

NATIONAL SECURITY PUBLIC INFORMATION GUIDELINES



JUNE 2010

INTRODUCTION

The National Security Public Information Guidelines provide a framework for the Australian Government and State and Territory agencies responsible for public information and media activities relating to national security issues and incidents.

The guidelines apply to day-to-day national security activities in addition to providing an appropriate response in the event of a terrorist threat or incident.

All national security agencies have an ongoing role in ensuring that information and media liaison activities work to:

- improve the understanding of the public of Australia's national security organisations and systems
- generate confidence in Australia's ability to respond to any terrorism threat or activity; and
- create public trust that governments and national security agencies are open and accountable, and will release all information possible within the confines of operational and security considerations.

CORE PRINCIPLES

- Public safety is the highest priority.
- Information flow should be provided regularly to keep the public informed and should only be restricted in the interests of safety and/or operational security.
- Public information and media responses/releases must undergo all necessary clearances by the responsible agency/ies preparing the response/release.
- Agencies must coordinate messages to ensure consistency of information being provided.
- Agencies must not make unapproved comment on, or speak on behalf of, another agency's area of responsibility.
- All agencies have a responsibility to ensure adequate training and resources to respond to any situation/incident.

PUBLIC ANNOUNCEMENTS ON NATIONAL TERRORISM PUBLIC ALERT LEVELS

The Australian Government will take appropriate steps to notify the community of changes to a level(s) of the national terrorism public alert system, in collaboration with the relevant First Minister(s). Such announcements will be issued at the discretion of the Prime Minister or representative.

NATIONAL OVERSIGHT

Depending on the nature of an incident the overall responsibility for policy and broad strategy in relation to the incident may transfer to the Australian Government, to be managed in close collaboration with relevant States and Territories.

In such a situation particular care should be taken to ensure that public communication messages do not compromise operational issues or confuse members of the public. Coordination and consultation will be conducted through the Attorney-General's Department Public Affairs Branch and designated contacts in each State and Territory according to jurisdictional standing arrangements.

National public announcements would be issued at the discretion of the Prime Minister, the Commonwealth Government's Attorney-General or other senior Commonwealth Government Ministers, wherever possible in consultation with the States and Territories.

The Premier/Chief Minister or a designated spokesperson will perform this role for the States and Territories. Police will be responsible for public information and media liaison according to their standing arrangements, in consultation with other affected agencies or organisations.

Other spokespersons may be called upon to provide comment or reinforce key facts during a situation/incident. For example, the Australian Government Chief Medical Officer has a role in issuing public health warnings and statements in relation to threats to public health.

IMPORTANCE OF MEDIA LIAISON AND PUBLIC INFORMATION ACTIVITIES

In the event of a national security incident or a period of heightened national counter-terrorism alert it will be critical to:

- provide appropriate advice for public safety
- ensure that authorities provide accurate and timely information
- work with operational areas to ensure the satisfactory management of public information during the threat period or resolution
- prevent an information vacuum which would encourage speculation, mistrust and misinformation
- build and hold public confidence in the ability of authorities to prevent or resolve the incident; and
- be conscious of the fact that national security public information and media activity is likely to be closely monitored by potential or actual terrorist operatives.

COMMUNICATION COORDINATION

- Attorney-General's Department (AGD) Public Affairs Branch will have overall responsibility for coordination of all Australian Government public information and media activity in relation to a heightened counter-terrorism level of alert or terrorist incident.
- Coordination of public information in the States and Territories will be in accordance with their standing arrangements and may vary across jurisdictions.
- AGD Public Affairs will also act as the coordination point between Australian Government agencies and the States and Territories. AGD media liaison officers may be co-located with the relevant State/Territory media unit as required.

RELEASE AND DISTRIBUTION OF INFORMATION

Information being released into the public domain should in no way compromise operational security or ongoing investigation/s.

AGD Public Affairs will maintain up-to-date contact and distribution mechanisms to facilitate timely distribution of information to Australian, State and Territory agencies with national security responsibilities.

It is crucial that media liaison officers coordinate their activities to maintain a continual flow of information. This should include the provision or sharing of:

- details of information released
- matters covered at briefings and press conferences
- draft media releases or talking points requiring clearance; and
- media statements.

CONSEQUENCE MANAGEMENT AND RECOVERY

All government media liaison officers must continue to coordinate and distribute information after the initial incident/situation has been resolved.

Issues relating to consequence management, such as assistance to any victims, notification of families, management of hospital and health-related issues should be clearly identified as separate from ongoing national security issues.

All jurisdictions should continue to upload public information to their websites and ensure that links are maintained to the National Security Website (www.nationalsecurity.gov.au) and those of other relevant consequence management agencies.