

# Insights From the Field: Media Tips and Resources for Local Health Departments

Local health department communications professionals play a key role in positioning the department as an essential resource for the community. Through effective media relations, local health departments can position their services as relevant and uniquely able to meet community needs, build credibility, and position themselves as trusted local leaders.

A proactive media relations program can foster a consistent, generally cordial relationship between an organization and media with three primary goals:

- To establish convenient, reliable, and immediate ways to share key health and safety messages, program updates, and general awareness about activities.
- To present journalists with convenient, reliable, and immediate ways to access credible subject matter experts, data, and commentary to inform their news stories.
- To maintain and enhance organizational reputation among media sources and the public through consistent, accurate, and credible messages.

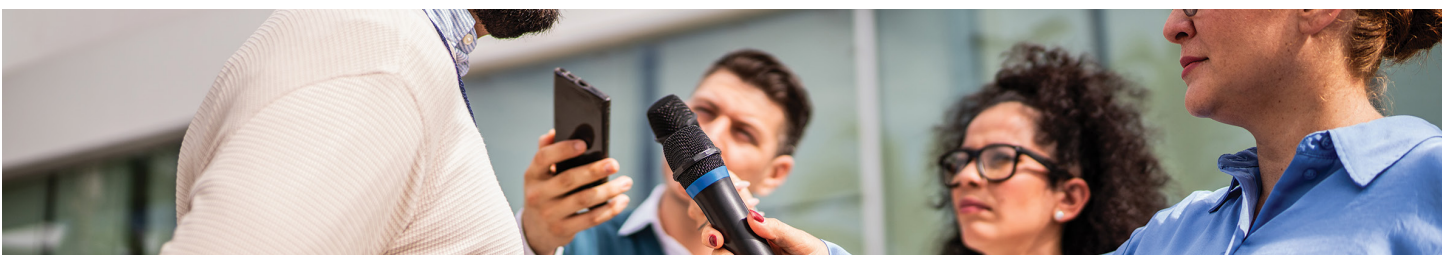
Media outlets have established audiences that can be very broad and very narrow. Local health departments should consider media relations as a 24/7/365 operational need, and not just a tactic for crises or emergency response.

## Tips and Resources to Support Local Health Department Media Relations

To support local health departments in establishing or building their media relations program, a number of tools exist. The Association of State and Territorial Health Officials (ASTHO) has published a [Media Relations Toolkit For Health Departments](#). This is a comprehensive resource for local health departments looking to establish or improve their media relations program.

*Insights From the Field: Media Tips and Resources for Local Health Departments* seeks to build on ASTHO's toolkit by providing additional information and resources that are applicable to the needs of local health department communications professionals.

This guide was developed by communications professionals from local health departments who are members of NACCHO's Public Health Communications Workgroup (2024-2025).



## Media Relations

When reporters need sources for their news stories, your local health department can position itself as a reliable, authoritative resource, ready to provide expert commentary, background, context, or opinion. Each media inquiry is an opportunity to share your priority public health messages and establish and improve your department's visibility and credibility. Keep in mind that reporters work under very tight deadlines in a fast-paced, competitive field. Allow some grace, and realize that they have a job to do, just like you.

## Media Lists

Effective media relations starts with having an up-to-date list of relevant media contacts. For most health departments, that will include local print publications, television and radio -- with both general newsroom contacts and reporters on the health or government beats. Building your list to include contacts at hospitals and healthcare systems, at government agencies, with neighborhood groups, and within the local health department itself helps you to expand your reach and the visibility of the content you send to media. When appropriate, also consider media outlets for specific language audiences.

Remember to update your media contact list regularly. Reporters change markets and beats often.

## Proactive Outreach

You may have opportunities to "pitch" or suggest your sources to media for stories. News stations have an interest in localizing stories or bringing a national topic into a local context. You can help them by providing background information, data, and color commentary from an subject matter expert (SME). You can also pitch feature stories, new department leadership, program updates, or new trends in data.

## Interview Requests From the Media

Always be responsive to media requests and mindful of reporter deadlines. If you can't meet their deadline, respond as quickly and as honestly as possible. You can also request a deadline extension. Begin by asking for a list of interview questions from the reporter or producer. They may not always accommodate this request, but a reporter may provide some general parameters of their story. This helps to confirm that the appropriate subject matter expert is identified and available to address the reporter's needs. Once the right SME is selected, collaborate with them to draft key talking points and anticipate questions that may extend beyond the proposed interview topic, especially those related to recent news or emerging issues.

Provide "b-roll" or other assets to support news stories, especially for radio and TV. If you can't provide a source or are otherwise not able to participate in an interview, consider offering alternative sources or a written statement. Be polite but firm: "We appreciate the opportunity but will decline at this time," "we don't have an expert available," and "we don't offer programs or services on this topic" are all reasonable responses. As a local health department communicator, your primary goal is to help your organization.

## Tailoring Your Preparation

Tailor your preparation based on the type of media—in-person, through Zoom or phone, and for print, radio, or video. Each format requires different approaches in terms of delivery and presentation. Practice with your interviewee to build confidence and ensure consistent, clear messaging. As a public information officer (PIO), provide your interviewee with tips on staying focused, bridging back to key messages, and handling challenging or unexpected questions.

Unless the interview is live, most reporters will allow for additional takes on responses. As needed, make a request to restart.

## After the Interview

After the interview, follow up with the reporter to offer additional information and clarify details. Some, but not all, reporters may allow you to review the draft before publication, especially for printed media. Share the published piece on your organization's social media channels to amplify your message and reach a broader audience, if appropriate.

## Gathering Impactful Stories to Share With the Media

To successfully engage with the media, you need a solid accounting of the interesting, impactful, and innovative work occurring at your local health department; use that content to tell a compelling story that attracts media attention. There are many different strategies that can be used to gather this key information—and while the best strategy ultimately depends on what existing information sharing pathways there are at your local health department—the following are helpful considerations:



Take note of who the subject matter experts are in your department for the public health issues of greatest importance in your jurisdiction. Knowing who to engage to obtain timely, accurate, and insightful information about your department's public health programs is a critical first step.



Actively solicit story ideas from within your local health department.

- ☐ At your next leadership meeting, consider holding a short poll to identify interesting activities that could be developed into a story.
- ☐ Create a form using Microsoft Office or free web survey tools that staff can use to submit news, accomplishments, and ideas for stories. Include the link to the form in your email signature, all staff newsletters, departmental intranet site, and other locations where staff can easily access it.
- ☐ Circulate a simple story template that staff can use to easily develop a story outline or narrative. See NACCHO's [Stories from the Field](#) template and [information on story spine structures](#) that can be adapted for your staff's use. The Public Health Communications Collaborative also has a [webinar](#) available on demand.
- ☐ If photos are shared as part of the gathering of relevant material, make sure you get the necessary approvals from the photo subjects and owners.



Leverage existing work products. Scan existing materials on your website that could be adapted into a story. Do any staff plan to publish an article or present at a professional conference on an interesting project? This material could also potentially be repurposed into a brief story.



As you gather materials and information to craft into a story, think about who your intended audience is and how to best communicate your local health department's work to that audience. Remember to use plain language guides to communicate effectively.



Curate what types of stories are most appropriate for specific channels and audiences. For example, what is appropriate to pitch to the media, what is appropriate for social media or an external newsletter, what is appropriate to share internally?



If you pitch a longer story to the media, consider whether it can also be abbreviated and shared as a short story through social media that can promote the full story that the media reports.



Prepare to recommend appropriate communications alternatives. When external media is not the appropriate channel for communications, consider other channels to best reach your audience.

## Creating a Press Release

After you have gathered your public health updates and stories, it's important to create easily shareable documents and files. One of the most common ways you'll share information with the media is through written press releases. When creating a press release, focus on:

- The 5 W's:
  - What happened?
  - When did it happen?
  - Where did it happen?
  - Who does it impact?
  - Why did it happen or why is it happening?
- Next steps community members need to take if they're impacted.
- Public health's response to/role in the situation.
- What the timeline is for local health department action.

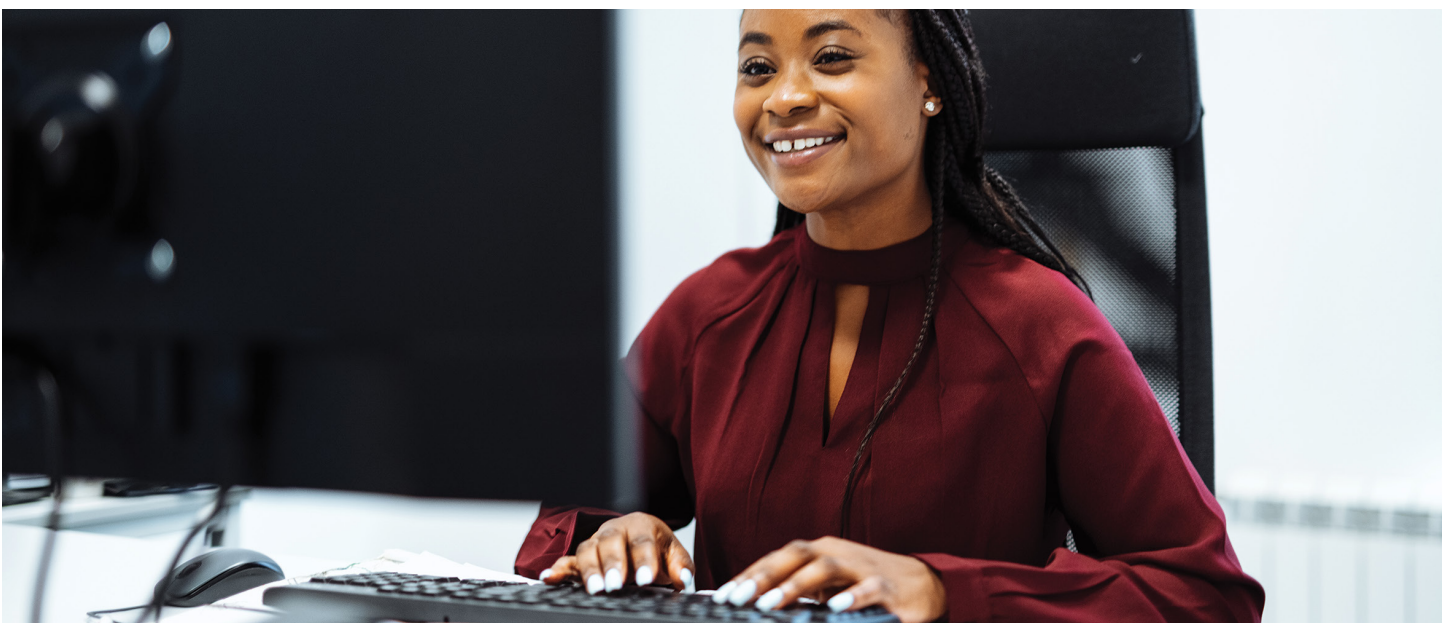
As always, try to write using plain language. Use free apps, like the [Hemingway App](#), to ensure that your information is easy to read and understand. If you have a quote from a public health official or someone who is impacted by the story, those often make good additions to press releases. Make sure individuals who provide quotes are available for follow up interviews. If you have photos or videos that help tell the story, organize those, and save them in a place that you can easily share them with the media.

For press releases and press conferences, consider the other partners that may be related to your topic and coordinate logistics around space, speakers, visual elements, and materials.

## Sharing Your Press Release and Story

Once you've written your press release, you'll need to share it with media members. You can send a press release to a list of news contacts at once, or you can reach out to reporters individually. Sometimes reaching out through social media messages can also be effective.

If you have additional photos or videos that help share your story, let media members know that those files are available upon request. Do not send large photo and video files without request; this can accidentally cause emails to bounce or servers to be overloaded. Consider using a file sharing site or linking to a file on your website.



## Hosting a Press Conference

Sharing your story can also be effective through a press conference. In general, press conferences are only needed when you expect a lot of media interest. You should always expect, and be prepared, to receive questions at a press conference. When setting up a press conference, coordinate with other government departments and conduct an environmental scan to avoid scheduling conflicts. Consider holidays, other major events, and breaking news. To alert media members to the event, develop and send a media advisory.

Below are a few tips on conducting a successful press conference.



If your announcement impacts many groups, consider inviting multiple representatives to attend/speak/answer questions to provide the full story.



Carefully consider the conference location, taking into account factors such as sound, weather (if outside), indoor temperature, accessibility, lighting, electricity, parking, and internet connectivity, especially if the event will be live-streamed.



Set up an appropriate space where you can present uninterrupted and where media and cameras can be set up. Consider setting up a podium and chairs and providing access to electrical outlets. Consider things that may impact the presentation and attendance, like timing, traffic/noise, lighting, and internet connectivity.



Per your local policy, arrange for any interpreters/ASL interpreters.



Reach out to media groups you want to attend; follow up with them individually to ensure you know who will attend.



Prepare your speakers with talking points and practice answering questions. If your speaker doesn't have the information to answer a question, practice sharing: *"We don't have that information right now, but we will get back to you."*



Set a "run of show" to clearly define speakers and brief those speakers/their staff on the press conference goal, talking points, and potential questions.



Allow for questions from reporters after speakers' remarks have concluded.



Print out press releases and talking points so that all attendees leave with the same message.



Review media stories that result from the press conference for accuracy. If something is incorrect, follow up with the news outlet to correct the story.



If recorded, archive the press release online and/or share through social media and other audiences after the event.

Press releases and press conferences are two common ways to share your story with the media. You can also share your story on your website and through your social media channels. Media members often use these two mediums to find stories. These can also be places where the media can send their audiences to learn more.



# Tips for Talking With the Media

The following are tips to help you prepare to talk with members of the media.

## Keep your message simple.

- ☐ Identify the most important point to make to the audience. Determine in advance one key message and stick to it. Simple sentences are the most powerful. State your conclusion up front as a declarative.
- ☐ Make your key point early and often so that the audience will retain and walk away with that information.
- ☐ Clearly communicate why this is relevant to the audience.
- ☐ Avoid jargon and speak in a way that is accessible and understandable to a larger audience.
- ☐ Focus on giving reporters a headline for the story by using phrases like, *"The most important thing to know is..."* or *"The key takeaway is..."* to flag your key point.

## Talk from the heart.

- ☐ Tell a story and make it personal. The audience wants a sense that you truly believe what you are saying.
- ☐ Personalize your message to connect with the audience effectively.

## Talk about one thing at a time.

- ☐ State your talking points or messages first. Then, try to fully address each point before moving on to the next.

## Be aware of your verbal and non-verbal cues.

- ☐ Keep in mind that different cues (e.g., nodding, conversational sounds like "mhmm", fidgeting) can potentially give away more information than you planned, detract from or even misconstrue your message.
- ☐ If you will be on camera, expect what you wear to be visible from head to toe as filming may occur from multiple camera angles.

## Remember that you are always on the record.

- ☐ Stick to your talking points. Be careful about elaborating or providing more detail than necessary – the more you say, the greater the possibility that your words could be taken out of context.
- ☐ Remember that reporters can use anything you share with them, even if you thought it was just a casual conversation. A reporter may act as if the interview is finished but can continue to engage you in conversation.

## Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know."

- ☐ Remember, you are under no obligation to answer every question that is asked by the interviewer.
- ☐ If you don't know the answer to their question, tell them you don't know. If relevant, let them know you will get back to them.

## Remember, an interview is not a conversation or a debate.

- ☐ Declare your message or tell your story to the interviewer.
- ☐ When possible, try to respond in a way that brings you back to your key message. If a question is off topic, bridge with phrases like *"Here's what I'm most focused on..."* *"You know the real issue is..."*

## Be prepared!

- ☐ Read/watch/listen to the reporter's past stories to get a feel for their style, tone and topics they cover.
- ☐ Anticipate questions that the interviewer may ask and prepare responses to those questions in advance.
- ☐ Practice your response out loud to better articulate the responses you've prepared in writing.

# Sample Materials

## Sample Press Releases



### Measles Virus Monitoring in St. Mary's County Wastewater and Additional Measles Vaccine Clinics Scheduled

LEONARDTOWN, MD (June 3, 2025) – New testing for measles virus in St. Mary's County wastewater was launched in May as part of [WastewaterSCAN](#), a national pilot study of Stanford University in partnership with Emory University, to test wastewater samples across the country. A person with an infection can shed virus in their urine or feces. Monitoring wastewater is a tool for early detection of emerging illness in a community and

<https://smchd.org/2025/06/measles-virus-monitoring-in-st-marys-county-wastewater-and-additional-measles-vaccine-clinics-scheduled/>



### Bird Flu Detected In Two New York City Cats Is Associated With 'Savage Cat Food' Raw Pet Food

*New York City Pet Owners Should Avoid Feeding Their Pets Raw Food or Raw Milk*

*Families with "Savage Cat Food" Should Check to See if Products They Have at Home Are Being Recalled*

*The Current Risk to New Yorkers of Bird Flu Remains Low*

**March 15, 2025**— Today, the New York City Health Department (NYC Health Department) is advising New Yorkers to not feed their pets food from the raw pet food company Savage Cat Food. Avian influenza (bird flu) virus was detected in two cats and a suspected third cat over the

<https://www.nyc.gov/site/doh/about/press/pr2025/bird-flu-cats-savage-cat-raw-pet-food.page>

## Sample Media Advisory



### FORMER CDC DIRECTOR DR. MANDY COHEN TO DELIVER KEYNOTE ON THE FUTURE OF PUBLIC HEALTH AT NACCHO'S ANNUAL MEETING IN ANAHEIM, CALIFORNIA

*NACCHO360 Conference Convenes the Nation's Local Public Health Leaders at the Anaheim Convention Center from July 14-18*

**Washington, DC, June 30, 2025** – The [National Association of County and City Health Officials \(NACCHO\)](#), the voice of the over 3,300 local health departments across the country, will host the largest convening of local health departments leaders at, [NACCHO360](#), from July 14-18 at Anaheim Convention Center in Anaheim, CA. This year's theme, "Bright Lights, Bold Ideas: Shaping the Future of Public Health Practice," will bring together over 2,300 public health leaders and experts to explore how forward-thinking approaches to public health are encouraging a

<https://www.naccho.org/blog/articles/media-advisory-2025naccho360>

## Additional Resources

- [Media Relations Toolkit For Health Departments](#), ASTHO
- [Healthy You Healthy Hennepin](#), Public health magazine published by Hennepin County Public Health (MN)
- [Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication \(CERC\)](#) Training, CDC
- [Plain Language for Public Health](#), Public Health Communications Collaborative Webinar
- [Engaging the Media to Amplify Public Health](#), Public Health Communications Collaborative Books
- [A Communications Playbook for Public Officials: How to Effectively Manage the Message, the Media, and Yourself](#), ASTHO
- [The Media & You](#) by Norman Hartman
- [The Media Training Bible](#) by Brad Phillips

## Acknowledgments

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[www.naccho.org](http://www.naccho.org)

The mission of the National Association of County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) is to improve the health of communities by strengthening and advocating for local health departments.

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