



# ***NAVIGATING MEDIA IN THE WAKE OF TRAGEDY:***

HOW SURVIVORS OF CRIME, VICTIM ADVOCATES, AND OTHER SUPPORTERS CAN ENGAGE — OR NOT — WITH NEWS MEDIA AND 'TRUE CRIME' CONTENT CREATORS



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***"To keep our family's story alive and keep them present, you have to engage the media. No one is looking out for our protection. If you say nothing, the storyline will tell something else. If family doesn't set the record straight, then people come up with their own narrative."***

*— Kim Goldman, victim advocate, author, host of the "Media Circus" podcast, and NCVV board member*



# Chapter

# 1

# INTRODUCTION



## Who this guide is for

This guide is for victims and survivors of crime, their families, and victim advocates struggling to navigate tragedies while also attempting to navigate the media gauntlet. This includes those being pursued by the media and those who are desperate to bring attention to their case. It includes those impacted yesterday, who find themselves in the ongoing glare of an unwanted spotlight, and those whose cases are decades old but suddenly have seen a renewed interest due to anniversaries or the growing “true crime” marketplace.

## How to use this guide

We hope this guide clarifies your rights when working with the media and provides best practices and pitfalls to avoid.

While it may make sense to review it cover to cover (and we certainly hope you will at some point), we have tried to provide you with topics in the table of contents that are easily navigable and can be digested piecemeal. We have also included tip sheets for quick reference, which can be printed separately to take with you to interviews and other media encounters.

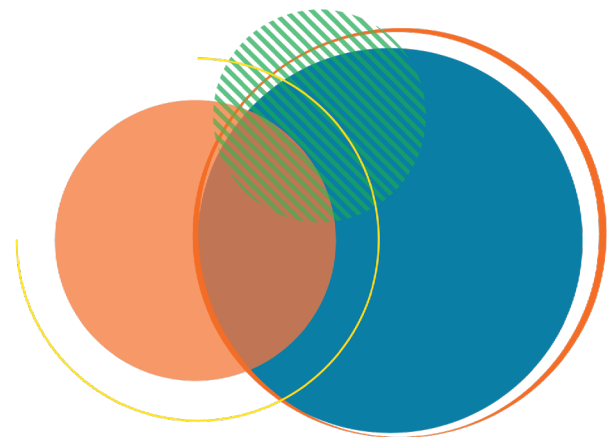
For more information, we encourage you to contact us at the National Center for Victims of Crime whenever you have questions. Our VictimConnect Resource Center can connect you to further services. Visit [victimconnect.org](https://victimconnect.org) to learn more.



## Why this matters

The public's fascination with crime and the quest by many in the media world to fulfill the demand is certainly not new. In recent years, however, the ability to consume "true crime" content on demand has led to a frenzy. This has led to a proliferation of TV shows, documentaries, and podcasts, renewing interest in decades-old crimes and some crimes that would not otherwise have been "high profile." Often, victims and survivors are forced to navigate both their tragedies and a media circus without a basic knowledge of their rights, leaving them vulnerable to revictimization and compounding their already present trauma.

Despite the often-unwanted glare of a media spotlight, victims/survivors and their families can use that same spotlight to their advantage in some cases. By engaging news media and using the power of the press to disseminate mass amounts of information quickly, they can raise awareness of their case and communicate their point of view.





***"Crime is commodity; it is used to sell a product and to enhance revenue for media. Only in the rarest instances are victims portrayed as victims... Society is left with little information concerning the causes, long-term effects or the implications of crime on its victims."***

*— Jerry L. Yeric, "The Law and Politics Book Review,"  
February 1997*



# Chapter

# 2

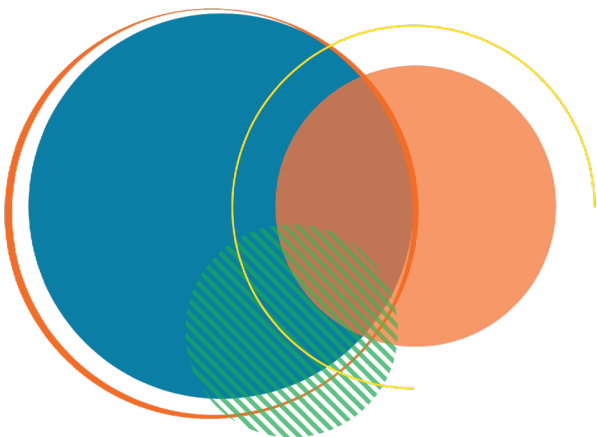
## MAKING THE DECISION TO WORK WITH MEDIA

### PROS OF ENGAGING MEDIA

Some victims and survivors choose to work with media and find coverage of their stories to be beneficial, while others prefer to maintain their privacy. Victims and survivors can also turn to a friend, relative, or other trusted individual to represent them and speak on their behalf. Whether to work with media is your choice — one that only you can make — and there is no wrong decision. We encourage you to weigh the pros and cons and work with victim-serving professionals to determine the best decision for you.

### Bringing attention to your story and shaping your narrative

- ▶ In addition to the practical and tangible benefits of engaging with media, there are also emotional and psychological benefits.
- ▶ Victims and survivors who actively engage with media can better control both the narrative that is being shared and the intrusion into their lives. Cooperation can increase the likelihood that media coverage will be more accurate and sensitive. Countless victims and survivors have reported that they have found solace in sharing stories of their loved ones, “humanizing” them to the public and encouraging community support of the victims/survivors and their families.
- ▶ There is, of course, an unfortunate and recurring truth: Reporters and other content producers can and will publish stories with or without participation from victims and survivors. This can lead to media relying on other parties, or sometimes even speculation, as sources. Worse, they may focus their work — intentionally or not — on the perpetrator. We believe that including the perspectives of victims and survivors can help turn the tide on society’s fascination with people who cause harm.







***"Participating (in media coverage) can, if done properly or without added trauma, ensure survivors and their families have an impact on coverage which will come often with or without their participation."***

*— David Guarino, founder of Survivors Say, communications professional, and former journalist*



***"For the first year, no one ever mentioned Ron's name. I don't say this to diminish Nicole or what she was enduring, but we couldn't even get anyone to say Ron's name — ever. You have been capitalizing on my brother's death for 30 years, and I get nothing when it comes to asking you to tell his story."***

*— Kim Goldman, victim advocate, author, host of the "Media Circus" podcast, and NCVV board member*





## 1. Get help in investigations

- ▶ In some cases, securing immediate news attention and providing media with current photos, videos, and other content may increase the likelihood of finding victims who are missing or kidnapped.
- ▶ In addition, victims and their families can use media attention to keep pressure on law enforcement while the case is under investigation and to reopen cold cases. This can be especially powerful in cases of violent, financial, or even property crime. Appealing to the general public through media can help members of the community empathize with victims/survivors and instill a sense of urgency to help by providing information that may assist law enforcement in solving the crime. For example, a victim of a scam sharing their story with a TV news station may prompt viewers with similar experiences to come forward, helping investigators, and sharing the experience may help viewers avoid becoming victims themselves. Similarly, family members of a homicide victim may share information about their loved one — and the impact of the crime on the family — with a news outlet, appealing to readers to provide information that could aid the investigation or otherwise help the family.
- ▶ In many cases, surviving family members have used the media to attract attention to a case for the first time, either due to law enforcement not taking the case seriously, or because the case was not attracting any attention when it first occurred. While there are many cons of “true crime” content, one of the pros is that it can bring awareness to cases that have never been in the public eye, specifically those involving people of color, those from marginalized communities, or those who may have been categorized by the system as not being “real” victims.

## 2. Expose wrongdoing

- ▶ The majority of victims we help at NCVC have one recurring mantra: “I never want anyone else to be hurt again in the way I was hurt.”
- ▶ The nature of media today has allowed issues that were once “swept under the rug” to become major headlines that lead to moral outrage and, sometimes, policy change. Three recognizable examples are the child sex abuse scandals in the Catholic Church, Boy Scouts, and USA Gymnastics. In each of these cases, abuse had been allowed to proliferate for years, flying largely under the radar. It was not until news media took hold of these stories that the public became generally aware of the issues and took serious steps to engage in policy change.

## 3. Correct false narratives

- ▶ Our society has a tendency to put people involved in the justice system in boxes — victim or perpetrator. In reality, the lines are often much more blurry, and someone can be a survivor one day and cause harm the next. We frequently see those who the public may not see as a victim, specifically young men of color, be categorized as perpetrators or blamed for their victimization, and it can be incredibly useful for families to use media to correct these false narratives.



***“My sister disappeared twice — in real life and on print in the sea of misinformation. There just isn't enough room for competing narratives. And if information pushed out is wrong, the burden comes down on the family and victims to correct it.”***

*— Julie Murray, advocate for her sister of Maura Murray, who disappeared in 2004*



## Cons and potential pitfalls of engaging media

### 1. Loss of privacy and dignity combined with intrusion

The advent of podcasts and the ability to stream “true crime” content 24/7 have expanded the landscape of how the media presents the news and treats crime stories and victims/survivors themselves. To ensure commercial success, media companies may feel compelled to tell more intriguing stories with more salacious details and often don’t acknowledge the same boundaries that were in place even 20 years ago.

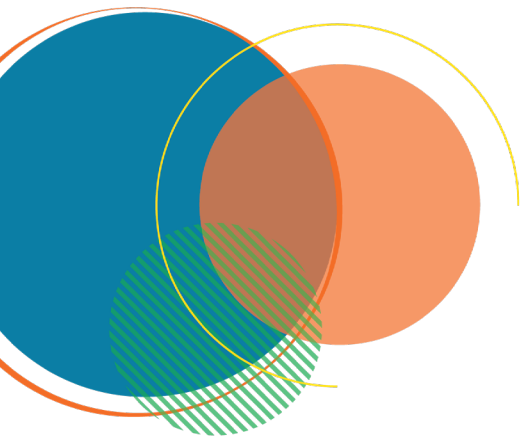
The loss of anonymity can compromise the psychological well-being of victims and survivors. In addition, the oversimplification of details of the crime or the victims’ experience may lead to harsh and untrue stereotypes.

Even if victims choose not to engage with media, intrusions may spill over into their private lives. Sometimes, journalists and “true crime” content producers may become interested in topics seemingly unrelated to the crime (such as the victim or survivor’s history of relationships, careers, and other personal details). In some cases, there may even be people who become obsessed with cases and incessantly contact victims or comment on stories. Unfortunately, this behavior has become more prevalent as “true crime” continues to grow in popularity. Parasocial relationships have become common in this space, with strangers assuming that they have personal relationships with survivors or family members because they know their story.

### 2. Compromising investigations and cases

You must be aware that interacting with media, especially if you are unprepared, can cause long-term harm to cases and victims. Even innocent remarks can be taken out of context, misinterpreted, and misused by media, discrediting other witnesses or even leading to crucial leaks that destroy an investigation.

An early story of a mistake outlined in our original media guide details that the brother of a homicide victim continued to talk to the press even after prosecutors and law enforcement expressed concerns that his statements were jeopardizing the case. He was shocked when the defense attorney used a recording of his statements to impeach his testimony on the stand.





***“In the past, I never wanted to be on TV. We don't get to heal. We have people asking us questions we can't process because cameras are here and they're asking dumb questions.”***

*— Dion Green, survivor of the 2019 Oregon District mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio*





### 3. Legal issues: court orders, SLAPP suits, and libel/defamation/slander

- ▶ Interacting with media and saying false and inaccurate information or confidential information can lead to serious legal ramifications for victims and their families.
- ▶ Gag orders are issued by a judge throughout a court case and may restrict what victims and survivors can say publicly regarding a case. Gag orders are usually issued to protect sensitive and confidential information from being released, and violating them can lead to severe sanctions, including monetary fees and jail time.
- ▶ SLAPP is an acronym for “strategic lawsuit against public participation.” These lawsuits are brought against individuals who speak out against issues of public concern. Similar to these are defamation cases, either libel (written word) or slander (spoken word). There are unlimited resources on what these types of suits are, but it is important to emphasize to victims that they must be absolutely truthful and accurate when speaking to media. Any speculation can lead to one of these suits. Survivors and family members may want to consider retaining or, at minimum, speaking with a civil attorney who specializes in these cases before speaking publicly about cases.
- ▶ We encourage you to learn more about civil justice options by visiting our National Crime Victim Bar Association’s website at [victimbar.org](http://victimbar.org), where we also maintain an attorney referral form and other resources for crime victims.





***“Everything I learned was through mistakes. I did not have any advocate to help navigate how to speak to media.”***

*— Dion Green, survivor of the 2019 Oregon District mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio*



## Those who can help you avoid common mistakes

### 1. Request a victim advocate

- ▶ Many law enforcement agencies and/or prosecutor's offices employ victim advocates who can help you navigate the justice system and sometimes media. Even if you have a victim advocate who is not trained in handling media, they can serve as a liaison between you and law enforcement/prosecutors, letting you know what information is sharable and helping you to protect your rights amid media coverage.

### 2. Consult with an attorney

- ▶ While we recognize that it may be cost-prohibitive for many survivors to retain an attorney, using one throughout the justice process in high-profile cases can significantly ease the emotional burden for victims. Attorneys often have relationships with news media already and can effectively organize interviews and press conferences.
- ▶ If you cannot afford an attorney, you can request local attorneys to assist you pro bono. Some will assist in high profile cases, as the publicity is helpful for them as well.

### 3. Consult with law enforcement

- ▶ Especially in new cases, victims should always consult with the investigators on a case before speaking to media, even if there are tensions with law enforcement. Law enforcement may share details of a crime or a case with a victim or their family that are not publicly known and could compromise an investigation. Victims must know what information should not be publicly shared before providing a media interview. Working with law enforcement will also help prevent the endorsement of false theories on the case spun by "armchair detectives" — something to which "true crime" coverage is especially susceptible.

### 4. Using a spokesperson

- ▶ Some families may find it beneficial to appoint a spokesperson (e.g., family member, friend, religious leader, attorney) who can handle media requests, coordinate logistics, and release written statements. That person should be aware of family sensitivities and work with other parties involved, but avoid discussing family issues/personalities with media.
- ▶ The individual selected should also be accessible to media and truly appreciate the potential impact of any statements made to the press. Using a third party as a representative can help mitigate the retraumatization associated with repeating stories over and over, and help the survivor or family members disconnect a bit from the publicity around the case.





***"It often feels like a rush for time to take control of narrative and quickly as you can. Once it's framed in a certain way, it's hard to dismantle. When there is not an active interest, learn how to engage media and reach out and find out what is the hook for them."***

*— Nela Kalpic, survivor of domestic abuse and victim advocate*



***"Media does not view all survivors as survivors. (the media coverage) did not encompass the truth of who my son was. To them he was Black, male, felony record and somehow contributed to harm that he experienced and was seen as not worthy of being a victim. My challenge was reclaiming his humanity in that space."***

*— Lisa D. Daniels, founder of the Darren B. Easterling Center for Restorative Justice, created after the murder of her son Darren and in response to the unfair ways in which he was depicted in news coverage*



# Chapter

# 3

## YOUR RIGHTS AND MEDIA: WHAT TO EXPECT, HOW TO SET EXPECTATIONS, AND WHAT TO DO IF THINGS GO WRONG

### What to expect

If your story becomes high profile, media representatives may become voracious. Even if you choose not to engage with media members, it does not mean your story will not be covered. It will also not necessarily protect you from disturbing media narratives and images. At NCVJ, we were recently asked to assist a victim whose story was aired in a national television special 30 years later with graphic images of her mother's violent murder that she had never before seen.

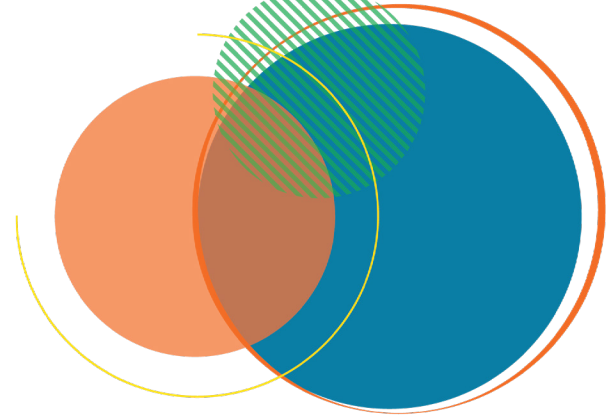
If you do choose to engage with media, remember that reporters are not obligated to use your statements, and often, they do not know what approach they will take until they begin writing the story. Additionally, editors or producers frequently change stories, select the headlines, choose the photos, and decide the placement of the story. Even survivors who fully participate in media interviews may be surprised to find only snippets of their conversation reflected in the final product. This lack of control — or even real input — in stories can be retraumatizing in itself.

### What rights you have

#### Also check out our quick tip sheet on your basic rights

You and your family have the right to grieve in private and can choose not to engage with media. You can also refuse permission for reporters and cameras to attend private family events, such as funerals. If you have a concern, you can ask for a law enforcement presence at these events (though agencies may decline).

If you decide to work with media, you have the right to control your interaction with them to a certain extent. For example, you can request to be interviewed by specific reporters and outlets. Likewise, you can decline to speak to certain reporters even if you are conducting other interviews. You can also request interviews at specific times and locations and have an advocate or emotional support. It's also advisable to ask if reporters can provide questions or, at the very least, a detailed outline of discussion topics, ahead of the interview. Though reporters are under no obligation to provide such information, many will, especially if you explain that you (or the victim you are representing) wants to be prepared and avoid retraumatization.



## What to do when things go wrong

If you are in the middle of an interview and you become uncomfortable or feel disrespected, you can stop the interview and decline to answer more questions. If you feel harassed by reporters at any point, you can file a complaint with their employer, victim service providers, and, in harassment situations, law enforcement.

You can also seek corrections from media outlets if they publish false or inaccurate information, although this may be met with limited success. If you know a particular reporter or outlet is going to continue covering your story, we also suggest asking them to ensure they correct the record going forward so that all future stories they publish are accurate.



# Chapter

# 4

# ENGAGING MEDIA DURING THE JUSTICE PROCESS

## ENGAGING WITH SOCIAL MEDIA THROUGHOUT PROCEEDINGS

Social media can be a nightmare for crime victims. There is simply no sugarcoating it. While there are many stories of social media helping to find victims, there are countless more of victims being retraumatized by comments on social media and lives being ruined by conspiracy theories that became accepted as factual. What's more, families and victims often post statements or comments on their own social media accounts that become public and media fodder.

While you have every right to remain on social media (and we get frustrated by the oft-given suggestion of "just stay off of it"), there are some precautions you can take to limit your chances of revictimization.

- ▶ Make all of your social media private; do NOT accept new "friends" or followers unless you know and trust that person.
- ▶ Review your friends and followers lists, and remove those you don't truly know or have not interacted with in some time.
- ▶ Post about your loved ones or family members as much as you want, but do NOT post about the case, suspects, or theories you have.
- ▶ If you're able, you may want to avoid the comments section. We know this is hard to do. If you decide to read comments, though (as is your right), we suggest preparing yourself for the reality that you will likely encounter falsehoods and unfair, harsh statements. While most people are well-meaning, the public can also be cruel. People may make rude, personal comments about you (e.g., your hairstyle, how you said a certain word, the shirt you were wearing, etc.). To them, you may be nothing more than a random character in their chosen form of entertainment. **Their opinion of you does not matter.**



***“Know your story. You are the author of your own story. Know what your agenda is, and don’t get sucked into their questions. We shouldn’t have to learn this element while trying to learn how to process grief and trauma. Learning how to talk in soundbites is terrible because you have to talk very edited. Media knows how to ask questions that trigger you and push on your bruises. It’s a lot of work that we are putting on our shoulders. We don’t owe them anything. We don’t owe them our voice; if we’re going to choose to give it to them, it needs to be on our terms.”***

*— Kim Goldman, victim advocate, author, host of the “Media Circus” podcast, and NCVV board member*





## 1. How to prepare for an interview

We provide an entire tip sheet on actionable items to prepare for an interview, which all boil down to research and preparation.

Before you agree to any media interviews, research the media outlet and the specific reporter and try to understand the angle they usually take in their stories. If they are not victim-friendly or seem untrustworthy, you are well within your rights to decline the interview.

Be prepared for your story, review your talking points, and be prepared for surprise questions (stay on topic!). It is helpful to meet as a family and agree on what points you want to make.

Note: If your case is currently working through the justice system, this is when you must be the most sensitive about information you are releasing. Be prepared for some backlash from the general public.

## 2. Managing media requests in the tough times/how to avoid media

Unfortunately, many cases are on a timetable regarding media interest, and reporters may want to speak to you most during the hardest moments. A few steps can make media attention easier to handle, especially in the emotionally charged moments:

- ▶ Appoint a spokesperson and make sure their name and contact information are easily accessible to media. Direct any and all inquiries to them immediately.
- ▶ Prepare written statements that can be released instead of agreeing to interviews.
- ▶ Ask for privacy. This seems obvious, and some individuals may not respect it, but starting with this baseline statement can deter some from contacting you.
- ▶ Identify media outlets you ARE willing to work with and set up guidelines for exclusivity with them.

## 3. When bias is impacting coverage

Racial biases, cultural misconceptions, and language barriers have the potential to impact how a case is covered, or even if it is covered at all. We polled reporters and media experts on how to combat this, and one common theme was found: shame the media. If you feel your case is not being covered or media is proliferating misconceptions, let people know. File complaints and be vocal. You can use social media for good in this situation. Post online about how the media has covered your case, and give specifics. It may be that another outlet wants to pick up this story.



***"We play a little game, me and the media. I'm able to get something I need, and I give them something they need."***

*— Norma Peterson, sister-in-law of Stacey Peterson, whose 2007 disappearance was highly publicized, and executive director of Document the Abuse.*



***"You don't hear more about people of color, Black and brown people. We don't highlight the majority of the mass shootings when victims are Black and brown people. What makes my loved one different than yours?"***

*— Dion Green, survivor of the 2019 Oregon District mass shooting in Dayton, Ohio*



# Chapter

# 5

## A SPECIAL NOTE ON 'TRUE CRIME' CONTENT

Unfortunately, “true crime” content creators don’t have an agreed-upon code of ethics. Many are driven by commercial success and may not be concerned with the long-term impact on victims. While it may benefit you to work with these outlets, be prepared to be firm with them regarding your rights and set forth clear expectations before giving an interview.

Podcasters can be particularly sensitive to feedback, as they rely upon public ratings. While you should be mindful of the same pitfalls we mentioned above, specifically regarding litigation and defamation, it can be effective to post your criticism of how they are treating your case on social media. Stick to the facts, and don’t sink to their level of sensationalizing everything. This is also a good reason to reach out to an attorney who is experienced in these types of cases.





# Chapter

# 6

## THE ROLE OF VICTIM ADVOCATES

Though there aren't specific call-outs within this guide that differentiate victim advocates, it is crucial that advocates are educated and have a basic knowledge of media relations. All victims need basic information about what to expect as well as the potential risks and benefits when engaging with media. The most important role of victim advocates is to empower victims and survivors to make their own choices on how and to what extent to engage media and to support them throughout the process.

NCVC has produced several guides throughout the years that directly relate to victim advocates, and we are happy to provide these as requested.





# TIP SHEET & TAKEAWAYS

## YOUR RIGHTS ENGAGING WITH THE MEDIA

### As a crime victim/survivor or family member, you have an absolute right to:

- You always have the right to say no to an interview. You do not owe anyone a story, and it's OK to grieve in private without engaging in any media interaction.
- If your privacy is not being respected or you're worried about media attention, such as in a high-profile case, you should request security/law enforcement services to protect your home and any major event you will not answer in advance and to refuse those questions.
- Ask for the questions that will be asked in advance and ask what the reporter's goal is in the interview. Many reporters will not provide exact questions ahead of time, but may be open to sending topics if you explain you would like to prepare and be ready to provide better answers.
- Request an interview with a specific reporter and/or media outlet you know and trust. Likewise, you can decline interviews with certain reporters, even if you've granted interviews with others.
- Grant interviews based on specific conditions, such as children being excluded from media coverage.
- Refrain from answering questions that you feel are intrusive, inappropriate, or disrespectful.
- End interviews early and/or cease all interaction with media. Please know that what you say before you end the interview is considered on the record and still may wind up published.
- Request that graphic, violent, or offensive imagery not be used/removed. Sometimes reporters do not have control over this, but you can always ask.
- If you've invited media into your home, you may want to take care ahead of time to not display anything you would not want to be aired on TV, captured in a photograph, or described in print/audio. Often, reporters or photographers will look for background scenes they can show or describe as "color," such as photos of loved ones on the wall. At the very least, you can ask them not to show/describe specific things ahead of time.
- Insist upon corrections to stories that contain inaccuracies and or file a formal complaint against reporters/media producers.



# TIP SHEET & TAKEAWAYS

## PREPARING TO FACE THE MEDIA (INTERVIEWS AND PRESS CONFERENCES)

### Preparing for an Interview

- Understand who the reporter is and who the news outlet is. Take the time to reach out to the reporter with the questions below.
  - Generate a list of questions you are not comfortable answering or topics you are not comfortable discussing. Send those to the reporter if given the opportunity. If they try to press during the interview, you can say, "I'm not comfortable answering that, and I think we should focus on " to steer them back on track.
  - Gather all photos/visual aids that you would like to provide.
  - Consider who you would like to have present with you to provide support during the interview. It may be helpful to have a neutral third party or a trusted family member present to help support you and keep the interview on track. Be sure to set ground rules over whether your support person can be interviewed.
  - Review the story you want to tell so that you are prepared for questions. Generate a list of talking points that are important to you.
- If you have a specific message you want to share, prepare a written statement and be able to provide a copy directly to the reporter.
  - If you are comfortable, request consultation with prosecutors or law enforcement on statements you intend to make to minimize mistakes or oversharing information that could jeopardize your case if/when it makes it to court.
  - Learn as much as you can about the audience of the media outlet; this will help you understand the point of the story.
  - Know that reporters or producers will likely pick soundbites or quotes that fit their story — something that can catch victims off guard if they sit for lengthy interviews. You can ask, "How much of this interview will be used?"



# TIP SHEET & TAKEAWAYS

## QUESTIONS TO ASK BEFORE AGREEING TO AN INTERVIEW

- When do you anticipate this being published?
- Who else will be present in this interview process?
- If I talk to you, will you give me notice beforehand that the story will be live so that I can mentally prepare and am not caught off guard when I see it on TV, social media, etc.?
- What are your intentions in covering this?
- Who else have you talked to about this story?
- How do you intend to portray my loved one? (\*This can be important and a good opportunity to help showcase a loved one as human rather than a number in a homicide count and/or however they've been described by law enforcement; especially true if the victim is someone who was formerly incarcerated or had a criminal record, etc.)
- If I go on the record with you, what will you do to help? (aka, Are you in it just for one story or can I send you a flyer about a vigil in the future that you'll either cover or at least re-share on social media?)
- (If previous stories/law enforcement statements/social media posts have been inaccurate regarding you or a loved one) What so and so said is wrong. Can I count on you to fix the record if I agree to an interview?
- Are you allowed to go off the record? What does off the record mean to you (the journalist)?
- How long will the interview be? Will you give me questions in advance so I can prepare?
- Will you allow me to review my quotes before they are used?
- Will you allow me to reconsider my participation in this story after the interview if I don't feel like it has gone well or the way I had been led to believe it would go?
- Will you let me see photographs you take or videos you intend to use before publication?

# TIP SHEET & TAKEAWAYS

## TIPS FOR MAKING AN INTERVIEW SUCCESSFUL

- Always remember that an interview is not a “friendly conversation;” you are not obligated to answer every question. You cannot control the reporter, but you can control your responses. Know your speaking points and try to stick with them.
- Stay calm. Stay grounded. Take breaks. Interviews can be scary and unsettling. Remain calm so that you don’t say anything you don’t mean. Never guess or speculate. If you don’t know an answer, offer to provide the information at a later date.
- Act as if nothing is off the record. If you don’t want to see it in print or hear it on TV, don’t say it to the reporter.
- Recordings last forever. Right or wrong, appearance does play a role in how you may be perceived by the audience. Take this into account when preparing for your interview.
- Practice talking in short, to-the-point statements — much like this list. If you’re trying to get a point across, keep infusing it into your answer. And it’s worth reiterating your main points several times during the interview so that it cannot be ignored.

***“I have always likened participating in media like dancing. The dancer carefully moves in sync with the rhythm of the music, a victim must manage their emotions and responses while staying composed in the spotlight. Each step in a dance requires balance and control, much like how each interaction with the media requires careful consideration and emotional resilience. Both involve a significant degree of vulnerability, where maintaining grace and dignity amidst external pressures.”***

***— Kim Goldman, victim advocate, author, host of the “Media Circus” podcast, and NCVV board member***



# TIP SHEET & TAKEAWAYS

## TIPS TO REQUEST THAT A STORY IS REMOVED OR CORRECTED

- Always put “correction” in the subject line of the email. It will get any reasonable reporter or editor’s attention. Most of them want to be as accurate as possible and will make corrections to errors of fact. It’s important to understand that reporters or editors may not change quotes or story content because someone (even a subject of the reporting) is unhappy with the published product. Generally, they will only correct errors of fact. It’s important to follow-up to ensure that a correction has been made. Some publications will explain the reason a correction was made, while others will only use vague language such as putting the word “updated” at the top or bottom of a story. You can always request that they explain to their readers/viewers/listeners why the record was corrected, such as misquoting or misrepresenting a fact. In rare cases, entire stories/published products may be retracted. This is generally reserved for situations in which egregious reporting errors, plagiarism, or outright intentional falsehoods were published. If you believe intentional defamation, libel, or slander occurred, you may want to consult with an attorney to find out if legal action is warranted and learn about your options.
- If you’re requesting a correction from a journalist, we recommend you reach out directly to the reporter as well as to the organization’s general inbox for news tips. That will ensure that multiple people see the request. If nothing is done, call the newsroom and ask to speak to an editor or news director.

### Here is a sample request:

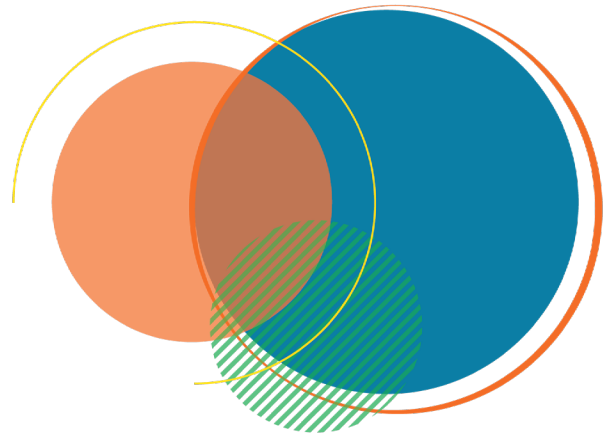
- Hello, [insert name]. I’m writing to let you know about an error in your story [insert headline of story and provide link if applicable]. [In one or two sentences, concisely and clearly describe the error and provide the truth. Then explain who you are, how you’re involved, and how you know the information published was incorrect]. Please immediately correct this story and let your audience know. If you shared this information on social media, I request that you also explain to your followers that a mistake was made and that it’s been corrected. Please provide me with a link to the story once it’s been corrected. Thank you.



# TIP SHEET & TAKEAWAYS

## TIPS FOR WRITING A PRESS RELEASE

- A news release can be a powerful tool, especially if it concerns a victimization that has attracted a high level of media attention. Putting together a news release will allow you (or the victim/survivor you are assisting or representing) to provide a statement for the public and interested journalists/"content producers" on your own terms and in a way that limits misrepresentation. By providing a single, official statement, you may also be able to limit the amount of interview requests by providing news outlets with information they want for their reporting. A news release can outline what you (or the victim/survivor you are representing) wants to say, what you will not say, when/if any further updates will be provided, who to contact for inquiries, and can also include a statement asking for privacy. If this concerns an unsolved crime, a press release can also include an appeal asking for the public to provide any relevant information to authorities. Seeing or hearing a statement from a victim or family member may compel someone with relevant information to come forward.
- It is also worth noting that you may include a recorded statement on video, which can be published on social media, with your press release. This will give TV and audio outlets vetted soundbites and potentially limit unwanted interview requests.
- As far as distribution, we recommend researching your local news outlets' websites or calling their offices to ask which emails are best for press releases. Individual reporters may also have email addresses that are easily available. If reporters or other media representatives/"content producers" have been emailing you, you can also include their email addresses. It's best to send one email to everyone, with the press release pasted into the body of the email along with any relevant links and attachments you want to share (this could include a photo, a flyer about a vigil, or a poster with info about how to help, or a link to a fundraiser, for example). This email should be sent from an account belonging to someone that you are comfortable with handling replies and further inquiries. If you are comfortable with posting the news release on social media, we also recommend that. Be aware that there may be comments and that it will be widely seen. The benefit, however, is that it will be findable by journalists/"content producers" and the general public in the future, ensuring that your official statement on the matter is represented.



## Sample press release

- What follows is a sample news release. It's been fashioned to represent the surviving family of a victim of homicide, as such situations are often the type that attract the most media attention. We recommend keeping it short, avoiding speculation, and only saying what you're comfortable with being published.
- A statement from the family of John Doe
- [Include date at the very beginning]

*The family of John Doe would like to thank the public for their support and ask for privacy at this difficult time.*

*[Insert a prepared quote from a family member about the victim. This can range from just a few sentences to a few paragraphs. Be aware that the longer it is, the more likely news outlets will only include small portions because they typically have space/time constraints in their stories. Often, journalists will want to know something about the victim, so we recommend sharing positive information about the person, explaining that grief is being felt by survivors, and explaining what you want the public to know and understand. You can also include multiple quotes from different people, for example, a family member, a faith leader, an employer, or teammate.]*

*The investigation by law enforcement is ongoing. John's family asks that anyone with information that can help the investigation to call [insert relevant phone number for investigating agency]. Please help them find justice for John.*

*John's family will make no further public statements at this time. They ask the media and the public to respect their privacy as they grieve. Any future statements will come from [insert name of representative] by email and will be posted to [include social media account]. Please direct any questions to [representative name and email].*

*Thank you.*

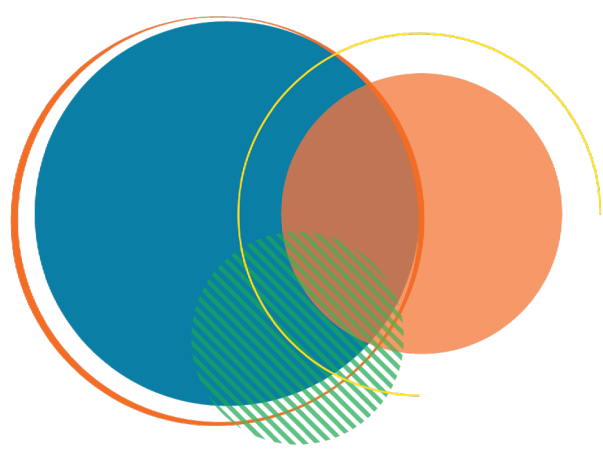




# TIP SHEET & TAKEAWAYS

## COMMON MEDIA TERMS AND WHAT THEY MEAN

- “Off the record” for normal conversations: Some journalists will agree not to print, or at least attribute, information knowing it will aid their story. For example, a reporter might be told by a law enforcement source that a suspect in a case has been tentatively identified but that authorities aren’t ready to go public. Unfortunately, there is a misconception that someone being interviewed can say, “This is off the record,” proceed to say something they intend to keep private, and that the interviewer will be bound to keep it confidential. That’s not how it works. The interviewer themselves must agree that what you say next is off the record. Even then, we strongly advise against making off-the-record comments. As we mentioned earlier, a good rule of thumb is that you shouldn’t say anything to a reporter or “content creator” that you aren’t comfortable sharing publicly.
- “On background” for educating: Sometimes, journalists will agree to a “background” conversation with someone in order to gain a general understanding of a situation about which they’re reporting. Typically, this isn’t a formal interview, and it isn’t actually used for a story. For example, a reporter might ask to talk to an attorney or police officer to understand more about the situation (and to check facts) but agree not to publish the conversation or even to get ideas about who to contact for formal interviews. We advise proceeding with caution if you hear this term. While there is certainly value in helping a journalist ensure that what they’re about to publish is accurate, there is always the risk that what you say is used for the final product.
- “Source close to the case”: This is a catch-all term that a journalist or “content creator” may use to describe someone who gave them information about a criminal case or victimization that is typically not public knowledge. Often, it’s law enforcement or someone else with knowledge about or a connection to the case or family. Whoever provided this information is likely unauthorized to speak about it either by their agency or by the family — otherwise, their name would be directly included. Other times, this term may be used to shield someone’s identity if they spoke to a reporter on the condition of anonymity. Sometimes, journalists will allow such an attribution if the information is in the public interest but the person providing it fears personal or professional reprisal or is concerned about safety. In cases of victimization, for example, this could be someone who is afraid of being targeted by the person who caused harm.
- On the record for attribution in the story: This is the standard level of interaction with a journalist. If they’re asking you for an interview or a comment, it’s “on the record,” which means they plan to use some or all of what you say in a published report. We strongly advise you to think of every conversation with a reporter or “content producer” as on the record and never say anything you wouldn’t want to be shared publicly.



- **No comment:** If approached by a reporter or “content producer” for an interview, you can decline to talk. Simply saying “no comment” will suffice, but you also don’t have to say anything at all. Be aware that there may be multiple attempts to get you to say something else. In that case, hold steady and try your best not to engage other than repeating “no comment”; if you sink to their level and make heated comments, that exchange might wind up on the evening news. The “no comment” line is simple and effective and is most commonly used by law enforcement, legal professionals, and public relations experts.
- **Embargo:** This is a term that refers to providing a reporter an advance copy of a press release or statement on the condition that they don’t publish it or any information presented in it before a certain time. This can be effective with media outlets or individual journalists you trust because it will help them build a story before the information is public, ultimately allowing for better coverage. Again, be sure you trust the outlet/individual reporter before sending them embargoed material; most will honor the embargo, but some may not. It’s worth noting that in areas with highly competitive local news outlets, if one of them breaks the embargo, the rest may follow to avoid being “scooped.”
- **Deadline:** A deadline is the time by which a reporter must turn in their story. You may be told they’re “working on deadline” by a certain time when they’re reaching out to you. Effectively, this means that if you don’t respond to them by whatever time they give you, they will publish the story anyway without your input. Be aware that not responding does not mean that you won’t be mentioned. In some cases, they may not mention you at all. In others, they may mention you and say that you couldn’t be reached or didn’t respond to inquiries by deadline.
- **Exclusive:** You can reach out to a specific reporter or specific media outlet to offer them — and only them — an interview or story. This means that that reporter/outlet will publish the interview. Be aware that once the story is public, other outlets will likely use clips or quotes from the interview for themselves. Also be aware that, if your story is high profile, the media outlet (especially television) may promote your interview as “exclusive” to build viewership ahead of time.



# TIP SHEET & TAKEAWAYS

## TIPS FOR SPOKESPERSONS, ATTORNEYS AND ADVOCATES

- Establish media relationships any time you can and be generous with your time.
- Return phone calls for YOUR benefit.
- Be genuinely helpful to media so they understand the issues.
- Understand reporters' motivations.
- Guide your client on libel/slander/defamation chances and remember privilege rules surrounding this.
- Create a media strategy; common considerations are:
  1. Cooperate with reputable media outlets and local newspapers.
  2. Keep prior medical/mental health/sexual history of your client/the victim off limits.
  3. Do not speak on the record without your client/the victim knowing.
  4. Distribute on-the-record press statements via website, social media, or email lists.
  5. Limit on-the-record comments to procedural issues or summaries of filings/orders.

## POST NOTES & ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

In producing this guide, we conducted roundtables and interviewed several victims whose stories fascinated the public for years. Their willingness to open up to us and share their stories again gave us profound insight into what crime survivors need and their experiences.

Their stories have been told and mistold countless times. If you'd like the truth, or to read their stories from their perspectives, please visit [victimsofcrime.org](https://victimsofcrime.org).

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- Bill Thomas

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