

E-PME  *Enlisted*
PROFESSIONAL MILITARY EDUCATION

Releasing Information 4.C.05

Learning Objective(s): **DISCUSS** the Coast Guard’s Policy and your unit’s policy governing the release of Information.

Why You Need to Know This

Your position in the government grants you access to newsworthy incidents as well as other information that may not be known to the general public. As a result of this access, it is vitally important for you to be aware that the information and material you may come in contact with while performing your duties **MUST** go through an official review and release process **BEFORE** being made available to the public.

It is the policy of the Coast Guard to make available to the public all information concerning the activities of the service except that information which is restricted by law. This is to be done in a forthright and expeditious manner. However, the unauthorized release of information or material that has not been properly reviewed can result in detrimental consequences for Coast Guard operations and the public we serve.

This lesson will help you understand the Coast Guard’s policies about releasing information to public.

Topics Covered

This section will cover the following topics:

- Types of Information
- Coast Guard Policy for Release of Information to the Public
- Unit Policy for Release of Information to the Public
- What Type of Information can be Released
- Release of Information Limitations
- Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

At the end of this lesson you will be required to participate in a learning activity. You are encouraged to first review the learning activity and the sign off requirements located in the “**You and Your Supervisor**” section of this lesson. Reviewing this information before you begin the lesson will allow you to take proper notes and focus on key learning points.

Types of information

In today's security-conscious environment, Coast Guard personnel must be careful regarding what type information is released to the public. The different types of potentially sensitive information includes:

- Spoken statements
- Paper and electronic documents (including text messages)
- Logs and case files
- Message traffic
- Photographs
- Videotape
- Audio recordings

The Coast Guard has policies established at both the unit and organizational level for the type of information that can be released, and through what channels.

Coast Guard Policy for Release of Information to the Public

In order to maintain confidence and trust, it is important that the Coast Guard share information with the public as quickly as possible. However, it is equally important that Coast Guard personnel follow their unit's policy before releasing any type of information to the public. When authorized to release information, Coast Guard personnel must stay within their area of expertise and knowledge.

The Coast Guard Public Affairs Manual contains a wide range of information about how, when, and why people in the Coast Guard should release information to the general public and news media.

Two important parts of the Coast Guard's public affairs information release policy that affect personnel are:

- "Maximum disclosure with minimum delay," [PA Manual, Ch1.B.1.]
- "If you do it, or are responsible for something, you can talk about it." [PA Manual Ch 2.D.3.]

Regarding the Release of **multimedia** material, such as photos, video, and audio recordings of Coast Guard activities made by Coast Guard personnel while on duty, or aboard Coast Guard units, shall be considered official information, regardless if the information was captured on government-owned or 'personal' equipment.

**Unit Policy for
Releasing
Information to the
Public**

Each Coast Guard unit commander determines who can release and what kind of information can be released to the general public and news media.

The Coast Guard's overall Public Affairs policies authorize units to permit any or all personnel to speak to the public and news media.

Every time a member transfers to a new unit, either PCS or TDY, they should ask about their unit's public affairs information release policies. This information can be obtained by contacting the member's supervisor or unit Public Affairs Officer (PAO). Specific questions to ask include:

- What are the unit's specific policies
- Who is authorized to release information
- What kind of information can be released
- What types of questions may a member answer
- Who in the chain of command should requests for information be referred to

Unit policies regarding the release of information will vary based on:

- Size of the unit
- Unit mission
- Level of personnel training
- Types of public or news media inquiries

For example, a unit policy may authorize and require a Coast Guard member to:

- Brief local news media about search and rescue cases.
 - Brief "national media" -- such as TV network news, news wire services, or major newspapers outside their area about search and rescue cases AND immediately notify the Public Affairs Officer that national media are now interested in the story.
 - Refer all inquiries from local or national media about Homeland Security and law enforcement operations or other policy issues to the unit Public Affairs Officer.
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Release of Information Limitations

Many factors need to be considered that could limit what and how much a member can respond to requests for information. These factors include:

- Unit information release policies
- Operational security
- Investigations
- Law enforcement plans or operations
- Homeland security and national defense operations
- Privacy laws
- Emergency circumstances

Use the “SAPP” rule (Security, Application, Policy, Propriety) to decide if the information can be released.

Security. Is the information classified or will it impact operational security?

Accuracy. Is the information complete and correct?

Policy. Would release violate Coast Guard or unit policy?

Propriety. Is it appropriate for the Coast Guard to release the information?

Clarifications of a few SAPP applications are presented here.

- For “Security” the rule is quite simple. If you know the information is classified, it cannot be released.
- For “Accuracy” the information is either correct, or it isn't.
- For “Policy” familiarize yourself with the policy that affects release of information. If unsure if the information can be released check your unit's policy.
- For “Propriety” you may be required to make a judgment call. What is considered “appropriate” changes from situation to situation.

When addressing question from the public and/or media, members must demonstrate good judgment and discretion at all times.

For example, a graphic description of the physical condition of a body recovered from a violent accident may be factual, unclassified and part of the case file. However, a member should consider that their answer could be insensitive to the family of the victim and that such details do not serve any immediate public need. The appropriate response in this example would be to redirect the question to local civil authorities, such as a coroner.

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA)

Coast Guard personnel may be faced with a request for information based on the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA). FOIA is a federal law that ensures the public has access to government records, and spells out steps and procedures for providing information.

A FOIA request often is connected to legal or policy issues, but may also be used by researchers, students, or the general public. Unless handling FOIA requests is part of official duties, Coast Guard members should refer any such requests to their supervisor or unit legal officer. If a news media representative mentions or requests information under FOIA, the unit PAO should also be notified.

Learning Activity



To successfully complete this requirement you will need to discuss your unit's public affairs policy with your supervisor. This discussion should include the type of information **YOU** are authorized to release to the public.

For You and Your Supervisor

In order to meet the sign-off requirement for this lesson **YOU** must perform the following:

1. Prior to meeting with your supervisor review the contents of this lesson and organize your thoughts.
2. Discuss your unit's public affairs policy.

Before signing off on this requirement your **SUPERVISOR** must:

1. Make sure the member understands Coast Guard and unit-specific policies regarding the release of information to the public.
 2. Provide the member with corrective feedback and answer any questions they may have related to this topic.
 3. Sign-off the check-off sheet on the Record of Enlisted Professional Military Education (E-PME) Performance Requirements.
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References

The references used to develop this lesson can be found at CG Directives(CG-612), www.uscg.mil/directives:

- Coast Guard Public Affairs Manual, COMDTINST M5728.2 (series)
 - Coast Guard Freedom of Information and Privacy Act Manual COMDTINST M5260.3 (series)
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