

## **EMPLOYEE MEDIA RELATIONS SPOKESPERSON POLICY:**

### **SECTION I: PURPOSE:**

The following policy has been enacted in the interest of ensuring that, to the best of its ability, the Town of Windham and its employees will facilitate the accurate and prompt exchange of information with the news media as follows:

- A) By providing useful and accurate information in a timely and professional manner regarding Town business as a whole.
- B) By ensuring, as much as possible, that consistent information is being disseminated by the Town.
- C) By ensuring that the Board of Selectmen, Town Administrator, staff, media and general public are aware of any communications issues.
- D) By utilizing the media as a resource, particularly in emergency, disaster or crisis situations.
- E) By fostering a cooperative working relationship between the Town of Windham and the media.
- F) By establishing procedures for responding to media inquiries, including identifying a Town spokesperson.
- G) By clarifying the difference between being a spokesperson on behalf of the Town of Windham and the expression of individual opinions of elected and appointed officials about matters related to the Town.

### **SECTION II: AUTHORITY:**

This policy has been enacted pursuant to the statutory authority granted to the Board of Selectmen by RSA 41:8 to manage the prudential affairs of the Town.

### **SECTION III: SCOPE:**

This policy applies to all appointed and contracted Town employees.

### **SECTION IV: DEFINITIONS:**

For the purpose of this Policy, the following words and phrases when used herein shall be construed as follows:

*Town staff* is defined as all employees of the Town of Windham including: full and part-time, union and non-union, and contracted individuals.

*Town Spokesperson* is defined as the person most knowledgeable and informed about a particular subject matter. In the event of a media inquiry, the spokesperson may be the Town Administrator, Chairman of the Board of Selectmen, or incident specific Department Head, or any of these individual's respective designees.

*Guideline* is a term for purposes of this policy to mean a statement or other indication of policy or procedure by which to determine a course of action.

*News Release* is information prepared for dissemination to the news media, reproduced on letterhead identifying the Town of Windham as the source. A news release should be timely and complete.

*News Conference* is a scheduled media gathering, planned by the Town Administrator or designee when an emergency, announcement or other significant information must be disseminated in a timely, coordinated manner to multiple media outlets.

*Non-routine Media Requests* typically involve responses that require interpretation of policy, involve employee information or are in response to an emergency situation or a controversial issue.

*Routine Media Requests* typically involve responses that require information that is incidental or inconsequential in nature.

*Sensitive and Controversial Issues* as that term applies to this policy may include, but are not limited to:

1. Personnel issue related to any Town employee, such as performance evaluation, reasons for termination, reasons for not hiring, harassment claims.
2. Legal claims or lawsuits filed against the Town of Windham or any of its employees or agents,
3. Issues that may affect the Town's public image or citizen confidence.

#### **SECTION V: GENERAL PROCEDURES:**

The following procedures and standards will be used by all departments as applicable to media relations within the Town of Windham.

- A) Spokesperson. In most cases there will be one spokesperson designated for response to each inquiry. For Town-wide inquiries, the spokesperson will most often be the Town Administrator. For department-related issues, the spokesperson will most often be the Department Head.
- B) Primary Town Contact. The Town Administrator will serve as the primary source of Town information, providing background information about Town issues, policies and services.
- C) Media Inquiries: Every effort should be made to meet media deadlines and ensure that all information released is accurate. Accuracy of information takes precedence over media deadlines.
  1. If another priority prevents an immediate response, a courtesy call should be made to the reporter confirming what information is requested and advising when the requested information will be available.
- D) Routine media requests may be responded to by any employee if the response is of a factual, incidental or inconsequential nature (i.e. special event schedule).
- E) Non-routine media requests should be forwarded the Town Administrator prior to response. These may include responses that require the interpretation of policy, employee information.

- F) Sensitive and controversial issues often become headlines for the news media. This provision provides the framework for the Town to respond appropriately and as soon as possible to sensitive and controversial issues as described in Definition Section of this policy.
1. Sensitive and controversial issues pertaining to internal operations of the Town organization should be immediately forwarded to the Town Administrator in order to prepare for or respond to media inquiries. The Town Administrator will communicate with Department Heads and Town officials as necessary, including the Town Attorney, to develop appropriate strategies for each issue and determine an appropriate spokesperson.
    - a) Town staff should not speak to a reporter or editor about a sensitive or controversial issue without authorization and prior approval by the Town Administrator.
    - b) Sensitive and controversial issues of interest to the media may be best assessed by asking the following:
      - i. Is the issue a threat, existing or potential, to life, health, or property?
      - ii. Could the issue likely be interpreted to negatively affect public confidence in or opinion of the Town of Windham's government or Board of Selectmen?
      - iii. Is the issue of particular interest to the general public?
      - iv. Are there legal ramifications, existing or potential, raised by the issue?
      - v. Has more than one member of the media inquired about the same issue?
      - vi. Has someone or some aspect of it threatened to go to the media about the issue?
      - vii. Is there unusual or inappropriate interest by a person or small group of people about a seemingly routine issue?
    - c) Public Records Requests from the media or general public for details or other information related to a sensitive or controversial issue must be made in writing and in all other respects shall be in accordance with RSA 91-A, the "Right to Know Law". All public records requests will be forwarded to the Town Administrator immediately upon receipt.
  2. News Releases will be prepared and issued by the appropriate spokesperson or designee as newsworthy information becomes available or as events occur, with a copy sent to the Town Administrator. Any news releases relating to a sensitive or confidential matter shall be prepared and issued by the Town Administrator or official designee.
  3. News Briefings may be conducted to educate the news media about potentially controversial issues and provide reporters an opportunity to ask in-depth questions. In most briefings, the Town should endeavor to provide extensive background materials, facts sheets and explanatory materials.

4. News Conferences will be held at the direction of the Town Administrator or Board of Selectmen to announce or respond to an issue of significance or controversy with a united voice pertaining to facts, information, rules, and emergency or crisis situation or the established policy/rules of the Town. A news conference allows Town officials to effectively respond at one sitting rather than responding individually to many media contacts. A news conference may be called when:
  - a. The issue to be announced is best conveyed at a news conference.
  - b. Major participants of a project are available to highlight their participation and respond to media inquiries "together."
  - c. The issue is likely to produce controversy.
    - i. News conferences will be planned in advance and coordinated by the Town Administrator.
    - ii. A spokesperson for the news conference will be selected by the Town Administrator, or if appropriate by circumstances, the Board of Selectmen.
      - Additional personnel may be required to attend who can provide background information and details.

G) Emergency Media Relations. In the event of a disaster or emergency that requires the Windham Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to be activated, either the Town Administrator (or designee) or Windham Emergency Management Director (or designee) will be responsible for primary media relations.

- a. Upon the Proclamation of a Local Emergency by the Windham Board of Selectmen, the Town Administrator or his/her designee may conduct the first News Briefing announcing such Proclamation.

## **SECTION VI: RESPONSIBILITIES AND GUIDELINES FOR RESPONSE**

### A) Town Employee Responsibilities and Guidelines.

1. It is the responsibility of employees to immediately notify their supervisor or Department Head of significant events or issues that occur and may be of major interest to the general public.
2. Unless restricted by specific departmental policies, employees may respond directly to a media inquiry regarding routine, factual information relating specifically to his/her function and information of inconsequential nature.
3. If the inquiry involves policy issues, the staff member may only respond after direction to do so from his/her Department Head.
4. No employee shall provide media interviews unless approved by the Department Head or Town Administrator.

B) Department Head Responsibilities and Guidelines.

1. It is the responsibility of Department Heads to immediately notify the Town Administrator of significant events or issues that occur within their departments and may be of major interest to the general public. The Town Administrator will determine the appropriateness of contacting the Board of Selectmen. Examples include, but are not limited to:
  - a. Injury, termination, serious illness, or death of an employee
  - b. Major malfunctions of Town equipment, facility or infrastructure that could impact the general welfare of the public, environment or ability to provide service.
  - c. An unexpected work stoppage or inability to provide a critical Town service.
  - d. The arrest of an employee.
  - e. Programs and employees receiving awards.
2. Upon receiving a media inquiry that requires additional information which the Department Head is unable to provide, the inquiry will be immediately forwarded to the Town Administrator.
  - a. The Town Administrator will work with the Department Head to develop a simple strategy to properly respond.
  - b. The Department Head may forward the inquiry to a staff member.

**SECTION VII: GENERAL MEDIA INTERACTION GUIDELINES**

- A) Respond to inquiries within your purview. Do not respond to matters that do not directly relate to your professional responsibility for the Town.
- B) Do not offer legal opinions on Town policies or activities.
- C) Do not discuss employees or personnel actions.
- D) Do not speculate about what action the Town will take.
- E) Inquire of the story's focus, the reporter's deadline and story publication date.

**SECTION VIII: DISSEMINATION OF NEWS RELEASES**

- A) News releases shall contain contact information for the appropriate spokesperson and other Town staff as designated.
- B) News releases shall be distributed electronically (email) and via facsimile to appropriate media (television, newsprint, radio).
- C) Town news releases will be distributed to the Town Administrator and Board of Selectmen and be forwarded to the Town's webmaster for posting on Town's official website.

**SECTION IX: EMPLOYEES ACTING AS PRIVATE CITIZENS**

- A) The following guidelines are offered to employees who may choose to contact the media as a private citizen. These guidelines do not prohibit such contact, but establish acceptable methods of doing so.
1. Letters to the Editor or similar may not be prepared on Town time, printed on Town letterhead stationery, or mailed at Town expense.
  2. Responses or letters shall not include the employee's official title or imply that the response is on behalf of the Town of Windham organization.
  3. Telephone contact may not be made on Town time using Town telephones.
  4. Use of Town email is prohibited.
  5. Use of Town facilities or supplies is prohibited.
  6. Statements made to the media shall not disrupt public meetings or interfere with the Town operations.
  7. These guidelines also apply to employees responding to or initiating media contact as official representatives of employee groups.
  8. Employees will not be disciplined for exercising their rights as private citizens.

**SECTION X : SEVERABILITY:**

If any provision of this Policy is held to be invalid, other provisions and sections shall not be affected, and to this end, the provisions and sections hereof are declared to be severable.

**SECTION XI - AMENDMENTS:**

An amendment to this Policy may be moved at a Board of Selectmen meeting, but shall not be voted upon until the next regularly scheduled meeting, not less than seven (7) days later.

**SECTION XII - EFFECTIVE DATE:**

This Policy shall take effect immediately upon adoption of the Board of Selectmen.

**Adopted by Board of Selectmen on April 2, 2007**

**Alan E. Carpenter**  
**Dennis J. Senibaldi**  
**Roger T. Hohenberger**  
**Margaret M. Crisler**  
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Board of Selectmen