

## **A Victim's Guide to Speaking with the Media**

### **Why would the media want to talk to me?**

The media's job is to report on stories it thinks the public wants to know about. The media often report on crime. If you are a crime victim, the media may want to interview you. Journalists try to get the victim's side of the story to put a human face to a tragedy. They do this to help the public understand what it means to be a victim so their coverage is fair. You can decide if you want to give an interview or not. Being a victim does not mean you have to give up your right to privacy. It is a personal experience that does not have to be shared with the public. It's okay to say, "I don't want to say anything now."

The media is very resourceful and will often talk to anyone and everyone they can to get a story. Often times people who did not know the victim well or any of the circumstances surrounding his/her death, will make statements that are incorrect, based on rumors and exaggerated. This is very frustrating and painful for the family of the victim.

### **What rights do I have if I'm asked for an interview?**

- You have the right to grieve in privacy.
- You have the right to tell your story
- You have the right to give or refuse to give personal pictures
- You have the right to ask that offensive pictures not be used, although media may still use them
- You have the right to select the time and location for media interviews. Remember, the media is governed by deadlines. However, nobody should be subjected to a reporter arriving unannounced at the home of the victim's family.
- You have the right to request a specific reporter. Don't hesitate to request the reporter you feel will provide accurate and fair coverage of your story.
- You have the right to choose to have a friend, family member or victim advocate speak for you. You have the right to expect the media to respect your selection of spokesperson or advocate.
- You have the right to have someone else with you during the interview for support
- You have the right to release a written statement through a spokesperson.
- You have the right to exclude children from interviews
- You have the right to conduct an television interview using a silhouette or give a newspaper interview without having a photograph taken
- You have the right to ask to review a story before it appears, if there is time
- You have the right to know in advance the direction the story is going to take.
- You have the right to know what questions reporters will ask you, along with the right to veto any questions. This places you in partnership with the person covering the story. Be aware that many reporters will give you an idea of what he/she will ask you and then throw some curves during the interview.
- You have the right to hold a press conference to speak to all media at the same time. Some people find it less stressful to speak only once to all media. You may choose to limit the conference to your statement(s) or you may take questions & answers.

- You have the right to speak to only one reporter at a time. At a time when you are in a state of shock, a press conference can be confusing and emotionally draining. Some people find it less stressful to speak with one reporter at a time.
- You have the right to refrain from answering any questions with which you are uncomfortable or that you feel are inappropriate.
- You have the right to demand a retraction when inaccurate information is reported. All news mediums have methods of correcting inaccurate reporting or errors in stories.
- You have the right to say "no" to an interview. Never feel that because you have unwillingly been involved in an incident of public interest that you must personally share the details and/or your feelings with the general public.
- You have the right to say "no" to an interview even though you have previously granted interviews. It is important to remember that survivors of homicide victims often ride an "emotional roller coaster." You may be able to talk one day and then physically and emotionally unable the next day. You should never feel "obliged" to grant interviews under any circumstances.
- You have the right to refuse an interview with a specific reporter even though you have granted interviews to other reporters. You may feel that certain reporters are callous, insensitive, uncaring or judgmental. It is your right to avoid these journalists at all costs. However, be aware that the reporter may write the story regardless of your participation.
- You have the right to file a formal complaint against a reporter. A reporter's superior would appreciate knowing when his or her employee's behavior is unethical, inappropriate or abusive.
- You have the right at all times to be treated with dignity and respect by the media.
- From time to time, survivors will be given information about the crime which should not be released to the media or anyone else. Please respect the confidentiality of any information you receive in such circumstances.

### **What are the benefits of speaking to the media?**

News accounts of a specific crime may help law enforcement catch criminals and prevent others from becoming crime victims. The news can also change how the public sees crime. Media reports have been a positive force in getting the community to speak and act out against crime and violence.

There are many ways that the media can use their power to make a positive contribution in the aftermath of a murder. Reporters and decision makers can:

- tell the community what the victims need, so people can offer help
- publicize charitable or reward funds to facilitate donations
- highlight some harm so that others will be more vigilant
- give special meaning to an ordinary person's life and death
- aid in the grieving process by providing victims a platform to talk about a loved one
- provide the public with information about suspects in no arrest cases to help solve the crime and make an arrest
- facilitate the grieving process of the community by focusing on the manner in which the media deals with a murders
- educate the public by about victims' rights, services, and the criminal justice system

## **What are the drawbacks of speaking to the media?**

The media may not report what you said, the way that you said it, or intended it to sound. You can ask the media for a correction when they get something wrong, but they may not do it. You cannot expect the media to look out for your best interests. If you are a witness in the case, you may hurt the case by speaking to the media before you testify. This is especially true if you are a victim who will also be a key witness at the trial. Your story can and may be used by the defense lawyer(s) to discredit you or the case. If you want to speak with the media, the safest time is after the trial is over. The police and the Prosecutor may not be able to share certain information with you if you plan to share it with the media. They have to try to make sure the trial is as fair as possible.

## **If I decide to talk to the media, are there guidelines I can follow?**

Here are some tips to keep in mind if you choose to be interviewed:

Talk to the Prosecutor or the police before you agree to talk to the media. They cannot tell you what to do, but may be able to provide you with some information that will help you decide how to best handle the interview.

- Ask what the story is about or how your interview will be used in the story.
- Ask who else the reporter plans to interview for the story.
- Prepare for the interview by listing the questions you think the media may want to ask you and think about how you would answer them.
- It might be helpful to write an outline or statement in advance.
- Be brief and concise. Use simple, clear statements. If you edit yourself, the media will have less editing to do and what they report may be more accurate.
- Have two or three main ideas or facts that you want to tell them and say them right away.
- If the interview is being broadcast on TV or radio, ask if it will be live or taped, then edited.
- You can control the information you share. You can set limits and tell the reporter you won't discuss some things.
- Once you've said something to a reporter, you can't take it back or expect them not to use it.
- Never speak "off the record." Everything you say can be used.
- Never give false information or lie to a reporter. If you can't answer a question, just tell them you can't answer it.
- Don't guess or speculate about the case. Stick to what you know.
- When you talk to a reporter, remember you are also talking to everyone in their audience – thousands of readers, listeners or viewers.

## **What kinds of questions might media ask?**

Doing an interview can be very emotional. Questions sometimes seem hurtful or unfair. The media may have lots of questions specific to your case. Here are some common questions:

- What happened? When? Where? How?
- How has this affected you and your family?
- Tell me about your loved one. Who was he or she?
- How do you feel?
- Who was involved?
- Why did it happen?
- What was the cause?
- What would you like to see done now?
- Who's to blame?
- Who should pay for this and how?
- How do you feel about the jury's verdict?
- Are you relieved the trial is over?
- What do you think the sentence should be?
- How do you feel about the sentence the judge imposed?
- Do you think justice was done?

There may be no way to avoid some contact with the media during the trial/sentencing. However you do not have to speak with them.

You should try to decide in advance whether or not you are willing to speak with the media during the trial. Usually prosecutors do not recommend it. Although the jury will be instructed not to read the paper or watch the news, things happen. So it is best to wait. But it is up to you.

After the verdict, the media usually wants to talk to family members, friends, Jurors, Attorneys, etc. You & your family should decide if you are willing to speak to the media after the verdict. The media may be relentless in trying to talk to you. It will be much easier for you and much more efficient if you plan in advance. A news conference can be arranged, so you can speak to the media all at once. You can give a somewhat prepared statement, followed by Q & A.

There is not much that can be done to influence the media to behave in a different way in such a highly competitive setting. However, an advocate who is knowledgeable about the media and its impact can help prepare victims to deal with the experience. Victim advocates should arrange to accompany the victim to court and may request additional escorts such as police, court officers, and sheriffs in order to minimize the trauma and facilitate safe passage through the crush of the media. Sometimes an alternate route can be found that avoids the press, but complete evasion of the media may not be possible.