

REQUEST FOR BOARD ACTION

HENDERSON COUNTY BOARD OF COMMISSIONERS

MEETING DATE: June 19, 2024

SUBJECT: Henderson County Communications Policy

PRESENTER: Amy Brantley, Assistant County Manager

ATTACHMENTS: Yes
1. DRAFT Communications Policy

SUMMARY OF REQUEST:

Staff are in the process of reviewing policies and procedures included in the County's Administrative Manual to ensure compliance and that all policies are up to date. At the April 1, 2024 meeting, the Board authorized Staff to rescind Tab 26 – Television Cablecast Policies and Procedures and Tab 38 – Internet Broadcasting Policies and Procedures, and to incorporate information contained within into Tab 37 – Communications Policy to streamline the location of this information.

The revised Communications Policy is attached, and presented to the Board for adoption.

BOARD ACTION REQUESTED:

The Board is requested to adopt the revised Communications Policy as presented.

Suggested Motion(s):

I move the Board adopt Communications Policy as presented.



Communications Policy

Title: Communications Policy
Owner Department: County Manager
Original Creation Date: 05/05/2011
Effective: Not Set
Approved By: No Users



TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. BACKGROUND FOR POLICY3

II. DEFINITIONS.....3

III. PURPOSE.....3

IV. RESPONSIBILITIES4

V. POLICY.....4

VI. PROCEDURES.....9

VII. AUTHORITIES.....10

VIII. REFERENCES10

DRAFT



Communications Policy

I. Background for Policy

- A. External communication shall occur in accordance with the provisions of this policy and other relevant county policies, rules, regulations and ordinances.

II. Definitions

- A. **Communications Team** – The Henderson County Communications Team is comprised of the Chief Communications Officer and the Public Information Officer.
- B. **Chief Communications Officer** - Individual who serves as county government liaison to the media, state, federal agencies or programs, and civic and community groups.
- C. **Joint Press Release** – A statement prepared between Henderson County Government and one or more agencies, groups, or committees not directly affiliated with Henderson County Government for distribution to the press.
- D. **Media** – The term “media” refers to all individuals and organizations who maintain print, broadcast, or digital communication vehicles for public consumption. This definition includes newspapers, magazines, television, blogs, digital news sites, and other vehicles. The Public Information Officer will determine the creditability and validity of these media outlets.
- E. **Press Release** – Statement prepared and distributed to the press.
- F. **Non-Routine Media Requests** - A non-routine media request may include responses that require the interpretation of policy, employee records, public record request for detailed records, legal action, or emergency situations.
- G. **Public Information Officer (PIO)** – Individual who serves as county government liaison to the media, state, federal agencies or programs, and civic and community groups.
- H. **Routine Media Requests** – A routine media request seeks basic information such general information about public events offered by libraries, parks, etc.; seeking general information about programs or services offered; or other requests seeking information that is readily available and non-controversial.

III. Purpose

- A. The Henderson County Communications Team is comprised of the Chief Communications Officer and the Public Information Officer. Henderson County seeks to inform its residents, businesses, and visitors by engaging in pro-active and interactive communications. Henderson County’s communications plan recognizes that the most effective and quickest methods to communicate County policies and activities to the public is by working in partnership with the traditional news media, while also directly communicating with constituents through digital media platforms, such as the County website. The Henderson County Government Communications Policy establishes efficient and standard procedures for:

- External Communication (oral/written) pertaining to media.
- Communication (oral and written) with citizens.



IV. Responsibilities

- A. The Henderson County Communications Team is responsible for the County's media relations. Discuss all non-routine media requests with the Communications Team prior to response. All county employees should notify the Communications Team about routine and non-routine media inquiries immediately following the request. Even routine requests can be used to contribute to a larger story that may be controversial. Therefore, it is important for employees to notify the Communications Team each time a media representative contacts them.

The Public Health Department, Department of Social Services, Sheriff's Department, Travel and Tourism and Cooperative Extension are not required to have press releases reviewed by the Communications Team unless the issue specifically requires the Board of County Commissioners to take action. However, all external communications should carbon copy the Communications Team.

Give inquiries from media outlets a high priority and respond to them as quickly and efficiently as possible. Make every effort to meet media deadlines and to ensure that all information released is accurate and uniform.

V. Policy

A. External Communications

1. Dissemination of Press Releases

There are events and announcements each year that Henderson County Government would like to release to the public. Any external mass communication that originates from a department, agency, or committee affiliated with Henderson County Government is an "official" Henderson County communication in the eyes of the recipient(s), thus certain standards must be followed. The Henderson County Communications Team is responsible for maintaining these standards.

The Henderson County Communications Team is ultimately responsible for the tone, quality and relevance of external communications. As such, individuals or groups employed by Henderson County Government must do the following:

- a) Use the standard Henderson County Press Release template.
- b) Insert your copy using fonts and sizes indicated on the template. Make sure you include (if applicable):
 - i. What is happening?
 - ii. When and where is the event taking place?
 - iii. Who is involved and/or invited?
 - iv. Where can individuals go for more information?
 - v. Quotes from key and/or responsible individuals.
- c) Omit needless words, jargon and subjective phrases (except as part of a quote). Summarize all essential information in the first paragraph. Press releases generally should not exceed one page in length.
- d) Review carefully for grammar, spelling and style.
- e) Submit your release, along with any attachments (e.g. photos), to the Public Information Officer.



- f) Upon receipt, the press release is reviewed and distributed to the appropriate media outlets. Editing by the Communications Team if required, will be approved by the submitting Department Head before distribution to ensure context accuracy. In the event of a joint press release, all above steps are required, but prior to submitting the press release to the Communications Team the joint agency/agencies will need to review and approve. The issuance of a press release does not guarantee publication. As traditional print media continues to shrink, less and less attention is given to events that have little news impact.

2. County Spokespersons

In most cases, there will be one spokesperson designated for response to each media inquiry. For countywide inquiries, the spokesperson will most often be the Communications Team. For department-related issues, the spokesperson will most often be the Department Head. The spokesperson will work directly with the PIO Communications Team to ensure that information for specific media requests is communicated appropriately.

Unless otherwise authorized, the County's spokespersons are:

- Chief Communications Officer
- Public Information Officer
- County Manager or Assistant County Manager
- Department Heads
- Sheriff and Emergency Management Director
- Members of the Board of Commissioners

Exceptions regarding departmental spokespersons is made at the discretion of the Department Head.

Refer all media inquiries received by other County staff, with the exception of routine media requests, immediately to the Communications Team, in addition to their Department Head. An appropriate response to the media would be, *"I'm sorry I don't have the full information regarding that issue. I will give your request to (Department Head or Communications Team) who will respond to you as soon as he/she is available."* Please gather the reporter's name/phone number and the topic of the story.

Under no circumstance is a spokesperson or County employee to speak to the media "off the record".

3. Sensitive and Controversial Issues

Sensitive or controversial issues often become headlines in the media and have the ability to go viral online. This provision provides the framework for the County's Communications Team to respond appropriately and as soon as possible to these issues.

Department Heads should notify the Communications Team immediately if a sensitive or controversial issue pertaining to operations of the County organization is identified. When an emergency occurs (i.e. those that will have an impact on a large number of



residents, could potentially generate great media interest, and those that involve high-profile individuals or organizations), County staff should immediately contact their Department Head when learning about any of these types of situations.

Department Heads should not wait until there is media interest before contacting the Communications Team. Immediate notification is critical in order for the Communications Team to prepare for and to respond to media inquiries. In a crisis, the County Manager or Assistant County Manager will communicate with the Communications Team, Board of Commissioners and the County Attorney.

Sensitive or Controversial Issues may include, but are not limited to:

- Issues that may affect the County's public image or citizen confidence.
- Potential threats to public safety, welfare, or property.
- Direct personnel issues regarding any County employee, such as performance evaluation, reasons for termination, reasons for not hiring, harassment claims and compensation to the Human Resources Department.
- Legal claims or lawsuits filed against Henderson County or any of its employees or agents.

Assess sensitive and controversial issues of interest to the media by asking the following:

- a) Is the issue a threat, existing or potential, to life, health or property?
- b) Can the issue be negatively interpreted and affect public confidence in or the opinion of Henderson County government?
- c) Is the issue of particular interest to the public?
- d) Are there legal ramifications, existing or potential, raised by the issue?
- e) Has more than one member of the media inquired about the same issue?
- f) Has someone threatened to go to the media about the issue?
- g) Is there unusual or inappropriate interest by a person or small group of people about a seemingly routine issue?

Legal Issues – Refer Inquiries regarding pending litigation or exposure to litigation to the County Attorney's Office.

Personnel Issues – Refer inquiries regarding personnel-related information to the Human Resources Department as well as the County Manager's Office. The Communications Team will coordinate a response with the County Manager's Office.

Elections Issues – Refer inquiries regarding election and campaign issues to the Board of Elections director. The Board of Elections director will contact the County Manager and Communications Team as appropriate.

Public Safety Issues – Procedures for handling the media during a major emergency (i.e. severe weather, chemical spill, large fire, etc.), are highlighted in the County's Emergency Operations Plan. The plan designates the Communications Team as the main point of contact for the media. The Sheriff, Emergency Medical Services and Emergency



Management departments operate 24/7 and their work generates a high volume of media calls. These departments have designated personnel as media spokespersons for routine public safety issues and follow specific guidelines when releasing information.

B. Communication with Citizens

Answer all telephone calls, electronic mail, and written correspondence promptly and in a professional and courteous manner in accordance with the Henderson County Government guidelines below.

1. Customer Service Policy for Telephones

Answering the telephone is every employee's responsibility throughout Henderson County Government. The best policy is to answer the telephone within three (3) rings. When answering the telephone, use a friendly, professional manner. Expectations in regards to citizen/customer telephone calls are as follows:

- a) When at all possible, have a human being answer the phone, not a machine. Use answering machines as back up, not primary answering points.
- b) Let the caller know which office he or she is speaking with by identifying the department/division and telling the citizen/customer your name.
- c) Make every effort to assist the caller at the point of first contact. If a referral is necessary, give the caller the option of receiving a return call from the proper person or receiving the telephone number of the proper person to call. To avoid the chance that the caller receive voicemail, the first option is preferred but allows the caller to determine what is best for them.
- d) Best policy is to return calls the day received. No call should go beyond the next workday without a return call. Calls referred to an employee by the County Manager's Office should become a priority and be returned within hours, but immediately if possible.¹
- e) Please try to resolve these contacts with the fewest number of calls practical. That means having the right person with the right expertise addressing the issue. It will not always be possible to resolve an issue in one call but that should be our objective.
- f) Courtesy, respect and patience should guide all of our interactions with our citizens/customers.

2. Customer Service Policy for Voicemail

Voicemail personal greetings shall be professional, kept current, and updated when necessary. Personal greetings should indicate the employee's name, position, the frequency of the voicemail monitoring, and a provision for contacting someone in person. Check voicemail frequently and return calls promptly.

¹ You will receive an e-mail from the County Manager's Office referring citizen/customer calls to you. The County Manager's Office will need a response from you when the call is returned, briefly describing the issue and its resolution.



3. Customer Service Policy for Electronic Mail (E-Mail)

Conduct all communication via e-mail in a professional and courteous manner. The e-mail response to internal and external customers should be clear, informative and timely. Never put anything in an e-mail message that might be viewed as offensive or inappropriate for the business environment. Remember that all information contained in the e-mail message is public information.² Expectations in regards to electronic mail are as follows:

- a) Check your electronic mailbox frequently for messages. It is your responsibility to check your electronic mailbox for messages the same way that you check your voicemail. Always read your e-mail messages carefully and respond in a timely manner.
- b) Use a letter (written correspondence) format with a salutation and a complimentary closing when responding to inquiries.
- c) Provide your name, position, department/division, and contact information (phone and office location) in the closing of your e-mail messages. Microsoft Office provides a "signature" feature to avoid unnecessary typing of this information with each message.
- d) Always check for spelling, punctuation, and formatting errors prior to sending the e-mail message. Take care to ensure that all responses provide the appropriate information to the customer by checking for consistency and accuracy.
- e) If you do not have an immediate answer and/or it may require a lengthier follow-up than normal, acknowledge receipt of the e-mail message, but note that you need additional time to research and respond.
- f) If the e-mail message requires a response from someone else, acknowledge that you have received the e-mail message and note that you are going to forward it to the appropriate person who should handle the request. Include the person's name and e-mail address in your e-mail response. Always include a closing sentence in your e-mail message giving them option to contact you if he or she needs additional assistance.
- g) Out of Office E-Mail Setup when you are going to be away from your office for one day or more, your e-mail should reflect that schedule. Use the "Out of Office Assistant" in Microsoft Outlook you should enter an automatic reply that states your schedule.
- h) Confidential E-Mail Correspondence that would require a response that could contain confidential information or if you need to attach documentation that is confidential, you should first respond to the e-mail message with a disclaimer statement. This statement would give the sender an option to have the information sent to them by regular mail through the U.S. Postal Service. An example of a disclaimer statement: The information that you are sending through the government e-mail address is public information. We can respond to your inquiry by e-mail but our response to you may contain confidential information. If you prefer a response by regular mail through the U.S. Postal Service, please submit your mailing address and specifically state that, your response should not be sent through our e-mail system.

² Please see Tab 22 "Information Technology Policy" of the Administrative Manual for additional information regarding acceptable use of electronic communication.



- i) For consistency across Henderson County government, sending out mass e-mails (or e-mail blasts) use Constant Contact. The Department Head or their designee should set up an account directly with Constant Contact (www.ConstantContact.com) using a Purchasing Card (PCard). The responsibility for coding invoices and working with Finance regarding all monetary issues for a Constant Contact account belongs to the Department Head or their designee.

4. Customer Service Policy for Written Communication

Conduct all communication via written correspondence in a professional and courteous manner. The written response to internal and external customers should be clear, informative and timely. Never put anything in a written message that could be viewed as offensive or inappropriate for the business environment. Write letters in a professional format with the standard style, font and size used by your individual departments and divisions.³ Expectations in regards to written communications are as follows:

- a. Proofread all written correspondence for spelling and punctuation, as well as consistency and accuracy.
 - i. Letters should include:
 - ii. Date
 - iii. Recipient's complete name and address
 - iv. Salutation
 - v. Response in the body of the letter
 - vi. Complimentary closing
 - vii. Typed signature
 - viii. Signed Signature
- b. The employee's name and telephone number should be contained in the body of the letter in order for the citizen/customer to call if additional information is needed or if they have additional questions.

^[1] You will receive an e-mail from the County Manager's Office referring citizen/customer calls to you. The County Manager's Office will need a response from you when the call is returned, briefly describing the issue and its resolution.

^[2] Please see Tab 22 "Information Technology Policy" of the Administrative Manual for additional information regarding acceptable use of electronic communication.

^[3] Individual departments and divisions are responsible for creating and maintaining their own letterheads. Please ensure that letterheads are current and up to date as addresses, phone numbers, positions and county logos change.

VI. Procedures

- A. No additional procedures

³ Individual departments and divisions are responsible for creating and maintaining their own letterheads. Please ensure that letterheads are current and up to date as addresses, phone numbers, positions and county logos change.



VII. Authorities

A. None

VIII. References

A. None

Draft