



HOWARD COUNTY SHERIFF'S OFFICE

GENERAL ORDER ADM-07 CORRESPONDENCE & CONFIDENTIALITY

EFFECTIVE JULY 13, 2009

This General Order contains the following numbered sections:

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I. POLICY¹

The Howard County Sheriff's Office (HCSO) shall promote timely, professional, and effective communication both internally and externally, and will ensure the confidentiality of all sensitive information. All external communication shall properly represent the Office and the Sheriff. Members of the public have a right to security and privacy, and information officially obtained shall not be improperly divulged.

II. CONFIDENTIALITY²

- A. Safeguarding information about an individual or group that has been obtained in the course of law enforcement duties or an official investigation is a key obligation of HCSO employees. No information shall be maintained or transmitted to another about the private life of any individual which does not specifically relate to the violation of laws.
- B. Security and privacy of information shall be assured to all individuals who communicate with the Office. Such records shall be used for official law enforcement purposes only. Information regarding individuals shall not be processed or integrated with other record systems except to inform criminal justice agencies on matters pertaining to violations of law.
- C. Special consideration will be given to safeguard any medical-related information obtained in the course of official HCSO duties. Consistent with HIPAA privacy regulations, any information obtained from health plans, pharmacies, hospitals and other covered entities that may include patients' personal medical information must be treated in the strictest of confidence, whether it is on paper, in computers, or communicated orally.
- D. Only those with a legitimate right shall have access to any official correspondence, police records, or criminal justice agency records or record system. Specifically, information contained in police records, other information ordinarily accessible only to employees, and names of complainants, witnesses, and other persons known to the HCSO, to include information received from NCIC, are considered confidential.

¹ CALEA 1.1.2

² CALEA 1.1.2

- E. Whatever a member of this Office sees, hears, or learns through the course of their employment will be kept confidential unless the performance of duty or legal provision requires otherwise.
- F. A violation of the security of any type of confidential information reflects misconduct and is therefore a violation of this General Order.

III. EXTERNAL CORRESPONDENCE³

- A. Official HCSO correspondence (including faxes and e-mails) is designed to enhance Office communication and to conduct Office related business. No form of misuse or abuse of official correspondence will be permitted.
- B. External correspondence representing the Office in any official capacity is generally sent by the Sheriff or his designee.
- C. All matters stating the policy of the Office's position on any topic will be issued ONLY under the signature of the Sheriff or his designee.
- D. The following persons are authorized, by the Sheriff, to use HCSO letterhead for external correspondence under their own signature:
 - 1. Chief Deputy (Major);
 - 2. Division Commanders (Lieutenants);
 - 3. Education & Training Coordinator;
 - 4. Deputies designated for background checks; and
 - 5. Designated Civilian Supervisors
- E. External correspondence by members, other than the Sheriff, shall be limited to the following, as it pertains to the component issuing the correspondence:
 - 1. Informational requests;⁴
 - 2. Acknowledging information received;
 - 3. Appreciation for general/specific incidents;
 - 4. Coordination with a similar component within another law enforcement agency concerning matters of mutual concern (e.g., meeting invitations, document service, warrant service, expungements, etc.);
 - 5. Any other letter in which the Sheriff has approved the content; and
 - 6. Responses to complaints/inquiries and community issues.
- F. Members shall be held accountable for the content of their correspondence, including faxes and e-mails. Supervisors and Commanders are responsible for determining that all correspondence control procedures are followed. Confidential and law enforcement sensitive documents shall not be disseminated.

IV. PREPARING & RECEIVING CORRESPONDENCE⁵

- A. Use of Office letterhead or e-mail must be ethical, lawful, consistent with the goals and mission of the HCSO, and must not compromise the integrity or security of the Office's information systems. Use for private personal gain, to make contacts for personal gain, or for any illegal or unethical purpose is prohibited.

³ CALEA 11.4.2

⁴ CALEA 54.1.1

⁵ CALEA 11.4.2

- B. Fraudulent, obscene, or harassing materials and messages are prohibited. This includes, but is not limited to:⁶
 - 1. Sexual harassment;
 - 2. Intimidation; and
 - 3. Any other action prohibited by federal, state or county law or by policy.
- C. Only designated recipients and those authorized by the designated recipients may read Office correspondence (including e-mail or fax messages) sent to or received by another member. All members are responsible for maintaining the confidentiality of all correspondence.
- D. The Administrative Assistant to the Office of the Sheriff shall open any mail not clearly addressed to a specific component or individual and will forward it to the appropriate person or component.
- E. Copies of all external correspondence will be retained by either the writer or within a folder maintained by the appropriate Division/Section. The system by which members will retain both hard copies and electronic copies of correspondence shall be consistent with the County's retention schedule and Office administrative procedures established by Supervisors and Commanders.
- F. All external correspondence received shall be stamped, indicating the date it was received. Electronic correspondence does not have to be date stamped.
- G. All correspondence shall be complete, accurate, and timely.
- H. When preparing correspondence, the composer is to indicate his/her initials at the bottom of the document. This "identification line" shall contain the initials of the writer, composer, or typist. The following guidelines are to be used:
 - 1. The writer and composer's initials shall be typed in upper case characters. The typist's initials shall be typed in lower case.
 - 2. The identification line for a letter should be two spaces after the signature and title line. For a memo, the identification line should be two spaces below the last paragraph.
- I. All response correspondence shall be completed within fourteen (14) days.
- J. All response correspondence prepared for the authorized signature shall be completed using the official letterhead.
- K. Responses prepared for the Sheriff's signature will be submitted to the Sheriff through the respective member's Chain of Command.
- L. The address used on HCSO letterhead should represent the sender's appropriate office location.
- M. Related documents (e.g. original letter prompting a response, etc.) will be submitted with the correspondence. All enclosures shall be noted, along with distribution.
- N. All correspondence will be spell checked and proofread prior to release.

V. ELECTRONIC CORRESPONDENCE

- A. The Office encourages the use of electronic messaging to speed responses to and the dissemination of vital information. However, under the Federal Electronic Communications Privacy Act of 1986, internet and e-mail users have no expectation of privacy. Therefore, members must be mindful of the information they release via e-mail.

⁶ CALEA 26.1.3

- B. When corresponding electronically (e.g., the Internet or Outlook e-mail), the rules for authorization from Section III above shall apply.
- C. The following matters will not be addressed or responded to externally using an electronic format:
 - 1. Establishing police policy or formally stating the Office's position on a significant issue;
 - 2. Addressing personnel disciplinary actions; and
 - 3. No information on active criminal investigations or internal affairs matters may be sent via e-mail without the express permission of the appropriate Division Commander.
- D. All correspondence, including files and documents produced, transmitted, or received on any Office-owned electronic messaging system, is the property of the Office.
- E. Deputies shall check their Outlook mailbox A MINIMUM of once a shift.⁷
- F. Other members within the Office shall check their Outlook mailbox A MINIMUM of twice during their shift, preferably in the beginning and once again towards the end of the shift.⁸ Exceptions may exist for training, meetings, and computer access problems.
- G. All members shall reply promptly to Outlook and/or e-mail messages.
- H. Ultimately, the latest version of the Howard County Policy on Communication shall supersede this General Order.

VI. TELEPHONE COMMUNICATION & ELECTRONIC MESSAGING

- A. Transmission of electronic messages and data will be treated with the same degree of propriety, professionalism, and confidentiality as official written correspondence.
- B. Office cell phones are issued to personnel whose assignments require them to be readily accessible. Except while on approved leave or in training at a remote location, it will be the responsibility of the Office member to ensure that the cell phone is on, is working properly, that it has a good battery charge, and that it is readily accessible. Members assigned an Office cell phone shall set up a voicemail account and will check the messages A MINIMUM of twice a day. Response to the messages will be prompt.
- C. Members are advised that they do NOT have any right to privacy in regards to any HCSO issued equipment or phone lines.
- D. Consistent with current County policy, and within legal limitations, the Office reserves the right to monitor the operation and use of all communications systems.
- E. Accessing or transmitting materials (other than as required for criminal investigative purposes) that involves the use of obscene language, images, sexually explicit materials, or messages that disparage any person, group, or classification of individuals is prohibited.
- F. All personnel shall check their voicemail A MINIMUM of twice a shift, preferably in the beginning and once again towards the end. Deputies will respond promptly to voicemail messages.
- G. If the member's telephone is equipped with a voicemail notification light, the member shall promptly check the voicemail once the light is activated.
- H. If a member is unavailable to receive calls, he shall leave a recorded message on his voicemail with instructions on how to reach either the Duty Officer or the phone extension of another member who can assist the caller.

⁷ CALEA 12.1.4

⁸ CALEA 12.1.4

- I. During their days off or if the member will be out for any extended period of time, he shall change his recorded message to reflect the expected date of his return and a phone extension of a person the caller can contact in his absence. If the phone group allows Dial 0 to reach the designated office, it shall be included in the voicemail message.
- J. If a member will be off work for an extended period of time, he shall indicate his absence in an Outlook automated response message. The response message will indicate the estimated date of return and the name and contact number of the most appropriate alternative contact.
- K. Ultimately, the latest version of the Howard County Policy on Communication shall supersede this order.

VII. COMPLIMENTARY CORRESPONDENCE FROM CITIZENS

- A. When correspondence is received thanking, complimenting, or commending a member for performing tasks in a courteous, efficient, or expedient manner, an appropriate response will be prepared for the Sheriff's signature.
- B. Whenever complimentary correspondence is received directly by a member, he will forward it to his supervisor for review and appropriate response.
- C. Distribution of the correspondence and response shall be as follows:
 - 1. A copy to the member involved;
 - 2. A copy for the member's personnel file;
 - 3. A file copy kept at the Division level; and
 - 4. A copy for the member's supervisor.

VIII. VERBAL & INTERDEPARTMENTAL COMPLIMENTS

- A. Verbal compliments received by telephone shall be documented. The person taking the call should explain to the caller that their compliment will be documented and forwarded to the affected member's supervisor.
- B. Verbal compliments will be documented by the person receiving them and will be forwarded to the supervisor of the member being complimented.
- C. Whenever a supervisor wishes to commend or recognize a member for exemplary performance, he may issue the member a Memorandum of Recognition.
- D. Personnel are also encouraged to provide documented feedback to a supervisor when they observe noteworthy performance by other personnel.

IX. COMPLAINT CORRESPONDENCE⁹

All written responses to a complaint will be prepared for the Sheriff's signature, in conjunction with the following guidelines:

- A. When responding to a specific inquiry or issue, restate the issue before stating the response.
- B. Responses will be courteous, respectful and sensitive, regardless of the tone of the complainant's letter.
- C. Responses shall explain the reasoning behind any action or any proposed action to be taken.
- D. All correspondence will be carefully reviewed for appropriate verbiage, conciseness, and proper grammar.

⁹ CALEA 52.2.4

X. ADDRESSING DIGNITARIES

All correspondence addressed to elected officials and dignitaries will use the following titles:

- A. County Executive, County Council Members, Judges: "The Honorable (County Executive, Council Member, or Judge's full name)"
- B. When addressing police or military officers, the officer's full rank and name shall be used (e.g., Major George Voll, Chief Deputy).

XI. RESPONSES TO ELECTED OFFICIALS

- A. Requests from elected officials will be coordinated through the Office of the Sheriff. Written responses to elected officials will be prepared on approved letterhead for the Sheriff's signature within fourteen (14) days of receipt.
- B. Contacts from the staff members of elected officials may be handled by the appropriate Division Office, except for issues of policy.
- C. At the discretion of the Sheriff, informal responses may be completed via e-mail.

XII. CANCELLATION

This General Order cancels and replaces General Order ADM-07, Office Correspondence, dated December 1, 2003.

Authority:

James F. Fitzgerald
Sheriff