

Aug. 1, 2014

## **Court Public Information Officers Core Competencies**

*Prepared by the Conference of Court Public Information Officers*

Court Public Information Officers (PIOs) serve as liaisons between the judiciary and the public and can be found at all levels of the justice system, including the trial courts, appellate courts and administrative offices of the courts. Although duties can vary considerably among states and court jurisdictions, a Court PIO is generally responsible for media and public information, community outreach, education, and publications. A Court PIO may also be involved in legislative and governmental affairs, internal communications, law related education, and supervisory management roles, such as overseeing a public information office. A Court PIO is generally expected to possess excellent communications skills, both orally and written. Other qualities that a PIO should possess are analytic abilities, diplomacy skills, flexibility, creativity, quick thinking, the ability to translate legal jargon into layperson's language, the ability to juggle many duties at once, and the ability to remain calm under pressure. A Court PIO serves judges, court employees, lawyers, the media and the public, and therefore, must have the knowledge, confidence, and public relations skills to deal effectively with each.

The following list of core competencies reflects the wide range of skills utilized by Court PIOs and the broad spectrum of their expertise. It should not be viewed as a baseline list of job requirements for Court PIOs but rather an expansive cataloging of potential duties. Funding and staffing of public information offices also will directly impact their ability to provide the duties described here. As these resources diminish, so does the ability of the PIO to provide core competencies.

### **Media Relations**

The media relations area is generally the Court PIO's greatest responsibility. The major objective is to generate positive goodwill and understanding between the courts and the media through a variety of skills and methods.

#### **As media expert**

- \_ Create and implement a comprehensive media and information plan
- \_ Build and maintain credibility, both with the press and court personnel
- \_ Advise top-level administration on media issues
- \_ Strategically use public relations tools (e.g., press conferences, press releases, social media, pitch letters, news advisories)
- \_ Measure results of media campaigns
- \_ Write op-ed pieces and letters to the editor for educational purposes or to respond to negative stories
- \_ Track current news trends and anticipate future ones
- \_ Prepare court personnel to speak to the media by briefing them on the fundamentals of interviewing and advising them both of potential opportunities and pitfalls
- \_ Monitor court-related news coverage and compile news clippings of articles related to the courts
- \_ Strategically place stories
- \_ Develop, manage and monitor a variety of social media technologies

#### **As court spokesperson**

- \_ Speak in understandable terms, avoiding stilted legalistic language
- \_ Provide reporters with accurate information and supply them with appropriate quotes
- \_ Present the court's "side of the story" to journalists and provide supporting information
- \_ Analyze and prioritize issues, including thorough monitoring relevant social media sites, that need to be brought to the immediate attention of top level management
- \_ Give "on-message" interviews
- \_ Understand journalistic jargon (e.g., "on the record," "not for attribution," "for background," and "off the record") and determine appropriate times to use each

- \_ Work within reporter deadlines and understand the different timing of print, radio, television and Internet news cycles
- \_ Determine the appropriate times to act as spokesperson and the appropriate times to arrange for judges or court personnel to speak

### **Generating publicity:**

- \_ Write newsworthy press releases and news advisories
- \_ Evaluate the newsworthiness of a story and highlight those elements when “selling” it to the press
- \_ Be familiar with the specific editors and reporters assigned to the court “beat”
- \_ Distinguish the best news medium for a particular story and tailor it to that medium
- \_ Target appropriate journalists and editors to pitch court stories
- \_ Distinguish between local and national news interests
- \_ Provide reporters with names of members of the bar or other related groups as sources of information for court stories
- \_ Assist judges in managing high profile cases
- \_ Develop social media understanding that facilitates its appropriate use in disseminating court messages both routinely and as a crisis communications device

### **Fostering positive court-press relations**

- \_ Respond to inquiries from the press with speed and accuracy
- \_ Compile case/decision summaries and distribute them to press in a timely fashion
- \_ Manage media needs in high-profile trials, including courtroom seating, overflow media rooms, access to court documents, etc.
- \_ Promote dialogue and good court-media relations by arranging for regular meetings between judicial leaders and editorial boards
- \_ Develop web content and disseminate information to the media
- \_ Produce media guides, information booklets, historic guides or other informative publications to assist reporters in covering the courts
- \_ Develop and coordinate educational programs for the media
- \_ Establish email listserves, distribution tools, or other means to reach out to various media groups, locally, statewide, and nationally as appropriate

### **Combating negative press**

- \_ Stanch the snowballing effect of erroneous, negative stories
- \_ Assess a crisis situation quickly and advise leadership on the best course of action
- \_ Implement a strategic plan in a timely manner
- \_ Gather and disseminate the facts of a situation quickly in order to gain control over the story
- \_ Act as organization spokesperson or identify appropriate spokesperson to respond to reporters
- \_ Proactively handle a crisis rather than reacting to negative stories after publication
- \_ Write op-ed pieces or “letters to the editor” to respond to a negative or erroneous news article
- \_ Partner with the bar and other related groups in responding to judicial criticism

### **Coordinating press events**

- \_ Determine the best means of achieving an organization’s goals (e.g., whether to hold a press conference, one-on-one interviews, press briefings, etc.)
- \_ Advise and educate upper management regarding the above
- \_ Choose and create a list of speakers for an event
- \_ Know how to notify the press and promote coverage of an event
- \_ Create press materials for distribution, including press release, fact sheets, pictures and other related materials
- \_ List event on media’s daily assignment/event list
- \_ Know how to set up a room for a press conference, taking into account the visual aspects of a press event, as well as broadcast media’s specific needs

- \_ Arrange for satellite, or Internet feeds (or both) of press events for wide-area broadcasts
- \_ Follow up with media attendees and refer them to appropriate spokespersons
- \_ Measure results of press conference by compiling news articles and monitoring broadcast coverage

### **Crisis communications**

- \_ Create a crisis communications plan
- \_ Implement emergency procedures
- \_ Know how to disseminate emergency information to the public and court employees when traditional means of communication are hampered (e.g., radio, Internet, emergency telephone numbers)

### **Education**

Helping the public understand and appreciate the role and function of the judicial branch is an important and challenging responsibility. Recognizing the media is only one vehicle to the public, a Court PIO must be able to develop ideas and implement educational programs that serve all segments of the public, young and old.

- \_ Develop programs in conjunction with local school districts that educate students about the judicial branch (e.g., court tours, mock trials, Careers in the Courts Day, mentoring or internship programs)
- \_ Respond to public inquiries and requests
- \_ Create written informational packets for targeted groups
- \_ Partner with the local school system on developing law-related curricula for use in social studies classes
- \_ Partner with law schools on court-related programs for students (e.g., summer internships, clerking for judges)
- \_ Oversee or give input on development and continued operation of court system website to provide pertinent, up-to-date information to press and public
- \_ Develop programs that help inform the public about various legal topics
- \_ Create and get placement of public service announcements
- \_ Develop and implement public service campaigns on law-related subjects
- \_ Develop web content and disseminate information to the public through the Internet
- \_ Produce high quality videos
- \_ Create web and mobile device content for diverse audiences
- \_ Develop, implement and manage new media technologies
- \_ Create multimedia content
- \_ Website development, content development and management.

### **Community Outreach**

Closely related to education is outreach to the community, which involves building good relations and providing accurate court information to key constituencies, such as business, civic, legal and law enforcement organizations.

- \_ Build interest and foster constituency support
- \_ Assess a community's needs and engineer court programs that meet these needs
- \_ Partner with community organizations to creatively initiate and develop outreach programs
- \_ Arrange speaking opportunities for judges and court personnel before community boards, schools and other interested groups
- \_ Create a court tours program that can be adapted to various audiences (e.g., school children, senior citizens, visiting judges)
- \_ Evaluate the requirements of launching a new program and realistically assess the expected benefits versus the availability of resources
- \_ Partner with the bar on law-related programs
- \_ Plan and coordinate special events and programs, such as Law Day, Take Your Child to Work, court openings, etc.

\_Develop materials for judges, attorneys, and court executives who may be called upon to speak to civic groups.

The presentations should be interactive, as well as informative.

\_Create web- and mobile device-friendly applications and content.

### **Internal Communications**

An informed workforce is essential in serving the public well. Keeping judges and court personnel up-to-date with accurate court information and key policy messages is often part of a Court PIO's responsibility.

- \_ Compile and regularly distribute a clippings packet of news articles and video clips relating to the courts
- \_ Write, edit or oversee the production of employee newsletters, publications and web-based communications.
- \_ Evaluate information for its relevance to employees and disseminate that information through the appropriate means (e.g., Intranet system, e-mail)
- \_ Develop and implement a plan for communicating directives to employees in cases of emergency

### **Publications**

Court publications provide readers with timely, accurate information about the judiciary's activities and can generally reach a broad audience through a mass distribution and Web-based networks. Publications generally include newsletters, annual reports, brochures, user guides, historical booklets, website content, and juror publications.

- \_ Assess the scope of a project, weighing the benefits of the publication versus a realistic estimate of the resources to create it
- \_ Tailor publications toward specific audiences (e.g., school children, lawyers, the media) in the choice of content, language, and writing style
- \_ Write in clear, non-legalistic language
- \_ Be conversant with publishing procedures, production schedules and printing protocols
- \_ Edit publication drafts and offer constructive critiques
- \_ Knowledgeable in creating content that is geared toward web and mobile applications.

### **Legislative/Governmental Relations**

Good relations with the other branches of government serves to inform them of important judicial branch issues and needs and helps to foster positive inter-branch communication A Court PIO can be helpful in providing timely information about court activities and major issues affecting key constituencies.

- \_ Develop educational programs for legislators and government leaders (e.g. "judicial ride-along" programs)
- \_ Write speeches for judges or court administrators
- \_ Identify key lawmakers and relevant interest groups
- \_ Develop a media campaign targeted towards desired legislation
- \_ Coordinate media campaigns to coincide with timing of legislative cycles
- \_ Target journalists and media outlets in specific legislative districts
- \_ Compile editorials and news articles to demonstrate support of desired legislation and to measure results of media campaign