



**Strengthening Oklahoma's Safety Net,
One Community At A Time**

Board Bulletin

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Laying the Groundwork for Media Success - Part II

Public confidence is hard to earn and even more difficult to restore if lost. Because today's headlines center around conflict, criticism and controversy, a board must proactively develop a media policy that will protect the community health center (CHC) from adverse public relations. Plan ahead so that board members are not caught off guard in the heat of the moment. An ill-prepared, unprofessional CHC board makes an easy target for the press - especially if a questionable situation arises.

Media Policy & Interaction

- ◆ **Designate a Spokesperson** - The board chair should serve as spokesperson and should be a trusted, articulate professional who is a 'fast-on-the-feet' thinker. This person will be the collective voice for the entire board - which is particularly important in a controversial situation. Journalists may try the 'divide and conquer' tactic by asking multiple board members about an issue. Nothing looks worse than to have one board member contradict another board member on the front page of the local news - the entire board is discredited and the health center suffers. Board members should feel confident in saying, "To uphold health center policy, all media-related questions are directed to the board chair."
- ◆ **Keep a Unified Front** - No matter how you feel about a particular issue, let the meeting minutes stand as documentation of your opinion. If a reporter attends the meeting, the vote will most likely be recorded in the news article. However, do not allow yourself, as a dissenting board member, to be singled out by the reporter to make the other board members look bad. Once the board has voted on something, it is your obligation to comply with the majority decision. Always remember your 'duty of loyalty' to the health center.
- ◆ **Develop Relationships** - Build a relationship with local reporters by providing 'good press' stories about the health center. Create succinct press releases that include solid, accurate statistics showing the value of the health center to the community. If there is a positive relationship with the local media, chances are they will be more objective should a crisis situation occur.
- ◆ **Choose Words Carefully** - Avoid the temptation to show cleverness by trying to be too witty - anything you say is fair game. There is no such thing as an 'off the record' comment. During an interview, you must be completely aware that every word you speak, every gesture you make is being recorded and observed. People appreciate honesty and would much rather hear a sincere "I don't know - let me find out for you" rather than an uninformed answer - which will have to be corrected later after damage is already done. Avoid negative answers when possible - instead of "No, we don't do that" say "Here is what we *do*..."
- ◆ **Less is Better** - If something questionable occurs, keep comments to an absolute minimum. However, never say 'no comment' - it sounds guilty. The board spokesperson could say, "The board's policy is to carefully review all information before making a public statement." Then be prepared to issue a public statement as soon as it is prudent to demonstrate that the board is true to its word, again using the board's designated spokesperson. And never sound hostile, even if a reporter keeps asking questions you have already answered repeatedly.
- ◆ **No Whining** - Facts should be corrected in a positive way - but do not come off as a 'whiner' as this makes the board look unprofessional. If the situation warrants, ask for a meeting with the editorial board so that you may interact with more than one reporter. Journalists have a code of ethics and editorial boards know what is at stake if erroneous information is printed under their watch. Above all, do not get in a personal fight with a reporter - it is an uphill battle that can lead to disastrous results for the health center.

With proper planning and forethought, media interaction can be positive. No benefit can come to the health center from having 'dirty laundry' aired in the local news. OPCA's Director of Communications is available at no charge to assist member CHCs with achieving media success. For more information, visit www.okpca.org and click on 'CHC Boards'.

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