

# Module 1

## *How to Write a News Release*



THE SOUTHERN CENTER FOR

**Communication, Health & Poverty**

## Background

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Few topics stir public interests more so than health. The media often capitalizes on the public's interest in health by providing timely stories of promising (or unpromising) developments. Despite the media's appetite for stories of the moment, public health professionals can work with journalists over time in an effort to set the agenda for what people think and talk about.

By participating in the media process, you can exert more control over the messages that are delivered. One way to reach the public via mass media is through a news release. When you have a story to tell, it is important to consider purpose, audience, message, message delivery, and timing. It is also important that you know how to pitch the story to a media outlet.

The following is a list of resources used in creating this module and for your reference.

**Resource:** Community Tool Box (CTB) is a website that provides practical information to support community health and development work. The contents of this site were developed and are maintained by the Work Group on Health Promotion and Community Development at the University of Kansas in collaboration with AHEC/Community Partners in Amherst, Massachusetts. For more information go to [ctb.ku.edu](http://ctb.ku.edu). The following module on news releases was adopted largely from materials on the CTB website.

**Resource:** The National Association for County and City Health Officials (NACCHO) offers an excellent web resource titled, "Media Outreach Guide." For more information go to: [www.naccho.org/advocacy/MarketingPublicHealth\\_guide\\_introduction.cfm](http://www.naccho.org/advocacy/MarketingPublicHealth_guide_introduction.cfm)

**Resource:** The Associated Press *Stylebook* provides information and examples on when to capitalize and/or hyphenate words. The style manual is an essential handbook for all writers, editors, students and public relations specialists. Go to [www.apstylebook.com](http://www.apstylebook.com) for more information

## Writing a news release

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The news release, also known as a press release, is the tool most frequently used to communicate with the news media. However, they should not be issued without a very good reason for doing so. Some general rules of thumb include:

- Journalists want to receive news releases that convey information that is unique, involve a change, or conflict, involve famous people or places, and will be relevant to targeted audiences.
- Issue releases on ALL new programs, no matter the size. Essentially, a news release provides a journalist with fresh new information, ideas and facts.
- Use your organization's stationery with letterhead and logo for the first page.
- A news release should be short, no more than two pages.
- The audience for a news release is a journalist

**DO NOT QUOTE OR REPRODUCE**    contact drubin@uga.edu

- Good releases are written as reporters would write their stories (concise, specific, uses reputable sources, uses objective facts, and is honest and direct)
- Correct grammar, punctuation and spelling are essential.

**Don't**

- Bury the news inside the release
- Express hyperbole, excessive adjectives
- Come across as a promotional ad
- Use wordy language or make the news release too long
- Include unattributed opinions
- Offer stiff-sounding, empty quotes

Community Tool Box (ctb.ku.edu) offers the following suggestions to make news releases potentially newsworthy.

**Tips for making news releases newsworthy**

1. *Human interest* -- People want to read about other people and what they do and say. This is an element that relates to our natural curiosity. Stories with this ingredient are sure to capture attention. Focus on a particular person's story or on a human angle.
2. *Emotion* -- If what you're reporting has an impact on your readers' lives, you can be sure it's news. It doesn't have to happen locally to affect you. Stories about environmental welfare are as important as stories about your local city dump's sanitary conditions.
3. *Proximity* -- Usually, people are more interested in what happens close to them. Local stories are most likely to grab attention. However, with the globalization of the world, people are also becoming more and more interested in what happens in distant places.
4. *Timeliness* -- Generally speaking, the fresher the news, the better. People want to know what is going on right now. Of course, there are timeless stories that can be written at any time; these are most likely to be feature stories, which need to be "pitched" differently than news releases.
5. *Prominence* -- Famous people, places and institutions always have a place in the news. If you throw a party, your friends will know. If a famous actor throws a party, it'll be in every magazine."

**Types of news releases**

- Announcement (straight news story)
- Feature story (combination of information and entertainment)
- Hybrid story (combination of feature and news announcement)

**Headlines**

Headlines are meant to summarize what the story is about. The headline may in fact be the only thing that people read so you'll need to make sure it captures people's attention. It should be short,

incorporate your organizations name or the main idea of the story and if possible, include a local connection.

### **Leads**

The lead includes the most important information but is independent of the headline. In the lead of first paragraph, use the five W's and the H: Who, What, Where, When, Why and How. If you can, try and keep your lead sentence to 25 words or less. For example...

As the start of the 2008-2009 school year quickly approaches, the Georgia Division of Public Health encourages parents to make sure their children get the required vaccines needed for school registration.

*Who* – The Division of Public Health

*What* – Certain vaccines are required for school enrollment

*When* – Effective for the 2007-2008 school year

*Where* – The State of Georgia

*Why* – The state recently implemented additional vaccine requirements for all children attending child care, Pre-K and private and public school facilities.

*How* - Remind parents to schedule immunization appointments for their children

### **Format**

A standard news release is 300-800 words long. Organize the release as an inverted pyramid putting the most important information first and the less critical information later in the release. Make sure to write in short paragraphs (1-3 sentences).

Usually contact information for a news source is provided directly below the headline. Providing a release date for the news is also standard practice.

### **Quotations**

If you use a quote from somebody make sure it is meaningful and sounds natural and conversational in tone. Make sure you attribute the quote to the person who made it.

### **Other important information**

- End each page with a complete sentence or paragraph
- Indicate release carries over to next page by using -- more -- at bottom of page
- Make sure to enter a “slug” at the top of new pages  
(Page 2/Red Cross Launches New Blood Drive)
- Close with standard or “boiler” paragraph
  - \* Add a brief description of organization/s and/or product mentioned in news release
  - \* Include Web site address for more information
  - \* Indicate the end of release with centered ###

**Example news releases<sup>1</sup>**

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**Fatherhood 101: Athens**

By Camille Cunningham, 404/463-5027  
cycunningham@dhr.state.ga.us

*February 15, 2007*

ATLANTA (GA) – Athens residents are invited to participate in a Fatherhood Summit on March 13, 2007 at the Athens Technical College from 10:00 a.m. until noon, where they can learn about the services offered by the Office of Child Support Services (OCSS) and the Department of Technical Adult Education (DTAE). This event will provide an overview of the Georgia Fatherhood Program and a review of the new Child Support guidelines that went into affect on January 1, 2007. The Fatherhood Program provides low-income parents with counseling and training at state technical colleges in order to increase their wages. The Athens summit, the fourth of six to be held statewide, will include employers, community leaders, faith based organizations, and state and local political leaders.

“Parenting is not an easy task, however it can be especially difficult for those who face financial barriers,” says OCSS Deputy Director, Keith Horton. “We are pleased we are able to prepare these individuals with the skills necessary to break down those barriers”.

Since 2001, the Fatherhood Program has served 15,000 non-custodial parents, assisted 2,700 participants in receiving a GED, 750 participants in receiving a vocational certificate, and 9,300 participants in obtaining employment. The Fatherhood Program generally takes three to six months to complete and serves both fathers and mothers who are non-custodial parents. The participants are required to work at least 20 hours per week while enrolled in the program and pay child support. Upon completion of the program, participants receive assistance in obtaining full-time employment at a livable wage.

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<sup>1</sup> The first three press releases in this section can be found at the Georgia Department of Human Resources- Division of Public Health- Online News Archives at [dhr.georgia.gov](http://dhr.georgia.gov) The fourth release can be found at: [scdhec.net/administration/news/2007/nr20070209-01.htm](http://scdhec.net/administration/news/2007/nr20070209-01.htm)

## **Food Stamps Program – First line of defense against hunger**

By Beverly Jones, 404-218-6056  
bjjones2@dhr.state.ga.us

*September 10, 2007*

ATLANTA (GA) – Although Georgia has seen mostly increases in its Food Stamp Participation Rate over the last few years, officials at the Division of Family and Children Services are continuing to look for ways to let more qualified Georgians know that they are eligible for the federally funded program.

"The Food Stamp Program is the first line of defense against hunger for poor families," said Mary Dean Harvey, director of the Division of Family and Children Services, the state office which oversees the program. "Most needy people are aware of the program, but many do not know they are eligible and we are engaging in a multifaceted outreach approach to inform them, particularly the elderly and the Latino community," she said.

The elderly and Hispanics have the lowest participation rate of 7 percent and 4 percent, respectively. DFCS officials say the lack of participation among the elderly is typically pride and the "stigma" often associated with welfare. For Latinos it tends to be language barriers and simply lack of knowledge about eligibility. To that end, the Division has established partnerships with the Latin American Association, faith-based organizations, local health departments, and businesses that cater to the Latino population. The state's outreach to the elderly, include collaborations with a network of senior centers through the Aging Services Agency as well as partnerships with local churches. The state is also in the early planning stages of Georgia GOLD, (Georgia's On-line Delivery) project to improve general accessibility to the Food Stamp Program. The project is being designed specifically to provide information and online application for the non-participating eligible Georgians. The state expects to launch the project next year. Currently more than 947,000 people receive food stamps per month in the state. About 52 percent of the food stamp benefits go toward children and 41 percent toward adults.

## Number one killer in Georgia: Cardiovascular disease

By Lisa Moery, 404-463-2299  
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August 21, 2007

ATLANTA (GA) – Cardiovascular disease (CVD) is the leading cause of death in Georgia, accounting for one-third of deaths in the state. The Georgia Department of Human Resources (DHR) wants you to know about ways you can lessen the affects of this disease. CVD includes all diseases of the heart and blood vessels including heart disease caused by reduced blood supply to the heart; stroke; congestive heart failure, a condition in which the heart can't pump enough blood to the body's other organs; hypertension or high blood pressure; and atherosclerosis or hardening and narrowing of the arteries. DHR has several initiatives that address CVD, including the Cardiovascular Health Initiative (CVHI), which is part of a national effort funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CVD), to address heart disease and stroke prevention. CVHI in collaboration with other prevention programs works to increase awareness about the importance of being physically active, not using tobacco, eating healthy, and having regular checks-ups in lessening one's risk for CVD and other chronic diseases.

"In 2004, more than 22,000 Georgians died from cardiovascular disease, and Georgia's CVD death rate was 14 percent higher than the national rate," said Stuart Brown, M.D., director of the Division of Public Health. "Incorporating healthy lifestyle behaviors and knowing the signs and symptoms of heart disease and stroke can save your life," said Brown.

DHR's Stroke and Heart Attack Prevention Program (SHAPP) is an awareness, detection, treatment and control program that targets low-income, uninsured or underinsured patients with uncontrolled high blood pressure. Funded in part by the Georgia General Assembly, the SHAPP program aims to reduce illness and death from cardiovascular disease associated with high blood pressure. There are 137 SHAPP clinics around the state, and they are partnerships between public and private health care providers. Both drugs aimed at reducing high blood pressure and guidance around lifestyle changes are made available in clinics to eligible patients. Once a patient's blood pressure is under control they are generally seen on a quarterly basis.

Seek medical attention immediately if you are experiencing any of the following signs of heart attack: chest discomfort; general discomfort in areas of the upper body including in one or both arms, the back, neck, jaw or stomach; shortness of breath; cold sweat; nausea; or lightheadedness.

You also should seek help if you have symptoms of stroke, including: sudden numbness or weakness of the face, arm or leg, especially on one side of the body; sudden confusion, trouble speaking or understanding; sudden trouble seeing in one or both eyes; sudden trouble walking, dizziness, loss of balance or coordination; or sudden, severe headache with no known cause.

Reduce your risk for cardiovascular and other chronic diseases by following the steps of the Live Healthy Georgia campaign: *Eat Healthy, Be Active, Be Smoke Free, Get Checked and Be Positive*. Following these guidelines can greatly reduce the chances of developing cardiovascular disease and other chronic diseases, leading to an improved quality of life and reduced healthcare costs. For more information, visit: [www.livehealthygeorgia.org](http://www.livehealthygeorgia.org).

**FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE**

Feb. 9, 2007

**Graniteville health screenings start Feb. 15**

AIKEN – The Aiken County Health Department and Aiken Regional Medical Center will begin a second round of health screenings Feb. 15 for Graniteville residents affected by the Jan. 6, 2005 chlorine spill, the S.C. Department of Health and Environmental Control announced today.

“A representative from Aiken Regional Medical Center will call those who have signed up with either the registry at USC-Aiken or Aiken 211 to schedule appointments for the screening,” said Marge Heim, regional systems administrator with DHEC’s Region 5 in Aiken. “Those individuals within a half-mile of the derailment and spill will be first to be scheduled for an appointment. Others will be scheduled as we extend the area of those who may have been exposed.”

For questions about the health screening, call Marge Heim at 642-1608 or Ann Lancaster at 643-4034, at DHEC’s Aiken County Health Department.

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**For more information:**

Thom Berry – (803) 898-3885  
E-mail – berrytw@dhec.sc.gov

News releases should be sent to all media, including television and radio. In addition to the major papers in your area, send releases to small and specialty papers, such as ethnic, religious, and community newspapers that reach the communities you serve. Smaller specialty papers may be tremendously respected in certain communities.

**Resource:** The website for *Emergency Risk Communication for Public Health Professionals* has many excellent checklists and worksheets that can help with message planning. This can be accessed online at: [www.nwcphp.org/training/courses-exercises/courses/risk-communication](http://www.nwcphp.org/training/courses-exercises/courses/risk-communication)



## **Pitching a news story**

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The National Association for County and City Health Officials offers the following suggestions when pitching a local news story:

### **First, do your homework:**



- Find out which newspaper section covers stories like yours and identify the editor(s) for that section. Find out how much lead-time the newspaper needs to run a story and schedule your meeting before that deadline.
- Research the newspaper's online site or library to determine if it has published stories on the current topic. Editors will appreciate that you know what the paper already has reported on these issues. Before the meeting, sit down with a colleague and rehearse your pitch. Include any community partners who will join you in the meeting.

### **Once you're in the door ...**

Keep your message simple and concise. Try to keep your introduction to three or four sentences that will tell the editor why he should be interested in publishing your story. Give more details as the conversation continues, but think of your opening as a way to heighten interest.

After you've made your initial introduction, be prepared to answer more specific questions. Is there a local hook? An upcoming related event? Have a list of community groups who can provide background and interviews for reporters to help localize the issue. The more resources you can offer, the better your chances of success.

### **Aim at the right person.**

Make sure to send your release to a specific person. Do a little homework— which reporter actually covers your issue? Who has written positive pieces in the past? Whether you are pitching an innovative program or stressing an important public health issue to the local TV news, it never hurts to call the assignment editor or the news desk: they will tell you who is appropriate.

### **Get to the point.**

A pitch that clearly frames the story idea in the first or second sentence is infinitely more welcome than one that tiptoes up to it, or worse, buries it under paragraphs of phrase-making. In almost every case, reporters know instantly whether an idea will work for them.

**Remember: It's a pitch, not a monologue.**

Give them enough information up front to pique their interest, but let them interject with questions before too long, certainly within the first 30 seconds.

**Give them time.**

The smartest pitchers tell reporters about things that are happening months before the news event actually comes up. This allows reporters and sources to work together to figure out when and how a piece would work for a newspaper. If you are sending in an announcement for an event do it at least ten days before the event. Make follow-up calls selectively- you do not want to be perceived as a pest.

**Be a resource.**

The easier you make it for the reporters, the better the chances they'll bite. Be ready to immediately provide quotes, background and interview opportunities. One strategy is to send a **pitch note or announcement** to your local media offering yourself as an expert on the issue at hand. The reporter/pitcher relationship is really pretty simple: You want the reporter to cover your story; in exchange, you help make the reporter's job easier.

**Source:** <http://www.naccho.org/advocacy/marketing/guide/pitching.cfm>

**Class activity 1.1 - Critique a news release**

Have students critique three sample news releases (e.g., those presented above, or they can locate other examples on their own) using the following criteria.

- Is the lead direct and to the point? Does it contain the most important and interesting aspects of the story?
- Have the who, what, where, when, why and how been answered in the first few paragraphs?
- Are the sentences short and concise? Paragraphs short? Words common and concrete?
- Has editorial comment been placed in quotation marks and attributed to the appropriate person?
- Are the quotations natural- that is, do they sound as though they could have been spoken?
- Are spelling and punctuation correct?

## News release template

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On the next page is a template for a news release. Please remember that this template is meant only to provide you with guidance. One template will not work for every situation so only use the parts that are applicable.

“The purpose of this initial news statement is to answer the basic questions: who, what, where, when. This statement should also provide whatever guidance is possible at this point, express the association and administration’s concern, and detail how further information will be disseminated. If possible, the statement should give phone numbers or contacts for more information or assistance.”

*Source: Emergency Risk Communication CDCynergy, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2003.*

**Helpful tip:** Be sure to be inclusive about the appropriate medium in order to tell the story most effectively. Do not neglect to consider smaller local, faith-based, and/or ethnic media outlets, including AM radio stations, church bulletins and community papers distributed free of charge. Often non-traditional media outlets are eager for news copy, and they can reach a great many people.

### **Class activity 1.2 – Write a news release**

The following activity will give students practice in writing a news release.

Ask students to write their own news release on any topic of interest using the template provided on the following page.

Then have your students critique each other’s news releases. Potential factors they could consider include whether the stories are newsworthy and whether they supplied the details that journalists would be looking for in each story.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: (name of contact)

PHONE: (number of contact)

Date of release: (date)

**Headline—Insert your primary message to the public**

Dateline (your location)—Two-three sentences describing current situation

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Insert quote from an official spokesperson demonstrating leadership and concern for victims.

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Insert actions being taken.

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List actions that will be taken.

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List information on possible reactions of public and ways citizens can help.

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Insert quote from an official spokesperson providing reassurance.

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List contact information, ways to get more information, and other resources.

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*Source: Emergency Risk Communication CDCynergy, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2003.*

**Resource:** For a more comprehensive list of questions geared towards ensuring your news release is accurate, clear, and correctly formatted see the checklist provided by the, “Emergency Risk Communication for Public Health Professionals” course. This course was created by the Northwest Center for Public Health Practice and can be accessed at: [www.nwcphp.org/riskcomm](http://www.nwcphp.org/riskcomm)

## **News release checklist**

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- Is the lead direct and to the point? Does it contain the most important and interesting aspects of the story?
- Have the who, what, where, when, why and how been answered in the first few paragraphs?
- Are the sentences short and concise? Paragraphs short? Words common and concrete?
- Has editorial comment been placed in quotation marks and attributed to the appropriate person?
- Are the quotations natural—that is, do they sound as though they could have been spoken?
- Has the newspaper style (AP or UPI) been followed faithfully throughout the release? If in doubt, contact your state health department public information officer to check your copy.
- Are spelling and punctuation correct (including names, titles, and organizations)?
- Have all statements of fact been double -checked for accuracy?
- Has the release been typed, double-spaced? Is the font a sans serif (e.g., Arial, Helvetica)? [Note: Serif fonts (e.g., Times, Times New Roman) sometimes are not clear when faxed.]
- Is the release in a prominent place (such as top right-hand corner above the release #)? Is the release time indicated?
- Are the names and phone numbers for further information included?
- Are pages numbered and titled in journalism format?
- Is the release properly identified as “Embargoed” or “For Immediate Release”?
- Is it labeled with a consecutively assigned number and logged in a notebook that tracks all releases?

Source: *Emergency Risk Communication for Public Health Professionals*. This checklist can be accessed online at: [www.nwcphp.org/training/courses-exercises/courses/risk-communication](http://www.nwcphp.org/training/courses-exercises/courses/risk-communication)