

OpTac International News Bulletin

Media Relations

Policing is receiving an enormous amount of scrutiny in the media, with the majority of reports being highly critical of recent events. On occasion, law enforcement agencies and their officers have not performed optimally. In many cases, these reports also result from an inadequate police response to media inquiries. Circumstances in which both inappropriate officer performance and subsequent department response recently occurred in Tulsa, Oklahoma, where a 73 year-old reserve deputy shot an unarmed suspect with his handgun instead of his Taser. Allegations surfaced that the reserve deputy's training records were falsified after he was criminally charged with manslaughter. While no amount of damage control can remedy a situation in which an unarmed suspect is accidentally killed by a poorly trained officer, this edition of the **OpTac International News Bulletin** presents effective strategies for dealing with the media.



OpTac International staff have been guests on local, national, and international news programs ranging from the Nancy Grace Show and the O'Reilly Factor, to the BBC. In this capacity, we learned (and continue to learn) a great deal about managing media relations involving high-profile police incidents. First, news reports are rarely about the excellent work that law enforcement officers perform on a daily basis. This is primarily due to increased public interest in negative incidents over positive ones, thereby resulting in sensationalized journalism (similar to attack ads used by political candidates prior to an election). Next, the majority of people in our communities receive their education about policing from movies and television shows, and not, from criminal justice courses or real-life interactions. With this in mind, the following is a brief guide to media relations:

- 1) The police mission is to save lives---this should be clearly communicated regardless of what transpired during the incident in question
- 2) An officer extensively trained in media relations should handle press inquiries whenever possible
- 3) Have a predetermined message that is simplified, defined, and prioritized before it is delivered
- 4) Balance community service with the need to release details that could compromise a current or future investigation/operation
- 5) Avoid personal opinions and do not be forced into a particular answer
- 6) There is no such thing as "off the record"
- 7) Avoid using the term "no comment;" explain why the question cannot be answered at this particular time
- 8) Understand that media personnel have a job to do and a story to tell, even if it is "their story"
- 9) Attempt to develop pre-existing relationships with reporters by inviting them to participate in training sessions
- 10) Ensure your public image reflects your department's values

The aforementioned is a brief guide to assist any officer having to deal regularly or unexpectedly with the media. Always remember, the way in which media relations are managed directly impacts your department's perception and reputation.