

HIDALGO COUNTY PUBLIC AFFAIRS DIVISION

Communications Procedures for County Departments

BACKGROUND

In an effort to streamline certain functions of County operations in the public arena, Hidalgo County Commissioners' Court created the Public Affairs Division in May 2010. The division's responsibility are to increase public awareness and understanding of Hidalgo County Government, support the County's internal and external communication and outreach efforts, and promote County activities by providing public relations services to County departments and offices.

MISSION

It is the mission of the Public Affairs Division to facilitate effective, timely, and accurate communication services to County departments and offices, the public, and the media.

PURPOSE

The Public Affairs Division is the official incoming/outgoing communications branch and provides the following services for County departments under the direction of Commissioners' Court:

- Public Information
- Media Relations
- Website and Social Media
- Multimedia Production
- Issues Management
- Emergency Communications
- Other Communications Services
- Internal Relations and Organizational Effectiveness
- Special Events
- Archives (Photos, Proclamations, Resolutions, County awards, etc.) ¹

Additionally, the Public Affairs Division provides marketing, public relations, and auxiliary services to County elected and appointed officials as requested.

COMMUNICATIONS PROCEDURES

County departments are instructed to follow the procedures outlined below to request assistance from the Public Affairs Division. Elected and appointed officials are invited to utilize the Public Affairs Division according to their needs. All requests should be in writing, and directed to Ms. Julia Benitez Sullivan, Director, at julia.sullivan@co.hidalgo.tx.us.

- 1. Public Information Requests.** To comply with the Public Information Act (Section 552 of the Texas Government Code), Hidalgo County is required to respond in a timely manner to requests for public information. Hidalgo County has adopted a Public Information Policy which is now overseen by the Public Affairs Division. Departments are instructed to contact the Public Affairs Division immediately upon receipt of any request for public information. The Division will track the request, gather the required information, submit requests for opinion to the Attorney General's Office (when necessary), and deliver an official and timely response to the public information request.

¹ *Proposed future responsibilities*

HIDALGO COUNTY PUBLIC AFFAIRS DIVISION

Communications Procedures for County Departments

Please note: Elected and/or Appointed Officials are essentially their own public information office, may receive public information requests or requests for judicial records, and are obligated to follow the appropriate statute or regulation and respond to the request accordingly. These offices are encouraged to contact the Public Affairs Division should they require any assistance in fulfilling these requests.

2. **Media Relations.** The Division serves as a point of contact for print, television, and radio media outlets, and is available to facilitate any outgoing message or communication via official statements, talking points, media advisories, press releases, interviews, and press conferences. When County departments are asked for an interview or statement regarding a particular issue, the Department Head is instructed to inform the Division for assistance in coordinating and/or scheduling with press. Alternately, in the event a Department would like to inform the media about an event or project, they are invited to contact the Division to assist in their outreach efforts. A multi-faceted communications strategy (print, web, video) can be planned, scheduled and implemented through the Division.
3. **Website and Social Media.** The Division oversees the content management of the County website and individual web pages inside the main site. The Division is also developing the use of social media (via facebook, youtube, and twitter) to increase County presence in the online community. Departments are encouraged to contact the Division to submit news items of interest to post on the Latest News section of the homepage, events for the event calendar, and any edits or changes to their individual web pages.
4. **Multimedia Production.** The Division offers video documentation of County events that can be produced into brief videos or public service announcements and broadcast on the County website and other outlets. Please note, individual requests for multimedia assistance are reviewed for feasibility and scheduled based on availability. Departments are encouraged to contact the Division with ample time to ensure coverage.
5. **Issues Management.** The Division provides strategic communications consulting for a variety of high-profile initiatives and issues. The Division offers a Countywide perspective on these initiatives and issues that require coordinated communications, and leads the development of overall communications strategies, such as developing key messages that properly frame the issue or initiative, coordinating media response among multiple agencies, briefing elected officials, County staff and others on issue, and monitoring media coverage of issue or initiative.

Examples of Countywide issues/projects include:

- Public Health
- Economic Development
- Disaster Preparedness
- Census
- Environment/MS4
- Drainage Project
- Voter Outreach Initiative

Departments are urged to inform the Division on any and all countywide initiatives and issues to ensure a clear and consistent message is maintained and communicated to the public, media, and other entities.

HIDALGO COUNTY PUBLIC AFFAIRS DIVISION

Communications Procedures for County Departments

6. **Emergency Communications.** The Division is the lead agency in providing emergency public information to residents and businesses in the county and employees of Hidalgo County. Emergency communications encompasses:
 - *Crisis Communications:* Planning appropriate actions and coordinating the dissemination of information in response to high-profile or sensitive issues such as on-the-job employee death or employee actions that result in criminal charges.
 - *Risk Communications:* Providing the public with information that reduces anxiety or fear and also provides suggestions for planning that will assist in responding to an emergency event (or pending crisis). Risk communications attempts to do no harm to the current situation, eases public concern and provides guidance on how to respond to the situation. Risk communications can also be preventative in nature, such as with hurricane preparedness information.
 - *Emergency Situations:* Predicted or actual events that have the potential to affect the safety, health and welfare of the population such as drinking water contamination or wide-spread exposure to infectious disease or critical incidents. Our staff is trained in NIMS Incident Command Systems, and serves as a member of the county's emergency management team consulting with the County Judge and senior management to assist in planning the county's emergency response.
 - *Staff Support in Emergency Situations:* Consulting with other agencies to assist in planning actions and collecting, analyzing and disseminating key information to residents, employees and media during critical incidents. The staff serves on many countywide emergency preparedness and planning groups, maintains various emergency communication tools, operates the Joint Information Center on an as needed basis, participates in various training exercises, and implements outreach projects that enhance public health and safety.
7. **Other Communications Services.** The Division provides a wide variety of communications services that provide cohesive and consistent look, feel and message to strategically communicate each agency's work as part of a countywide vision of service and accessibility. The Division will conduct an assessment to determine the type of communications services that County departments/offices would need, and will meet with individual departments as they request particular communications services. Examples of other communications services include designing, writing, reviewing, and/or editing press releases, brochures, issue briefs, etc.
8. **Internal Relations/Organizational Effectiveness.** The Division assists the Executive Office in its efforts to foster internal communications between and among County departments and offices. Additionally, the Division coordinates efforts to develop and enact policy, projects or initiatives to increase the organizational effectiveness of County departments.
9. **Special Events.** The Division can assist County offices and departments in the coordination of planning, marketing, and designing invitations and programs for special events such as ribbon cuttings, groundbreaking, and dedication ceremonies.

HIDALGO COUNTY PUBLIC AFFAIRS DIVISION

Communications Procedures for County Departments

- 10. Archives (Photos, Proclamations, Resolutions, County Awards, etc).** While the Division does not have the full capacity to maintain archives, it is proposed that in the future, the Division will maintain archives of special County events, records, and functions.

Furthermore, the Division coordinates with key personnel from other County offices to share and update on topics that impact communications Countywide.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, OR TO REQUEST SERVICES, CONTACT:

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