

Right to Know Advisory Committee

Law Enforcement and Media Meeting

May 21, 2025 • Augusta, Maine

Purpose

The Right to Know Advisory Committee, created by Public Law 2005, Chapter 631 as a permanent advisory council with oversight authority and responsibility for a broad range of activities associated with the purposes and principles underlying Maine's freedom of access laws, reports to the Joint Committee on Judiciary.

At the conclusion of its annual slate of business in December 2024, the RTKAC directed sitting members who represent broadcast and print media to convene a meeting with law enforcement to discuss each other's concerns in an effort to enhance collaboration during and immediately after critical public safety incidents.

Accordingly, the media representatives sitting on the RTKAC invited members of state, county and local law enforcement to a joint meeting held May 21, 2025 in the Deering Building on the State of Maine's AMHI Campus.

Goal

- Share information about the pressures and constraints experienced by members of the media when gathering and timely reporting information regarding public safety incidents and ongoing criminal investigations on the one hand and the deadlines, staffing issues, complex legal issues and other challenges facing law enforcement during these incidents on the other hand; and
- Develop recommendations for increasing collaboration between law enforcement agencies and representatives of the media in a way that will ensure the public has access to timely, reliable information about significant public safety incidents and criminal investigations.

Attended by approximately 30 representatives from state, county and local law enforcement personnel, as well as print and broadcast news outlets, the four-hour meeting the conversations were frank, honest, congenial, productive and constructive.

Law enforcement included the Maine Commissioner of Public Safety; Knox, Sagadahoc, Cumberland and Penobscot County Sheriffs; Police Chiefs and Public Information Officers from the municipalities of Cumberland, Bath, Old Orchard, Bangor, Fort Fairfield, Brunswick, Scarborough, Portland and Waterville; and representative from the Medical Examiner's Office.

Media representatives included two television stations and three newspapers, in addition to the four who sit on the Right to Know Advisory Committee.

By all accounts, the meeting was successful, with a resulting commitment by all that another gathering, or regional gatherings, should be scheduled to continue the conversations. In

addition to the opportunity to drill down on issues related to geography; i.e., Northern Maine and Southern Maine have different demographics, and Coastal Maine and Western Maine have their own characteristics, these regional meetings will also encourage greater attendance with short driving distances.

By the end of the meeting, two regional meetings had been tentatively scheduled, one in Saco, the other in Knox County.

The May 21 agenda was kept intentionally simple:

Discuss the role of media and its responsibility to inform the public during critical incidents.

Define the code of ethics and rules of conduct under which law enforcement and media respectively operate.

Discuss the job of law enforcement and the job of media at crises and incidents.

Refine the standard of communication at emergency scenes.

Define operating protocol at incidents and scenes, and establish best practices for communication infrastructure between first responders/ law enforcement and the media

From those conversations, the following points were made:

- 1) The goals of law enforcement and emergency response/law enforcement maintain common ground: Police and first responders have the responsibility to protect the public and media has the mission of informing the public with accurate and validated news. (The first point in the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics states that journalists should verify information before releasing it and should use original sources whenever possible.)
- 2) With the advent of social media, and the internet's demand for 24-7 information, there has been an increase of misinformation and public panic. The media attempts to counteract that trend, and be the trusted source for the facts.

"There is a rat race to get ahead of social media," said law enforcement.

"Part of our job is to beat out the misinformation," said media.

Suggested Action: Establish and strengthen contact lists of journalists and law enforcement officials, return to email blasts for public safety announcements and news releases. Understand better how social media currently engages the public, and rely less on it for circulation of law enforcement information.

- 3) The relationship between law enforcement and media has deteriorated in Maine for a variety of reasons, including the increase of electronic communication over personal one-on-one visits and phone calls; shrinking staff levels; COVID; and social media.

Suggested Action: Hold periodic scheduled visits, or meetings, to flesh out misunderstandings and streamline communication channels. Actively work to understand statutes that govern law enforcement and what protocols govern media. The relationship must be built outside moments of crises.

“Hope what we could accomplish today is to see into each other’s world, find correct information to create a safer public.”

- 4) Law enforcement emphasizes trust and relationship-building as integral to its relationship with media. Policies and law mandate what information is released, and when it is released. Journalists work for the public interest; i.e., what roads are closed, is there an imminent danger to the neighborhood, is community support needed for victims.

“Generic info about what is happening,” is what the media requests. “We do not want to stay there and be a thorn.”

Media is looking for baseline information for a quick turnaround to the public, information that is accurate and from a first-hand source. While an incident unfolds, longstanding and trusted news outlets are getting peppered by the public for information.

“Logistics, it is not that we do not want get the info to you, but how to get it to you,” said law enforcement. . . . “We are trying to build a case, but if we rush to get info out to feed the machine, we mess up the case, and put a bad person back out on the street.”

Suggested Action: Cultivate a channel directly to a spokesperson or incident command officer to obtain initial information to let the public know what the status of the situation may be, and let the public know that more information will be forthcoming.

- 5) There are 150 law enforcement entities across Maine. They respond to their own chains of command; e.g., sheriffs and county government; state police and state administration; tribal police and leadership; local police departments and municipal leadership.

Suggested Action: Revive or develop rapport between media and law enforcement. Identify points of contact in statewide and local media with periodically updated email lists, communicate regularly (drop by the station or call on the phone).

“Cops would rather go into a hail of bullets rather than get in front of cameras.” Why? Because they do not know what questions will be asked and are apprehensive of what they say. On the flip side, law enforcement would benefit from more pointed instruction and training about handling inquiries from the media.

“Anytime we’ve had an incident and media wants something on camera, I told them up front, what questions are you going to ask?”

- 6) “We are not afraid of who is in the room, we are more afraid of those who have a blog, who are not even journalists, the scanner chasers.”

With the increase of internet bloggers, start-up news websites, and social media, there is likewise a rising number of would-be citizen reporters, without the training. This presents a layer of confusion at scenes, if there is no established communication.

Suggested Action: Adopt easily recognizable identifying credentials so that first responders and law enforcement know immediately they are communicating with a credible news outlet.

- 7) Resources, such as a police information officer, are scarce in the more rural parts of the state. It can be more difficult to establish contact with the lead officer at a crisis scene and obtain information.

“There is a need for information at the scene, we are trying to get the truth out, let us perform our style of public service.”

Suggested Action: Establish communication with the PDs and agencies and have communication channels in place before crises happen.

Immediate conclusions:

Schedule more of these meetings

Train law enforcement at all levels about talking with media

Build trust and make all parties feel more comfortable

Build on a system of how to recognize credentialed journalists

Attendees

Alice J. Briones, Office of Medical Examiner
Beth Jones, WVII-TV
Chief Andrew Booth, Bath Police Department
Chief Charles Rumsey, Cumberland Police Department
Chief Elise Chard, Old Orchard Police Department
Chief Jason Moen, Auburn Police Department
Chief Mark Hathaway, Bangor Police Department
Chief Matthew Cummings, Fort Fairfield Police Department
Chief Scott Stewart, Brunswick Police Department
Chief William Bonney, Waterville Police Department
Jake Freudberg, Morning Sentinel
Jon Small, WABI TV

Lt. Randall Keaton, Maine State Police-Major Crimes-South
Marie Weidmayer, Bangor Daily News
Michael Sauschuck, Commissioner of Public Safety
Sheriff Joel Merry, Sagadahoc County Sheriff's Office
Sheriff Kevin Joyce, Cumberland County Sheriff's Office
Sheriff Patrick Polky, Knox County Sheriff's Office
Mary Crabtree, Knox County Sheriff's Office
Justin MacDonald, News Center Maine
Jason Longley, Waterville Police Department
David Hemingway, Old Orchard Beach Police Department
Lindsey Chasteen, Office of Medical Examiner
Mark Rediker, WABI-TV
Ryan Cote, Blueberry Broadcasting
Chris Farley, Camden Fire Chief
Amy Beveridge, WMTW
Lynda Clancy, PenBayPilot.com
Brian MacMaster, Dirigo Safety
Judith Meyer, New England First Amendment Coalition, MPA
Tim Moore, Maine Association of Broadcasters

Report respectfully submitted by Right to Know Advisory Committee members

Amy Beveridge, representing broadcasting interests

Lynda Clancy, representing newspaper and other press interests

Brian MacMaster, representing law enforcement interests

Judy Meyer, representing newspaper publishers

Tim Moore, representing broadcasting interests

Right to Know Advisory Committee

Law Enforcement and Media Meeting Summary

May 21, 2025 • Augusta, Maine

Thank you all for taking the time from busy schedules to attend the May 21 meeting in Augusta to discuss the relationship between Maine law enforcement and public safety personnel and representatives of the media.

By all accounts, the meeting was successful. Our four-hour meeting included conversations that were frank, honest, congenial, productive and constructive, and we walked away knowing we share many of the same goals.

The Right to Know Advisory Committee, created by state statute as a permanent advisory council with responsibility for a broad range of activities associated with the purposes and principles underlying Maine's freedom of access laws, reports to the Joint Committee on Judiciary.

At the conclusion of its annual business in December 2024, the RTKAC directed sitting members who represent broadcast and print media to convene a meeting with law enforcement to discuss each other's concerns in an effort to enhance collaboration during and immediately after critical public safety incidents.

Accordingly, the media representatives sitting on the RTKAC invited members of state, county and local law enforcement and public safety to the joint meeting held in the Deering Building on the State of Maine's AMHI Campus.

While we will submit a report to the RTKAC, we wanted to continue communicating with you now about the meeting's outcome.

Our goals were simple:

Discuss the role of media and its responsibility to inform the public during critical incidents.

Define the code of ethics and rules of conduct under which law enforcement and media respectively operate.

Discuss the job of law enforcement and the job of media at crises and incidents.

Refine the standard of communication at emergency scenes.

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We have a short list of agreed-upon recommendations:

- 1) The goals of law enforcement and emergency response/law enforcement maintain common ground: Police and first responders have the responsibility to protect the public and media has the mission of informing the public with accurate and validated news. (The first point in the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics states that journalists should verify information before releasing it and should use original sources whenever possible.)

- 2) Establish and strengthen contact lists of journalists and law enforcement officials, return to the practice of email blasts for public safety announcements and news releases. Understand better how social media currently engages the public, and rely less on it for circulation of law enforcement information.
- 3) Hold periodic scheduled visits, or meetings, to flesh out misunderstandings and streamline communication channels. Actively work to understand statutes that govern law enforcement and what protocols govern media. The relationship must be built outside moments of crises.
- 4) Cultivate a channel directly to a spokesperson or incident command officer to obtain initial information to let the public know what the status of the situation may be, and let the public know that more information will be forthcoming.
- 5) Revive or develop rapport between media and law enforcement. Identify points of contact in statewide and local media with periodically updated email lists, communicate regularly (drop by the station or call on the phone).
- 6) Adopt easily recognizable identifying credentials so that first responders and law enforcement know immediately they are communicating with a credible news outlet.
- 7) Establish communication with the police departments, fire chiefs and agencies, and have communication channels in place before crises happen.
- 8) Hold meetings between law enforcement and public safety official with media on a regional basis to drill down on issues related to geography; i.e., Northern Maine and Southern Maine have different demographics, and Coastal Maine and Western Maine have their own characteristics. Regional meetings also encourage greater attendance with short driving distances.

Immediate conclusions:

Schedule more of these meetings

Train law enforcement at all levels about talking with media

Build trust and make all parties feel more comfortable

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Again, thank you for attending!

Right to Know Advisory Committee members

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