

PARTNERING FOR PERMANENCY

*Working with Your
Public Information Officer*



NATIONAL RESOURCE CENTER FOR
DILIGENT RECRUITMENT

at AdoptUSKids

WORKING WITH YOUR PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

The Value of Partnering with Your Public Information Officer

Child welfare work demonstrates time and time again that partnership is a key element to achieving our goals and improving outcomes for children families. As child welfare systems continue to seek ways to build ties with the community and increasing awareness of the need for families for children in foster care, working with your agency's public information officer (PIO) offers a practical way to leverage existing expertise on communication strategies and combine that expertise with key adoption-related messages you're seeking to share. Working together within your agency's established protocol, you and your agency's PIO can combine your collective expertise, knowledge, and resources. This partnership will provide the foundation for strong relationships, increased communication and positive outcomes toward the common goal of promoting adoption from foster care and finding forever families for the 102,000 children waiting to be adopted.

Understanding Your Public Information Officer's Role, Expertise, and Needs

PIOs — whatever title they have in your agency — are invaluable allies for communication efforts. They are colleagues within your agency offering media expertise and access to key strategies and tools for reaching the media and, through the media, the public. PIOs often have frequent contact with administrators and other key staff in your child welfare and social services systems. This allows them to serve as an ambassador for information, communication efforts, programs, or media efforts that you are seeking to promote.

Just like you, your agency's PIO faces multiple demands and competing priorities — trying to help the agency communicate and engage effectively with the public and inform people about work the agency does on behalf of the community. The primary responsibility of a PIO is to provide information to the media and general public. They often serve as a bridge between child welfare program staff and the media, providing editorial and media-relations expertise. Key responsibilities for most PIOs include:

- Writing and distributing press releases, media alerts, and other communication pieces both internally and externally.
- Media relations, including pitching stories to a variety of media contacts to gain interest from the media about specific story ideas to cover.

PIOs have a broad understanding of the media landscape and can offer advice on strategies and tactics for working effectively with the media and reporters. They are also familiar with the etiquette and idiosyncrasies



of working with reporters and the media. For example, PIOs have a solid understanding of editorial policies, frequency of publications, copy dates, circulation area, target audience information, and best practices for distribution of materials to various media outlets.

- PIOs can offer assistance with media preparation for you and your staff, including media training for interviews, how to develop talking points, fact-sheets, tip-sheets and media alerts.
- They are experts in crisis communication management and can assist with preparing crisis communication plans. This is particularly helpful when there are breaking news stories — especially those that lean negative or sensational — helping staff respond appropriately to the media.
- They provide effective, clear communication to key audiences. They have the ability to take complex information and translate it into information that is concise and easy for varying audiences to understand.
- PIOs need your help! They need information (data, stories, and facts), your expertise on child welfare, and your willingness to partner with them.

It's important to understand that the approval process for media materials (e.g. press releases, media alerts, etc.) can be lengthy and complex. As you work with your agency's PIO to develop materials for the media, build time into your schedule to accommodate this process.

Keys for Partnering with Your Public Information Officer

Confirm and Follow Your Agency's Protocols

A crucial first step before you approach the PIO is to learn about your agency's current protocol for interacting with your agency's PIO, so you can be sure that you follow the protocol. If your agency's protocol doesn't permit certain staff positions (e.g., the adoption program manager, foster care manager, etc.) to approach the PIO directly to solicit their help with promoting positive stories, talk with your supervisor to find out how you might pursue a new approach without violating established protocols.

Be Clear About Your Communication Goals

As you work with your agency's PIO, be sure to share what, specifically, you're hoping to accomplish in your work with the public information officer. For example, advise your PIO on whether you're seeking to:

- Design and conduct a thorough public awareness campaign
- Coordinate a targeted outreach effort related to National Adoption Month
- Celebrate a particular agency milestone (e.g., noting the 1,000th adoption from foster care in your State, etc.)
- Work with the media to place PSAs from the National Adoption Recruitment Campaign and Response Initiative

Build a Collegial Relationship to Support True Partnership

Find common ground with your agency's PIO, identifying goals that you are both trying to accomplish, so you can build a relationship with each other that supports each other's priorities and objectives.

- Involve PIOs in key strategic discussions and planning meetings as early as possible.
- Be willing to partner with your PIO. Make yourself available to the PIO for interviews, phone calls, questions, and quotes.
- Ensure the PIO understands your child welfare role and responsibilities and those of staff who may have contact with the media.
- Be accessible and responsive. Provide feedback as quickly as possible; reporters work on extremely tight deadlines and usually need information from PIOs quickly.
- Take “No” for an answer. PIOs usually have a very good reason for turning down a media request (e.g., the issue is not timely or newsworthy, there are other competing media priorities for the agency, etc.).
- Communicate your experience and comfort level with working with the media.
- Reach out to your agency's PIO and express your interest in understanding more about working with the media. Ask questions such as, “What are our current media practices and policies?”
- Send a note of thanks after working together on a media effort.
- Keep a record of your interactions with the PIO and any resulting media coverage, for future reference.

Be a Helpful Resource for Information and Compelling Stories

You can be a key resource to your PIO's work by providing information that will tell a compelling story and develop effective messages for the media and the public. For example, you can provide relevant child welfare data (e.g., the number of children in your State waiting to be adopted, the number of youth who aged out of foster care last year, the number of children in foster care who are part of a sibling group, etc.) and personal stories about youth in foster care and adoptive families. You can also let the media know when new adoption-related research findings or positive results are available (e.g., the public release of the Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System (ACFARS) data, if your State receives an Adoption Incentive payment, when AdoptUSKids features a child or sibling group from your area waiting to be adopted or selects someone from your agency as the [Caseworker of the Month](#), etc.). By providing a variety of information about foster care and adoption, you can help your public information officer compile press releases and communication strategies that will be most likely to engage the public.

- Good content and stories = good media opportunities.
- Make your PIO aware of your knowledge and child welfare expertise.
- Provide as much information as possible, especially in the form of research, data, facts, and figures. Reporters love data and numbers; it's their job to present the facts.

Recognize Your PIO's Role in Being a Primary Point of Contact With the Media

If media contacts approach you directly, contact and work with the PIO to address the media request together, always following your agency's established protocols for direct interaction with the media. The PIO can use their breadth of media knowledge to ensure the response will meet media needs accurately and appropriately. For example, a request from a TV station will usually require strong, compelling visuals whereas a newspaper feature will require quotes and data from key spokespeople or child welfare experts.

Partner With Your Agency's Child Welfare and Adoption Program Leadership

By combining your communication expertise and the expertise of your agency's adoption and child welfare program leaders, you can develop powerful, compelling communication strategies and messages. Child welfare program leaders have a wealth of information about the children in foster care who are waiting to be adopted, such as the kind of families they are hoping to recruit, and the support and resources available to help adoptive families meet children's needs. You can leverage this information to help develop simple, clear messages that will resonate with the public and help find more adoptive families for children in foster care. Working together, you can develop communication strategies that are data-driven and align with specific recruitment needs, ensuring consistent, effective messaging to reach prospective parents.

Communicate, Communicate, Communicate

A solid communication process between you and your agency's PIO will foster innovation, generate ideas, improve relationships, and produce positive outcomes.



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