



DSS Public Relations Toolkit

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Objectives of the Toolkit

Social services departments, especially child welfare services, are increasingly under scrutiny in the media. Confidentiality concerns hamper us from defending ourselves when we're under attack, and even from touting our successes. Too often, good news never makes the news and the bad news is distorted. How can you bolster the public trust in your programs and in your agency?

This media toolkit will help you to get your good news out, and give some pointers on how to keep the bad news from spiraling into something worse. You'll learn how to deal with different forms of media, and get some pointers on how to talk about delicate topics. There are some reference materials about public records, open meetings and confidentiality. Examples of "good" coverage are included, with the understanding that sometimes a good story is one that treats bad news fairly.

This toolkit was created by the NC DHHS Office of Public Affairs, with the help of the NC Division of Social Services and under the guidance of the Joint State-County Relations Committee of the NC Association of County Directors of Social Services.

About the Media and Interviewing Tips

Different media are looking for different things. It is important that you understand these differences, so you give a reporter what he or she needs.

Basic Tips for Dealing With the Media

- Always return reporters' calls on the same day. Don't ignore them. Don't wait until the end of the day to respond, when print deadlines are often earlier. If you absolutely do not have time to talk to them that day, call them to arrange a better time.
- Assign someone to be a media liaison on various issues.
- Prepare for the interview. Know your message and review your major points. Don't be embarrassed to refer to notes.
- Always frame your answers in a positive manner.
- Avoid bureaucratic language and jargon; explain in layman's terms. Avoid terms like *policy* and *procedures, rules* and *regulations*. Don't hide behind "bureaucrateze."
- Avoid acronyms.
- Explain complex programs in human terms. Use real examples without violating client confidentiality.
- Never lie, even just a "little bit," to a reporter.
- Never say "no comment." "No comment" is a comment.
- Stay on the record. Reporters aren't your friends. You can respect each other professionally, but don't think you're buddies.
- If you don't know the answer to a question, be honest and say so, then offer to find out.
- Admit mistakes and tell how you are fixing the problem.
- Never be condescending to a reporter or try to "set them straight."
- Be patient. You're an expert, the reporter is not.
- Don't accept a reporter's definition.
- Never be argumentative, confrontational or lose your temper with a reporter.
- Never ask a reporter to review his story.
- Be proactive. Go to reporters. Don't wait for them to come to you.

Television

What sets television apart from the print media or radio? The answer, of course, is pictures. If you want your story to get good play on television, then you need to think of pictures. What pictures can tell your story?

If you want television to cover your news release, then you must be prepared to have someone willing to do an on-camera interview. Your story will get better play if you can also think of other good pictures to go with the release material. The easier you make it for television to get pictures, the more likely you are to get a complete story on the air.

Who do you call to talk about television coverage? In general, the best person to call is the assignment editor. The assignment editor is responsible for deciding what stories are going to be covered and by whom. Assignment editors are very busy people. They are multi-taskers--listening to police scanners, monitoring other station's signals, juggling reporters and photographers in the field and taking calls from people with news tips. They don't have time to waste. You should bear that in mind when calling them.

Call when assignment editors are least busy. The best times to call day assignment editors are 7:15-8:15 a.m. and 1:00 to 2:30 p.m. If you're having an event or press conference, place **ONLY** two calls. Give the assignment editor a heads-up about the event a few days before it happens; make that call in the afternoon. The day of the event make an early morning call as a reminder. The best times to call night assignment editors are 3:00-5:00 p.m. or 8 to 9:00 p.m. Place the heads-up call in the evening a few days before it happens and the reminder day-of-event call in the afternoon.

No call to an assignment editor should last more than a minute or two, unless the assignment editor lengthens the call by asking questions. Be prepared to make a short pitch. Don't whine, needle or threaten. State your case clearly and concisely. Thank the assignment editor for his or her time and end the call.

Radio

What makes radio different than newspapers? Obviously, the answer is sound. What makes radio different than television? Once again the answer is sound. Without pictures to distract, the listener is totally focused on sound. Finding and identifying sound for a radio reporter will give your story greater presence on the radio.

Sound can be simple--just a taped interview. Sound can also be much more involved. Today's National Public Radio style reporter is also focused on what's called natural sound, the sounds you hear in the background of everyday activities. If you are announcing an initiative that replaces paper files with computer files, then you should be prepared to take the NPR-style reporter to your file room.

Open up files for him and talk about the size of the files and what a waste of space they are. That's the kind of sound that will improve your story. A story on playground rules can be improved with the natural sound of children playing.

You also need to have someone ready to do a taped radio interview. Nothing is more frustrating for a radio reporter than to be told that "the news release speaks for itself." It will speak all right--to the radio reporter, telling him that you think he or she is unimportant. Your story won't end up on the air.

There are two types of radio reporters--the NPR-style, doing longer stories filled with natural sound and the more traditional reporter, often expanding stories that have already run elsewhere. You may get a call from the latter kind of reporter who has seen a story on the wire or in the newspapers. They are calling you for one thing; they want sound. They want somebody saying what the newspaper reported. Whatever you do, don't insult them by saying "just read the story in the newspaper." They've already read it, and they are calling for your help in making that story into a radio story.

Newspapers

What sets newspapers apart from radio and television? The answer is clear--details and background information.

Most sizeable newspapers assign reporters to beats. That means that there are specific people assigned to cover specific areas like health care, environmental issues, women's issues, and business. Find out who is assigned to your beat and communicate with that person. Beat reporters have a lot of time to spend on stories. You should get acquainted with the beat reporter. Invite them over for a tour. Invite them to see what you do in the field. Invite them to lunch to talk about your area. Call them with any new details. In other words, spend as much as possible getting to know and staying in touch with the beat reporter. That time will pay off in informed stories by a reporter who has the time to understand the issue.

Large papers often have what are called investigative reporters. Rather than cover the day-to-day news, they do a great deal of research on topics that are complex or controversial. They can spend days or weeks on one story, and may take a lot of your time in lengthy interview and records requests. As with all media, it is very important to be forthcoming with information that is considered to be public record. If demands for information seem unreasonable, negotiate for a timeframe that you can live with.

Smaller newspapers, especially weeklies, may not have beat reporters. Reporters may cover a variety of issues, but they probably still have more time to spend on a story. Invite new reporters to sit down for a chat. Invite them into the field. Give them heads-up as stories progress. Remember that today's weekly newspaper reporter is often tomorrow's daily newspaper reporter. This is a vital opportunity to get to a reporter early in his or her career and make sure they understand the importance of your program.

Interviewing Tips

It doesn't matter who is doing the interview, or whether the interview is for television, radio or print. The important thing to remember is that you need to be in control of the interview. Never lose control of the interview. View the interview as your chance to get your information to the public.

Got Nerves?

Most people get nervous when a reporter asks for an interview. That's a typical, normal reaction. People have different techniques for dealing with nerves. Some people have found that taking a few deep breaths works. Others swear by a moment of meditation. Others go for a walk to organize their thoughts. There is no secret rule for overcoming feelings of nervousness, but the more you prepare for the interview the better off you'll be.

Take some time to talk informally with the reporter about his or her request. Find out what the reporter needs. Is he or she looking for cursory or in-depth information? Is he or she doing a historical interview, or is the subject current? How long does the reporter expect the interview to last? What kind of deadline is the reporter working on?

Prepare for the Interview

Once you know what the reporter is looking for you can prepare for your interview.

You have the right to take time to prepare for the interview. Don't let a reporter bully you into responding off-the-cuff. You want to make sure that you know what you are talking about before the interview begins. It is perfectly acceptable to tell a reporter that you need time to familiarize yourself with the issue.

Pull your notes and files. Read over the information. Familiarize yourself with the subject. Think about what points you want to make in the interview. Practice expressing those points. Think of arresting ways to make your points. Is there a colorful phrase that will express your point? Can you think of good examples and illustrations to make your point? Can you distill confusing, complicated data down to a simple, concise thought?

It is a good idea to have your files and notes readily accessible, so you can pull information if needed. Don't worry about looking up information. Reporters don't expect you to have memorized everything, but they do expect you to give them correct answers. If providing a correct answer means taking the time to consult your notes or files, then do so.

Television Interviews

Lots of people freak when a television reporter calls. They think that they are expected to look like anchor people. Don't fret. The public doesn't expect you to look like Diane Sawyer or Dan Rather. You don't have to wear a suit and tie or dress and panty hose. Just be yourself. The important thing is that you appear honest, straightforward and concerned.

A useful technique to tame the television nerves is to imagine that your conversation is one-on-one with someone you know and like. Pretend you are explaining your program/issue to your mom, your spouse or a close friend.

Look at the reporter, not the camera. The camera person should be concerned with the camera, not you!

Be prepared to suggest visuals that may help make your story better. You might suggest meeting the reporter outside your office at a more visual location. For instance, if you are doing an interview about water quality you might want to suggest that you meet on the banks of a river. If you're doing an interview about hospital rules, you might want to meet at a hospital.

Radio Interviews

Most radio interviews are conducted over the phone. Make sure that you prepare for the interview by cutting out all distractions. Ask that other calls be held and shut your door, so that phones aren't ringing and people aren't ambling into your office during the interview.

Talk in your normal voice. Don't feel compelled to put on a fake "radio" voice. Radio has changed in the past few years. National Public Radio has popularized real voices; you'll hear ethnic and regional accents and normal tones on NPR and most other radio news operations. It is okay to have an accent or to not talk in a deep, fake voice like a sixties deejay. Just be sure to talk so that you can be understood.

Print Interviews

Print interviews usually last longer than radio or television interviews and the reporter usually wants more detail. Make sure you block out enough time for the interview. You may also want to pull other folks from your office in for the interview. You may not be the expert on every facet of your program/issue. Pulling in other folks helps to round out the interview.

Toot Your Horn: Building Trust and Rapport

Why It's Important

Some people love the limelight, and some shun it like the plague. You may be the kind of person who believes that a good job should speak for itself, and working at public relations is simply fluff, not integral to your mission or your success. Let other folks seek glory, *you* are only worried about the important stuff of your job ... except that your image in the community is integral to your success in providing social services.

Consider the caring couple who would be foster parents except that they do not want to deal with the imagined hassles. Or think about the neighbor who doesn't report suspected child abuse because he doesn't trust social services to act appropriately. Consider the struggling single mother who goes to an expensive lawyer instead of to your office to get child support ordered, because she just doesn't perceive that social services will work hard on her behalf. Think about the elderly woman who won't apply for food stamp benefits because she doesn't feel she deserves them, even though she qualifies. For these people and more, working on your image means a great deal to accomplishing your mission.

The more the Department of Social Services is known in the community as a vibrant, caring, efficient, effective agency, the better you will be able to serve the people who most depend on you. And that means spending a little time and effort on letting the community know when you're doing a good job.

When Good Things Happen

When something good happens in your agency, make a habit of getting the word out. If you have a good audit or review, or if your department receives an award, a short press release or call to a reporter is in order. These are the things for which you cannot plan ahead and for which it can be hard to find the time. Go ahead and take a little time to brag. There are enough opportunities for bad attention.

Social Services Pride

The Department of Social Services holds such an important place in the community, but we're too often taken for granted. We're the folks who can always be counted on to be there when things go wrong, but that doesn't always translate into respect. Avoid that Rodney Dangerfield syndrome by manifesting some pride and conveying it to your staff, your clients, your advocates and especially to the media.

Calculate some key statistics and keep them handy. On a moment's notice, you should be able to spout off these statistics for your county:

- How many children are insured in Health Choice and Medicaid
- How many families have gotten help through Work First to get off and stay off public assistance
- How many children are in your protection
- How many adoptions you've finalized last year and your goal for this year
- How many families receive child support enforcement services from your agency (if your agency has this service) and the collection percentage for cases under order.
- How much fraud and overpayments that your investigator(s) have uncovered and recovered.

Create an annual report that describes all your programs and your accomplishments. Catawa's annual report is a glossy brochure with colorful pictures and pie charts. Durham's is a calendar with lots of photographs of employees and clients.

Key Messages for Key Programs

When being interviewed on any given program, be sure to convey these key points.

Adoption

Every child deserves a family.

Hundreds of children in North Carolina are waiting for a home. They are children of all ages, mostly over five years old. Many have special needs. Many are siblings who need to be placed together.

Adopting families can be older or younger, wealthy or of modest income, two-parent or single-parent. The primary requirement for adoption is that you can provide a healthy, loving and nurturing home for a child.

NC KIDS is available at 877-NCKIDS-1 to help people who want to adopt a foster child from North Carolina.

Child Support Enforcement

Children are better off when both parents support their children.

The public good is promoted when people take responsibility for their children.

Child support enforcement offices are working smarter and getting more money for children.

CSE offices are an inexpensive alternative to lawyers in finding absent parents, establishing paternity, and getting child support ordered from the courts.

Customer service is available at 800-992-9457 and at www.ncchildsupport.com

Child Welfare

Child abuse cannot be tolerated. Children deserve to be safe.

Every citizen has a responsibility to report suspected abuse or neglect to their county department of social services. There's no excuse for silence. It helps to give the name, address, and age of the child. Reports may be made anonymously.

Food Stamps

Many low income and elderly who qualify for food stamps do not participate in the program. They may not know about it, or they may feel it carries a social stigma.

It is estimated that 196,000 people in North Carolina are hungry from time to time.

Foster Care

Provide a family and a safe home for children at risk. What could be more important?

Foster care is intended to be a temporary arrangement for children, not an end in itself. The goal for every child who enters foster care is a safe, permanent home as soon as possible, whether that means reunification with the birth family, custody or guardianship with relatives or kin, or adoption.

NC KIDS is available at 877-NCKIDS-1 to help people who want to provide a safe home for foster children.

Fraud

Fraud is rare, but we investigate it and take appropriate action.

Health Choice

NC Health Choice for Children is a popular low cost/no cost health insurance program for the children of North Carolina's working families.

Health Choice is designed for working parents like contract employees; day care and nursing home workers and providers; state employees and entrepreneurs who work hard but can't afford private insurance.

The program is comprehensive, covering well and sick child doctor's visits; hospitalization; dental care including x-rays and fillings; vision care including glasses; hearing care including hearing aids; care for children with special needs and prescriptions.

Older Adults

Older and disabled adults deserve to be safe regardless of their living arrangement.

Every citizen has the responsibility to report abuse, neglect or exploitation to the county Department of Social Services.

Work First

North Carolina's *Work First* program is helping families leave welfare for work—and protecting children.

Work First has helped thousands of families on welfare to build stronger families and lead more productive lives.

Tips for Getting your Story Covered

So you have some good news you want to spread. Or you want to make people more aware of their responsibility to report child abuse. Or you're hosting an event and want media to attend. Or you want to reach out to noncustodial dads and make it easier for them to pay their support.

The first question you have to answer is "what makes my issue newsworthy?" "How can I make this interesting to someone outside my agency?"

If you want to raise awareness on an important topic, then you may have to make news where none exists. Want to assert your agency's leadership in helping low income people? Offer a workshop in financial literacy or establish a tax clinic at your agency during income tax season. Want to gain public support for child protection social workers? Create an annual award for service above the call of duty. Even if the media does not respond to your invitation to attend, you will have accomplished a good deal of your goal.

For an important event, try three press releases:

- One media advisory a week ahead of time alerting all media in your media market, or two weeks if your primary audience is a weekly
- A second media advisory one a day, or one week, ahead of time,
- A "day of" release, written as if it's a newspaper article covering the event, including quotes.

For an announcement that is not tied to an event, a press release to all media is in order. Make sure you are available to take reporter calls after the release (don't send it out and then go on vacation ... you'll only frustrate your reporters!)

For more information along these lines, see Chapter 1, "About the Media."

How to Write a Press Release

A press release always includes the *who*, *what*, *where*, and *when* and it sometimes includes the *why*. Unlike other kinds of writing, press releases are written so that the most important points are at the top, and the detail are given below.

- Make the headline short and catchy.
- The lead statement, that is, the first paragraph, should capture the main point of the release.
- A short quote that encapsulates an important point or thought should appear in the second or third paragraph.
- Include a contact name and phone number for reporters to call. If there is one phone number for the public to call, perhaps to inquire about a program, and a different phone number for reporters to get their story, make that clear.
- Keep paragraphs short, and keep the release to one page or two at the most.
- Morning is the best time to send out a press release.

Here's a sample media advisory and a sample press release:

Sample Press Release

YOUR LETTERHEAD
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Date: XX/XX/XX
Media contact name and number: XXX-XXXX

May is the Time to Honor Foster Parents and Foster Kids

CITY: May is Foster Care Month, which means it is time to remember and honor the children who live in foster care, and the wonderful adults who care for them.

X County has X foster children, and the state of North Carolina has almost 10,000.

QUOTE FROM DIRECTOR, SOMETHING ALONG THESE LINES: "It's tough to be a foster child." said YOUR DIRECTOR. "We love getting foster parents who can be compassionate and provide a sense of stability to these kids in crisis."

[GIVE ONE, TWO OR THREE EXAMPLES OF GREAT FOSTER PARENTS, SOMEONE WHO HAS AGREED TO TALK TO MEDIA. FOR A BETTER RELEASE, INCLUDE QUOTES FROM THEM ABOUT WHAT IT MEANS TO THEM TO BE FOSTER PARENTS.]

Foster parents must be at least 21 years old and get 30 hours of training. They must pass a criminal background check and submit their home to inspection. A stipend is available to cover the child's expenses.

Adults wanting more information about becoming a foster parent can call the X County Department of Social Services at XXX-XXXX or NC Kids at 1-877-NCKIDS-1. Or go to www.dhhs.state.nc.us/dss/c_srv/cserv_fostercare.htm

Sample Media Advisory

YOUR LETTERHEAD
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Date: XX/XX/XX
Media contact name and number: XXX-XXXX

MEDIA ADVISORY

Many Groups Gather on Hunger Awareness Day to Fight Hunger

CITY -- Members of North Carolina's Food Security Network, a collaboration of many agencies who work to fight hunger, will be available tomorrow for interviews to commemorate National Hunger Awareness Day.

The group is meeting at the Raleigh Food Bank to help sort food donations.

TIME: June 5, 11 a.m.

WHERE: Raleigh Food Bank, 3808 Tarheel Drive (919-875-0707)

WHO: Marilyn Carpenter, USDA, Wilbert Morris, NC Division of Social Services, Audrey Edmisten, NC Division of Aging, Alice Lenihan, NC Division of Public Health, Earline Middleton, Raleigh Food Bank

BACKGROUND:

It is estimated that 196,000 people in North Carolina are hungry from time to time. More than 600,000 are considered to be food insecure, that is, they often must choose between buying food or another necessity of life.

Many people who qualify for food stamps do not participate in the program. They may not know about it, or they may feel it carries a social stigma.

Programs that address hunger include food stamps, WIC, food banks, school lunch and breakfast programs, summer food programs and home-delivered meals.

People who feel they may qualify for federal programs can go to their county department of social services (or, for WIC, to their public health department).

To find a food bank distribution center near you in North Carolina, visit www.secondharvest.org. Or, you can contact the food bank in Raleigh at 919-875-0707 and they can point you to the nearest food bank location.

Keep track of your champions

Sometimes you get tired of the sound of your own voice. If you are the only proclaiming what a good job you're doing, it will start to sound hollow at some point. That's why it's a good idea to keep track of other folks who know what a good job you do, and let them help you get your message out from time to time.

Who could that be?

Clients

When someone you helped off welfare, an adoptive family, a foster parent, a child support client, or a foster child who's grown to adulthood sings your praises, their words ring true. Your clients' stories carry the most weight of all. If they're happy with your agency, ask them if they would be willing to talk to a reporter at some point about their experiences. Then keep their name and telephone number on file, and you'll have it handy the next time there's a reporter call or you do a press release on that topic.

Advocates

Advocates who work on behalf of the people you serve can be strong allies. Even if they are sometimes critical of your agency, it's important to ally yourself with advocates who have the same basic goals as you, whether that's keeping children safe or helping people leave welfare.

Partners

Your relationships with law enforcement, mental health, health care providers, guardians ad litem, the courts and other partners help make your agency effective. These folks have the inside scoop on how hard your agency works and the good things you do. See if the head of one of your partner agencies would be willing to supply a quote for a press release. Help reporters to understand your working relationship with other agencies. (Do not make the mistake, however, of telling a reporter who to interview. Nobody likes to be told how to do his or her job!)

Be a community advocate

No place is as busy as a social services office. The work of a social services department is complex, tiring and neverending. How can you take on the role of community advocate on top of everything else?

You're already doing it. Forsyth County works tirelessly to help low income households claim their Earned Income Tax Credit. Caldwell County has developed an outreach campaign to publicize the Safe Surrender Law and try to prevent infant homicides. Catawba County hosts an Affordable Housing Summit and a Hidden Faces of Poverty Tour so that community movers and shakers can see first-hand critical needs in the community, and as a result, make better decisions for this population. These are only examples of the many such projects going on across the state.

One opportunity all counties have is to participate in your community health assessment. Your county goes through a community health assessment every four years. Your local Healthy Carolinians Partnership and the local health department provide leadership in this initiative. This assessment is a process by which community members gain an understanding of the health, concerns and health care systems of the community. The assessment identifies, collects, analyzes, and disseminates information on community assets, strengths, resources, and needs. Be sure you are at the table when this happens! You bring a vital perspective to the table, as a voice to vulnerable populations. Help other agencies understand the resources you bring and better understand the resources available to your clients. These assessments result in exciting and successful collaborations and creative solutions in communities across the state. More information is available at <http://www.healthycarolinians.org/assess.htm>

No such project should be undertaken as a public relations ploy. If your heart isn't in it, you'll only make a lot of noise and anger a lot of people, and in the end won't be very successful. But do realize that, as the Social Services Department, your leadership in championing certain causes can do a lot to both boost morale in your agency and reassure the public about your commitment and caring.

PR and Customer Service

What's your reputation? How does the public feel about your agency? How do your clients feel?

The link between customer service and public relations became very clear in the recent creation of a child support central collection system. Problems with incorrect information in the database were compounded because the phone system did not allow child support clients to find out what was going on or to provide the information to correct their case files.

An unfortunate situation was made much, much worse. The resulting press coverage was unrelenting and unforgiving.

A commitment to good customer service really pays off. The following suggestions are part of the NC Department of Health and Human Services customer service policy. Consider incorporating them into your agency's policy.

- Please remember that when "the telephone rings three, it rings for thee." Answering the telephone is every employee's responsibility throughout the Department of Health and Human Services. As a general rule, telephones should be answered within three rings and it becomes each employee's job to answer it.
- When answering the telephone, use a friendly, professional manner. Your greeting is the first thing heard by callers, you are setting an example and making the first impression for the Department. Speak distinctly, with a warm welcoming tone. Let your caller know which office he or she is talking with, by identifying the division/agency and telling him or her your name. Imagine that you are the caller, and answer in the way that you would want to be treated.
- Callers should not be transferred directly to a voice mailbox without first asking the caller if that's okay. Give the caller the correct telephone number and the name of the person to whom he or she should talk. Briefly explain to the caller why you are unable to assist him or her yourself.
- When you initially put a caller on hold, never leave him or her on hold for more than thirty seconds.
- You may have a caller who speaks limited English or another language. Create a plan for handling those calls and make sure everyone in your agency knows it.
- Voice mail personal greetings shall be professional, kept current, and updated when necessary. Personal greetings shall indicate the staff member's name, position, frequency with which messages will be checked, and a provision for

contacting someone in person. Voice mail shall be checked frequently and calls shall be returned promptly. Voice mail shall be used in accordance with the voice mail guidelines.

- Your personal greeting for your voice mailbox should be current and updated daily. It should tell callers when you're going to be out of the office and unable to return phone calls. Let callers know when you will return calls and always give them an option of someone else whom they may call.
- Always return phone calls promptly. Callers may get very frustrated when they leave a message and do not receive a response in a timely manner. If the caller's message will require a lengthy follow-up but you don't immediately have the time and/or the answer, place a short phone call to let him/her know that you have received the message and will call back to talk more fully later.

For a full copy of the NC DHHS customer service policy, go to <http://info.dhhs.state.nc.us/olm/manuals/dhs/pol-40/man>.

Calendar of suggested PR activities

January

- Hold a volunteer appreciation reception to honor all the community volunteers who help you out.
- Children's Services Heroes: Give an award or simply highlight the important work that your child protection staff does.

February

- Heating—Hold a media event inviting reporters to come to the home of a family which has received LIEAP assistance. Have statistics handy on how many families you help.
- Valentine's Day press release (theme could be adoption, foster children, dads who support their kids. Hint, send out before so papers have time to cover it on the actual day.)
- "Happy Birthday George" party: Seniors Morning Out. Party in honor of George Washington's birthday, with patriotic theme. Bingo and prizes, breakfast buffet, special music, bag lunches to take home. Part of congregate meal program (suggested by Catawba County Social Services Department)

March

- Put on a March to Work job fair with your community college and Employment Security Commission.
- Caldwell County holds a Social Worker luncheon for Social Work Month, not only for social services workers, but for all in the county. The luncheon honors the way we all work together for families, with speakers and souvenirs.
- Bike Rodeo and Car Seat Safety Inspection: The Catawba Adoption Unit and Foster Parent Association give away bike helmets and teach how to properly put car seats in a car. Invite a representative of a local safety organization to offer a car safety seat inspections and replace those that didn't pass at no charge.

April

- Child Abuse Prevention Month – work with your Prevent Child Abuse affiliate to highlight the need to report suspected abuse. Sign onto their blue ribbon campaign and ask all your employees participate.

- Child Support Amnesty week – if your office does child support enforcement, participate in this activity that is increasingly becoming a useful tool to collect support (held sometime in April, May or June)
- Child care subsidies release – how help with child care keeps the welfare rolls down

May

- Older American's Month: Caldwell County holds a Celebration of Life in May to celebrate contributions of older adults. A half-day event is held at the county agricultural fairgrounds that includes information booths, health screenings, entertainment, door prizes, luncheon and gifts.
- Adoption parent appreciation tied to Mother's Day.
- Dare County designates May as Health Coverage Awareness Month, to increase awareness of Health Choice and Medicaid. They also host a health conference every spring inviting local health care providers to meet with staff to increase cooperation and understanding of programs.
- Caldwell County issues a press release on a mother in the Adolescent Parenting Program, to break stereotypes about teen moms and highlight the struggles they go through.
- Honor high school graduates from your foster care program and/or Adolescent Parenting Program.

June

- Paternity promotion: News release touting the ultimate father's day gift--- paternity.
- Enlist a car dealership to host an event on the dangers of leaving children in hot cars.
- Observe Hunger Awareness Day (<http://www.hungerday.org/>) with a food drive, or by helping out at a local soup kitchen. Host an event or put out a press release about a pressing food stamp issue (such as encouraging elderly to apply).

July

- Use summer festivals to promote foster care and adoption. Have a booth where you offer face painting and balloons, and have information handy on opportunities for foster care and adoption. Display the PALS book and the NC Kids toll-free number. If your booth has power and internet, bring a computer with the NC adoption website.

August

- Work with your school system to put Health Choice information into student packets.
- Press release on your Child Support Enforcement statistics
- Caldwell County holds a Back To School supply drive for children in foster care, the Adolescent Parenting Program, Work First, and other children in need. A drop box is located outside each major discount store. Churches are asked to donate book bags full of school supplies.

September

- Caldwell County does a “Laboring on Labor Day” with releases on Work First clients who are working and the employers who hire them.
- School social workers—News release talking about the role of school social workers.
- Caldwell County engages the local government cable show to discuss a different Adult Services program each year, including services for the blind, rest home supervision, in-home community block grants, CAP and other services.

October

- Domestic Violence Awareness Month: Partner with your domestic violence agency to highlight one aspect of this pervasive societal problem.
- Agency Open House: Invite the public for a tour of the facility and to learn about programs and services.

November

- Adoption Awareness Month—hold an adoption banquet to congratulate the newest families in your county. Hold an open house or fair to encourage people to consider foster child adoption.
- Energy Assistance—News release on what will be available and how to apply
- Caldwell County holds a “Hidden Faces of Poverty Tour,” a half day event that includes breakfast and lunch, and presentation on area poverty conditions and tour of spots of poverty in the county, as well as of service organizations who serve the county.

December

- When the annual Community Child Protection Team Report is delivered to your county commissioners, write a press release to highlight the important work of this group and highlight their findings.
- Promote the organizations who donate gifts to children and families in your caseload with op-ed pieces for the newspaper or press release.

Note: Thanks to all counties who shared some of the events that work for them. Any other counties who have ideas for great events, submit them to Lois.Nilsen@ncmail.net, and they can be included in the next version of the toolkit.

Tough Issues

When bad things happen involving your agency, whether a child has died, an employee has embezzled money, or a disgruntled client treats you as their personal punching bag, how you respond is at least as important as the facts in the case.

Hide from the media or act defensive, and your problems are only compounded. Show concern and be as forthright as possible, and the public is reassured.

Tips for communicating in a crisis

Crises are confusing, and the conditions are ripe for misinformation. Therefore, it is important that your agency speak with one voice. Coordination of communication is essential during a crisis. Choose one person to be your spokesperson, which could be the director. If it's not the director, realize that the spokesperson *must* have access to the top decision makers. This person also needs to be available and responsive to the media.

News releases and scheduled media briefings give reporters access to accurate information and high-level officials and field staff. They also allow you to take care of questions all at once.

If your agency made a mistake, admit it and tell how you are fixing the problem.

Never be argumentative, confrontational or lose your temper with a reporter.

Maintain a regular listing of emergency numbers, including after-hours numbers for members of the media and your staff.

The DHHS Public Affairs Office is a resource for you if you have questions about how to deal with a delicate situation. Contact Debbie Crane or Lois Nilsen at 919-733-9190.

The bottom line

Admitting a problem exists and describing how you are going to solve it are always better than being found out and having to defend yourself or your agency.

Under fire?

If an unflattering story about your agency or programs is in the media, you need to decide how to respond. Often the best response is silence, but not always. There are no magic formulas and no guarantees, but here are some guidelines:

Is the story basically true?

If the unflattering story tells the truth and the truth isn't pretty but also *can't be helped*, then leave it alone. Today's story is tomorrow's birdcage liner.

Is the story true but you're doing something about it?

This is the time to write a press release or call up the reporter who unearthed the story. Show how proactive your agency is being and above all avoid being defensive. Sometimes the media points out problems we didn't know we had, and we take the high road by thanking them for it.

Are two sides of the issue fairly presented, and you disagree with one of them?

This is the time to be silent.

Is there an unflattering, untrue statement or two in a basically positive story?

For television or radio, it's best to leave these alone. For print media, you can either leave these alone or write a letter to the editor. The tone of that letter is very important. Thank them for the coverage and mention the positive aspects. Follow up with a clarification on the information, but be sure to end on a positive note.

Is the story libelous, untrue, or irresponsible?

Does it incite dangerous behavior, such as refusing to call DSS to report child abuse? Most media are responsible, but rogue reporters and rogue publications exist. If the problem occurs in a major news source for your area, your response should be swift, reasoned, unemotional and unequivocal. That could be a letter to the editor, or to the owner of a television or radio station. If the problem occurs in a publication that is not a major news source, and if it's obvious that the publication has no commitment to fair coverage, do not respond directly. However, make sure you cultivate strong relationships with the remaining media in your area, as well as with your community advocates.

CPS Talking Points: New child abuse statistics

Child abuse and neglect is a tragedy every time it occurs.

By law, all North Carolina citizens have an obligation to report suspected child abuse and neglect to their local department of social services. Reports can be made anonymously.

Child abuse and neglect is not a just social services issue, it is a society issue, and a community issue. We need to respond as a community – providing preventative services in our schools, hospitals, places of work, houses of faith, private non-profit organizations, and the state and county agencies.

If numbers are high:

- Stress your commitment to investigating and preventing abuse.
- Discuss what you see as major contributors to abuse and neglect in your community ... substance abuse, domestic violence, economic stress, etc.
- Give the public a way to respond ... such as volunteering, reporting suspected abuse, lending a hand to a stressed-out parent.
- If you think your higher statistics are a result of increased vigilance on the part of the public in reporting, make that point. Praise the community for looking out for children.

If numbers are low:

- Give credit to any local heroes who are making a difference in your community. Is there a social worker, guardian ad litem, lawyer, or advocate you can praise?
- It's possible that the low numbers can be attributed to under-reporting. Talk about the need to make people more aware of their responsibility to report suspected abuse and neglect.

Don't forget to:

- Talk about prevention programs you have and their importance.
- Mention the work of your Community Child Protection Team.
- Discuss support systems in place in your community for parents who feel they are at the end of their rope.

CPS Talking Points: When a baby is abandoned

Tragedies like this baby's death can be prevented. It's called Safe Surrender.

The North Carolina General Assembly wisely passed a law making it legal for a woman to surrender her newborn to a responsible adult without fear of prosecution.

A hospital worker, a social worker, a law enforcement officer, and an emergency medical worker are all examples of responsible adults who are sure to know about this law. As the law is written, any responsible adult can receive a child under 7 days old.

Any adult who receives a surrendered child must protect that child and immediately call their county department of social services or law enforcement.

To any woman who is hiding a pregnancy and is hoping to hide a birth, please get prenatal care. Seek help from someone you trust to make good decisions, a family friend, or clergy. If you have no one to turn to, go to an institution that you can trust ... your health department, your social services department, or doctor. Plan for the birth, because giving birth alone could hurt you or your baby.

Most of all, if you do have a baby in secret, you can release it to a responsible adult. Do not leave your child alone to die.

Please help spread the word about this law.

When a baby who is released to an adult, the county department of social services becomes the child's legal guardian in the short term. After a short time, when authorities determine whether this is truly a surrendered child, an adoption will be arranged.

CPS Talking Points: When you're under fire for being too zealous in a certain case

In two out of three investigations of abuse or neglect, times, DSS finds no evidence of abuse or neglect, and the case is closed.

Child protective services workers are the hardest working people you will find. These are the folks who daily perform the difficult and unsavory task of following leads about suspected abuse or neglect. We require them to have superb judgment and nerves of steel, as well as handle large caseloads. For all this, they are very low paid. They do not make any more money if their caseload is larger.

Confidentiality precludes us from ever disclosing facts about a child abuse and neglect investigation, but rest assured that confidentiality does not mean DSS works in a vacuum or without oversight. No social worker can make a placement decision on his own. ALL decisions that DSS makes about placing a child must be upheld by a judge who has all the facts from both sides before making a decision.

By law, we are required to keep children with their families if at all possible, and, if that's not possible, the first placement option considered is always a relative.

If a social worker shows up at your door, they are investigating a claim of child abuse or neglect. Most citizens are cooperative with investigators. In two out of three investigations of abuse or neglect, DSS finds no evidence of abuse or neglect, and the case is closed. In many cases, DSS finds that a family needs resources or information on parenting and makes those available.

When a child is left in a hot car

Hot weather, hot cars and kids are a dangerous and potentially deadly combination.

In 2002, 25 children died in heat-related car deaths nationwide, according to the National Safe Kids Campaign. Yet child fatalities in hot cars is easily one of the most preventable causes of death.

It is never okay to leave a child alone in a car, even for a few minutes. Even with the windows cracked, it takes just a few minutes for interior temperatures to go from comfortable to hot enough to fry an egg.

Heat exhaustion can occur at temperatures above 90 degrees and heat stroke can occur when temperatures rise above 105 degrees. If not treated immediately, heat exhaustion can lead to heat stroke.

Make certain that empty cars are locked so young children can't wander into them and become trapped.

Public Records and Open Meetings

About Public Records

Although your client records are closed to the public (see the appendix with the Institute of Government bulletin on confidentiality in social services), the laws regarding just about everything else you produce is public record. You should bear that in mind when creating any document, including emails and drafts. If you're not prepared to see it in the newspaper, then don't produce it.

There are very few exclusions to the public record law. Major exclusions include: attorney/client discussions, confidential patient/ health records and most personnel records.

Contrary to common belief, there is no exclusion for draft documents. Stamping draft on a document does not mean you don't have to give it to members of the media.

You also can't control the way a public record is used. You are not allowed to ask a reporter why he or she wants a particular document. If it is public record, then it is their right to request it without having to explain how it will be used.

North Carolina has made a concerted effort to make electronic records public as well. If you maintain a record electronically, then a reporter can request the electronic version and you are required to give it to him. You will be required to remove any fields that contain confidential information.

The law requires that you give a document the way you prepared it. You don't have to crunch numbers into a form that doesn't currently exist for a reporter. You are only required to give him or her what you have, in the form you have it, and he or she can crunch his own numbers. Once again, the law and public relations differ. If it is a fairly simple process to do, you might consider crunching the numbers as a way to build trust and rapport with a reporter.

The public records law also says that agencies are required to make requested records available in a timely basis. You should respond as quickly as possible. The faster you respond, the more open you appear. Some reporters over-interpret the public records law, making outrageous demands. If a reporter calls at 5 p.m. on a Tuesday and makes a lengthy public records request demanding that it must be filled by close of business on Tuesday, you have the right to explain that the public

records law says "timely" fashion. Negotiate with a reporter about when he can expect to receive the documents.

You cannot make a profit from public records. You can charge for the copy/paper costs of a document, but not for the labor involved in copying or producing the document. In other words, you can charge the amount you paid for the computer disc; you can't charge for the data entry operator's time. You can charge for the paper/copy machine costs; you can't charge for the time of the administrative assistant who ran the copies.

If confidential information is commingled with requested nonconfidential information, you must separate, or redact ("white-out" or mark out) the confidential information at the agency's expense.

If you are short-staffed, you might want to make records and a copying machine available and let the reporter fulfill his or her own request.

Public Records Laws

N.C. Gen. Stat. § 132-1. "Public records" defined.

(a) "Public record" or "public records" shall mean all documents, papers, letters, maps, books, photographs, films, sound recordings, magnetic or other tapes, electronic data-processing records, artifacts, or other documentary material, regardless of physical form or characteristics, made or received pursuant to law or ordinance in connection with the transaction of public business by any agency of North Carolina government or its subdivisions. Agency of North Carolina government or its subdivisions shall mean and include every public office, public officer or official (State or local, elected or appointed), institution, board, commission, bureau, council, department, authority or other unit of government of the State or of any county, unit, special district or other political subdivision of government.

(b) The public records and public information compiled by the agencies of North Carolina government or its subdivisions are the property of the people. Therefore, it is the policy of this State that the people may obtain copies of their public records and public information free or at minimal cost unless otherwise specifically provided by law. As used herein, "minimal cost" shall mean the actual cost of reproducing the public record or public information.

N.C. Gen. Stat. § 132-1.4. Criminal investigations; intelligence information records.

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(1) Records of investigations of alleged child abuse shall be governed by Article 29 of Chapter 7B of the General Statutes.

Open Meetings

Under North Carolina law (NC Gen. Stat. Section 143-318.1 to 143.318.8) some meetings must be open to the media. The Open Meetings Law applies to official meetings conducted by elected bodies or by many bodies appointed by elected officials. If quorums of those bodies are together to conduct public business (i.e. anything other than a social purpose), then the meeting must be open to the public. You should be very careful about the social purpose exclusion. In the past, public officials have used that purpose to skirt the law. Social means no talking business. If you talk business, then that becomes an official meeting that must be open.

The law allows for the meeting to be adjourned to closed or executive session for several limited reasons--things like conferring with attorneys, discussing personnel issues or the purchase of property. The body can only discuss those issues in executive session; the board must take any votes in a public session open to the media. The body must produce a general account of the closed session so that the public may understand what happened.

Many of the meetings you are involved with probably don't fall under the definition of meetings required to be open to the media. Internal discussions, staff meetings, meetings with advocacy groups (unless they contain a majority of an elected or appointed board) are not required to be open.

Meetings of appointed bodies like the Health Services or Social Services commissions are required to be open. If you or your staff is meeting with a majority of the members of a town council, county commission, local DSS board or local board of health, then that meeting is open.

Although you aren't required to open up meetings that don't fall under the law to reporters, you should consider allowing a reporter to attend a meeting if he or she asks. Many times a reporter will try to tell you that meetings with advocacy groups and the like are "open meetings." They aren't, but for p.r. reasons you may want to open them. Be sure and explain to the reporter that the meeting doesn't fall under the open meetings law, but you want to be as open as possible and that's why you're letting him or her attend.

If you have legal questions about the Open Meetings Law, you should contact your agency's attorney.