

ADVOCATING FOR VICTIMS WITH THE MEDIA

Media coverage of crime greatly influences public perceptions about victims. As reporters rush to meet deadlines, particularly in the immediate aftermath of crimes, their reporting may not reflect the desired sensitivity to traumatized victims. Because many reporters do not receive training about how to interact with victims, you have an opportunity to help them approach crime stories with sensitivity. As a victim advocate who understands the perspective of victims and knows what reporters need to include in their stories, you play a key role in advocating for victim-sensitive coverage of crime.

Tips for Reporters

In writing news stories about crime, reporters have the difficult task of seeking interviews from victims and conducting those interviews in an ethical manner when victims agree to speak. Advocates can help reporters prepare to speak with victims by offering suggestions about how to approach victims so that they feel comfortable and safe. Educate reporters on how to approach crime victims by sharing the following guidelines.¹

Asking for the Interview

- Recognize that the victim may be coping with shock and trauma.
- Approach the victim initially without equipment – notebooks, tape recorders, cameras, and lights – and try to make a human connection.
- Introduce yourself as a reporter, give the victim your name and title, and briefly explain what you hope to achieve with your story.
- Express concern for the victim by saying, “I am sorry for what happened to you” or “I am sorry for your loss.”
- Ask victims how they would prefer to be addressed, and observe that preference in all of your questions.
- Give the victim a reason to speak with you by explaining the purpose of the story, the fact that it will be published, and why the victim’s participation is important.
- Tell the victim how much time you need and observe that time limit.
- Courteously accept the victim’s refusal if he or she is unwilling to be interviewed.
- If the victim declines, express interest in a future interview, leave a business card, or send an email with your contact information, and ask for the names of others who may be willing to speak.

¹ Bonnie Bucqueroux and Anne Seymour, *A Guide for Journalists Who Report on Crime and Crime Victims*, (Washington, DC: Justice Solutions, 2009), 2-10, accessed November 20, 2018, www.mediacrimevictimguide.com/journalistguide.pdf.



Logistics and Other Considerations

- Make the victim comfortable – offer a chair or suggest a comfortable, safe place to talk.
- Respect the victim’s space – because people experiencing trauma often do not want to be touched, hand the microphone to the victim and explain how to adjust it.
- Ask permission to record the interview.
- Clarify ground rules – explain that anything the victim says may be used in the interview.

Victim Advocacy during Interviews

With the help of victim advocates, reporters can approach the interview with sensitivity toward the victim and the understanding that he or she may be undergoing trauma associated with the crime. Advocates who are present during the interview may step in if the reporter’s questions become too invasive or difficult or if the victim seems to become upset. By making the victim’s needs a priority, advocates can keep the interview on track and encourage the reporter to do so as well.

Tips for Victims

Advocating for victims with the media also includes helping victims decide whether to accept interviews, how to minimize invasions of their privacy, and how to exercise their rights and options in dealing with reporters. Advocates can also help victims anticipate questions and prepare how to answer them.

Before the Interview

By giving victims the following checklist of questions and walking through it with them, you can help victims decide whether to participate in an interview.

- **What are your goals in speaking to the media?** What purpose do you hope the interview will serve? Will it help the community learn more about your loved one or understand the impact of crime on victims? Are you willing to answer questions from reporters who might not understand your pain or your point of view?

- **Would the interview invade your privacy?** If you are still struggling with the emotional, physical, or financial impact of the crime, would speaking to a reporter disturb you or violate your privacy? You may want to discuss the pros and cons with a victim advocate before making your decision.
- **Does refusing the interview increase or decrease your control over what is published about the crime?** Denying an interview will not prevent publicity about your case. If the story is newsworthy, the media will publish the story with or without interviewing you. Also, an interview may provide you with an opportunity to offer your perspective on the crime.
- **Would you prefer that someone else speak for you?** If you would rather not be interviewed, you may ask someone else – an attorney, a victim advocate, a clergy member, a family member, or a friend – to represent you in media interviews. That person can also release written statements on your behalf or accompany you to interviews if you decide to accept them.
- **Would granting an interview affect the investigation or prosecution of the crime?** Giving an interview may compromise the investigation or prosecution of a crime. You may want to speak with an advocate or an attorney before deciding to grant an interview.
- **Do you want to set conditions for the interview?** Although reporters and producers may not agree to the conditions you suggest, they will most likely comply with reasonable requests if they want your interview. You have the right to ask or express your wishes regarding:
 - » Time and location of the interview
 - » Visiting the set or location before an interview



- » Advance information about questions, the reporter’s angle, or plans for using your interview
 - » Requesting that a victim advocate, lawyer, or support person be present
 - » Issues you will not discuss
 - » Requesting a specific reporter or producer
 - » Protecting your identity (through silhouettes and electronic distortion of your voice)
 - » Excluding children and other family members from the interview
 - » Excluding photos and other images you find offensive
 - » Excluding offenders or other participants to whom you might object
- You may request a correction if the article is inaccurate or you are quoted out of context. Newspapers and other outlets may publish corrections and television news may correct serious errors (although the option to do so is theirs). You can also contact management at the news outlet prior to publication or broadcast if the reporter was aggressive, insensitive, or obtained information dishonestly.
 - You may refuse a follow-up interview, even if you have previously agreed to be interviewed a second time.

Victim advocates can play a key role in mediating between reporters and victims, especially when victims feel vulnerable and stressed. The victim, his or her family, and the wider community have an important interest in ensuring that media coverage is sensitive, accurate, and does not put the victim under duress or at risk.

Preparing Victims for the Interview

Share the following tips with victims who agree to interviews:

- Bring a trusted individual to provide support.
- Prepare for the interview by having an advocate list questions the reporter may ask and rehearsing responses.
- Refuse to answer a question by:
 - » Polite refusal: “I’m sorry, but I don’t want to talk about that.”
 - » Bridging: Change the subject to what YOU want to talk about. Answer by saying, “What is really important about that issue is...” and then talk about what you think the audience should know.
- Never speak “off the record.” Reporters may publish or broadcast anything you say.
- If you don’t know the answer to a question, simply say you don’t know. Don’t guess or speculate.

