptive and qualifying words to reinforce your message.

1. -----
2. -----
3. -----

### Step Four. Combine the main points with the descriptive words to define the key points in your final message.

1. -----
2. -----
3. -----

### Here is an example, using the template above:

#### Step One. Identify the overall message that you want to convey to the public.

The site is safe in the short term, but continued exposure over many years can be harmful.

#### Step Two. Identify the main points of your message. (No more than three at a time.)

1. The site is currently safe.
2. EPA and contractors are now working to make the site permanently safe.
3. EPA's team has experience and skill.

#### Step Three. List descriptive and qualifying words to reinforce your message.

1. Site: Protected, secure, stable, safe, not harmful
2. Agency/Site Team: Conscientious, experienced, highly qualified, exemplary, first-rate, top-notch, commendable, dependable, reputable, truthful, reliable

#### Step Four. Combine the main points with the descriptive words to craft a simple, easy-to-understand message:

1. EPA's first concern is always the public's health and safety.
2. We have eliminated all risk of immediate danger. Now we are working to eliminate the long-term threat.
3. Occasional contact with the site will not be harmful.
4. We have an experienced, top-notch team working on this site. They have worked together for several years, and combined, they have over 80 years of experience with this kind of situation.





## Attachment 2: Writing Effective Press Releases

Use these tips to prepare effective press releases:

- Define your key messages and convey them clearly and concisely.
- Use the inverted pyramid style: the most important information comes first and progresses down to the least important information. The lead sentence should give you the most important facts. Do not write chronologically.
- The first two or three paragraphs must convey the “who, what, when, where, how and why.”
- Be concise. Use short words, sentences and paragraphs.
- Use quotes attributed to senior management, the remedial project manager or other respected sources.
- Consult and comply with [EPA Style Guidelines](#).
- Always provide information about whom to contact for more information. Include name, title, telephone number and email address.
- Submit your draft press release to the EPA Regional public affairs office for editing, and do not agonize over wordsmithing in the headline you offer, as they will use their own.

**Here is an example of an EPA Superfund-related press release:**

*This example is for demonstration purposes only.*

### EPA Prepares for Upcoming Work at Harley Mills Site

May 2, 20XX

Contact Information:

Name and Title:

Email:

Phone number:

**BOSTON** – The U.S. Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and the Connecticut Department of Environmental Quality (CDEQ) expect to begin field work on Monday, Aug. 1, to decommission and remove above-ground piping at the Harley Mills Superfund site in Fairtown, Connecticut.

This project is expected to take about 2-3 weeks to complete. During that time, residents can expect to see the frequent presence of field workers and increased activity.

Activities will include mobilizing, staging of equipment and removal of the piping and auxiliary infrastructure.

The piping will be removed as part of a soil vapor extraction system. The system has been inoperable for several years. Originally, it was designed to extract vapors from contaminated soil to reduce contamination. It was modified to extract water in addition to vapors. This aided the cleanup of contaminated soil and groundwater within the trichloroethylene (TCE) spill area.

“The vapor extraction system is no longer necessary,” said EPA Remedial Project Manager Mary Smith. EPA approved the removal of the system components in June 2016, after EPA and CDEQ determined that the system had achieved its goals. Pumping and treatment of the TCE-contaminated groundwater from four large on-site extraction wells will continue for the foreseeable future.

As stated in reminders from the Fairtown Water and Sewer Department, the residents in the Harley Mills Groundwater Remediation District ordinance zone cannot use wells for any reason, as any such pumping can spread contamination and adversely affect the cleanup at the site. Residences within the ordinance zone affected by the spill have been connected to the town water supply.





A former textile mill began operating the site in the early 1900s. In 1989, a solvent-scouring system that used TCE to remove oil and dirt from newly woven fabric was installed. That same year, an unknown quantity of trichloroethylene, or TCE, was spilled at the site.

Technical documents related to the site's cleanup are available on the web at <http://epa.gov/superfund> or at the North Smithfield Public Library.