

CHAPTER 3
AREA COMMANDER
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CHAPTER 3

AREA COMMANDER

1. GENERAL.

a. Message. The CHP Area commander's job is to ensure their command's "story" is properly and effectively told. Telling the story of the command requires:

- (1) Internal Information: reaching departmental employees and their families.
- (2) External Information: getting news to the public and stakeholders.
- (3) Community Relations: in person appearances at press conferences, high-profile incidents, newsworthy arrests and accomplishments; attendance at city council meetings and county board of supervisors meetings; speeches at luncheons and community events; hosting Area open houses; letters to the editor, etc.

b. Tradition. Commanders should always remember that media stories and departmental interaction at community events can have an impact on the past and future reputation of this Department.

2. RESPONSIBILITY.

a. Involvement with the Media. Commanders are responsible for the effectiveness of media relations programs within their command. This accountability includes:

- (1) Taking personal responsibility and becoming personally involved in the media relations activities of their respective commands.
- (2) Ensuring the command has a positive relationship with the media.
 - (a) Establish a professional atmosphere and be seen as approachable in routine activities.
 - (b) Commanders should introduce themselves to the journalists who will be covering their command's activities and establish and maintain those relationships.

1 Be approachable.

2 Be available.

3 Be accessible.

(3) Maintaining an effective and favorable working relationship with media representatives and organizations to ensure fair treatment of the Department.

(4) Ensuring the media is provided accurate, complete, and appropriate information regarding the Department.

(5) Ensuring the media is providing the public with accurate, complete, and appropriate information about the Department. If the media is reporting inaccurate information, the commander has the responsibility of ensuring they are provided with the correct information.

(6) Resolving unfair treatment of the Department by the media.

(7) Ensuring media relations activities are actively directed toward accomplishing the goals and objectives of the Area, Division, and Department.

(8) Ensuring media is properly utilized, addressed, and managed at major incidents.

(9) Ensuring interviews and statements are formatted and approved so the correct message is conveyed to the public.

b. Involvement with Social Media. Commanders are responsible for providing oversight of social media pages managed by their command and shall ensure the posts maintain the professional image of the Department.

c. Involvement with Community Organizations.

(1) Commanders are encouraged to participate in organizations whose purpose is the interchange of information relative to law enforcement, crash investigation, and departmental goal attainment. Such organizations include:

(a) Peace officer organizations.

(b) Ad-hoc advisory committees.

(c) Traffic advisory committees.

(d) County alcoholism advisory boards.

(e) County drug advisory boards.

(f) Emergency medical care committees.

(2) Community organizations also present an opportunity for departmental employees to positively affect the community through active participation. Such groups include:

- (a) Mothers Against Drunk Driving.
- (b) Students Against Destructive Decisions.
- (c) Taxpayers League.
- (d) Chamber of Commerce.
- (e) Parent, student, school organizations.

(3) The purpose of community service organizations is the betterment of their communities. These groups also present opportunities to further departmental goals and objectives through departmental participation in service projects, traffic safety and other law enforcement presentations, and providing resources where appropriate. Such groups include:

- (a) Lions Club.
- (b) Rotary Club.
- (c) Kiwanis Club.
- (d) Organized car and motorcycle clubs.
- (e) Veterans organizations.
- (f) Ethnic organizations.
- (g) Seniors groups.
- (h) Scouting groups.

d. Selection of a Public Information Officer. It is the responsibility of the commander to designate a public information officer (PIO) and an alternate. The PIO and alternate are the Area's primary contact with local media, but commanders are encouraged to interact with media representatives as well.

(1) Commanders shall have their PIOs report directly to them. The PIO should have direct access to the commander.

(2) Commanders shall ensure they are fully informed of news media activities within their command that may affect departmental operations.

(3) Commanders should keep their PIO informed of incidents and events that have the potential to draw media interest.

(4) Commanders should allow their PIOs to attend Area staff meetings as appropriate. This practice ensures the Area PIO becomes familiar with current issues, activities, and programs at the Department, Division, and Area level.

(5) The PIO needs to understand the commander's leadership philosophy (what the commander believes is important and will lead to the success of the command) if the PIO is going to accurately communicate the commander's vision both internally and externally.

e. Release of Information. Commanders shall establish procedures for disseminating information to the media. At a minimum, establish local procedures for:

(1) Normal Release of Information. The normal release of crash and arrest information is routinely submitted on the CHP 288A, Report of Collision - News Release, and/or the CHP 288B, Report of Arrest / Unusual Incident - News Release.

(a) Commanders are responsible for every news release issued on their behalf.

(b) This responsibility also extends to the release of photographs to the media. (Refer to General Order [GO] 110.8, Processing and Storage of Digital Media.)

(2) After-Hours Release of Information. Law enforcement operates on a 24-hour schedule and so does the media. Procedures should be implemented for the release of information after normal business hours.

(3) Significant or Sensitive Subjects. Usually, only commanders should speak with the media regarding CHP personnel matters (other than on-duty critical incidents such as shootings and crashes), and other sensitive issues rather than the PIO. Matters of statewide significance or political sensitivity should be referred to the Office of Community Outreach and Media Relations (COMR).

(a) The Department has a duty to address all types of incidents to maintain good media relations.

1 Trust and integrity demand public accountability
“Maximum Disclosure–Minimum Delay.”

2 Deal with bad news quickly. Be forthcoming to help avoid allegations of a cover-up.

3 In the case of alleged crimes and misconduct, utilize the key messages found on the CHP Intranet site, Outreach, Talking Points, Personnel Investigations.

(4) Allied Agency Investigations. Media inquiries involving incidents being investigated by allied agencies should be referred to that agency.

f. Disaster Planning–Public Awareness and Education.

(1) The CHP shall assist in the dissemination of disaster planning information.

(2) Each Area office shall evaluate the possible emergencies that may occur in their jurisdiction and work with the local media and community groups, as well as allied agencies, to educate the public.

(a) Establish relationships with these groups before a crisis occurs. This can help overcome initial doubts or misunderstandings.

(b) This is especially true of relationships with journalists. In the depths of a crisis, the media is an essential ally in providing the public with information that can enhance their welfare and even save lives.

(c) One benefit of establishing relationships–before a crisis–with these groups is simply to open the lines of communication. Exchange contact information and keep it current.

(d) Participation in local or regional emergency preparedness drills is a good opportunity to practice and prepare for a real event.

3. COMMAND ASSUMPTION.

a. A news release identifying a new Area commander should be sent to the local media. This news release should contain biographical and job-related information. It should also provide a message about the new commander’s goals for traffic safety as well as the commitment to provide security and service to the community.

- b. A photograph of the commander should be available to the media for publishing. These pictures should be updated occasionally. The photos should be available both in hard copy and digital formats.
- c. Ideally, the commander should be available for interviews when the news release goes out. The news release may contain a “media availability” time and location for the media to obtain a one-on-one interview with the commander.
- d. As soon as practical, the PIO should introduce the new Area commander to the local media so they can assess their relationship with the Department.
- e. The PIO should obtain the new commander’s business cards to have available to hand out to the media to ensure proper spelling of the commander’s name.

4. EVALUATION.

- a. Commanders should continually evaluate the effectiveness of their media and public relations activities. One way a commander can assess this is through the type and frequency of the media coverage.
- b. Commanders shall ensure public relations activities and abilities are documented on the performance appraisals of employees under their command that have ongoing contact with the public in person or by telephone.

5. NOTIFICATIONS.

- a. Commanders shall make immediate notification of all significant incidents and newsworthy events, involving the Department, occurring in their commands to their appropriate Assistant Chief (including, but not limited to, those incidents listed in GO 100.80, Notification and Report of Emergency Incidents and Significant Events). This is especially critical when a story may be carried by a media outlet.
- b. Commanders shall ensure supervisors, the Officer in Charge, PIOs, and communications centers understand the necessity of making timely notifications through the proper channels.
- c. Significant events should also be reported to the Division PIO coordinator who will then ensure COMR is notified.

6. RESOURCES.

- a. The Office of COMR has developed talking points on subjects for commanders to use when speaking on behalf of the Department at community engagements, media events, or during media interviews. The talking points can be accessed on the CHP Intranet site.
- b. Commander's cellular devices are preloaded with abbreviated talking points for those critical incidents likely to be encountered on a regular basis.
- c. A downloadable pamphlet, CHP 939, California Highway Patrol Mission, is also available on the CHP Intranet site, Outreach, Printed Material, with the ability of the commander to personalize the Area contact information.
- d. Commanders are encouraged to provide frequent input to COMR on these tools to ensure their relevance and usability.

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