

# JAIL BULLETIN

NUMBER 54

June, 1989

The Jail Bulletin is a monthly feature of the Crime Commission Update. The Bulletin may be used as a supplement to your jail in-service training program if officers study the material and complete the attached "open book" quiz. The Bulletin and quiz may be reproduced for use by your staff. We welcome any jail training materials you would like to contribute to the Bulletin.

The contents of the "Jail Bulletin" represent the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect official views or policies of the Nebraska Crime Commission or the Nebraska Jail Standards Board.

## PUBLIC RELATIONS SKILLS

Agencies that serve the general public require their employees to possess and exhibit good public relations skills. When dealing with the public, it is important that these skills are used and that agency employees present themselves in a positive and professional manner. Certainly, the way you present yourself is a representation of your entire agency. It is inevitable that a citizen's contact with you is how your agency will be perceived and remembered.

When interacting with the public, several techniques can be employed to enhance your department's image and maintain good relations with the community.

Be positive in your approach when dealing with people from the community or staff from another agency. Although it would be ideal if every interaction were pleasant, situations will arise where you must deal with a difficult person despite your best efforts. A positive approach is by far your best line of defense when communicating with an agitated or abusive person.

When speaking with the public in person or by telephone, certain strategies can be used to make the most difficult conversations as pleasant as possible.

- Keep in mind, these are the people we are paid to serve, no matter how difficult some can be.
- Always remain calm. This not only serves as a good model for the individual but should reduce the likelihood that a complaint will be made concerning your behavior.

- o Make an effort to determine the exact nature of the individual's need and/or requested information. Make sure you are both clear as to the questions and information to be supplied.
- o Use your experience to provide the individual with necessary information whether it is requested or not.
- o Use appropriate feedback, i.e. "Am I correct in believing that you are trying to get your friend/relative out of jail?"
- o Be clear and informative to avoid making the individual feel that he is facing an uncaring bureaucracy.
- o If the individual becomes loud, try speaking even more softly. This serves as a good model for the individual who will also have to quiet down to hear you.
- o If the situation escalates despite your best efforts, it may be necessary for you to become directive. This will help the individual maintain self-control. Examples of being directive are:
  1. "I understand that you are upset. I think we could find a solution more easily if you would relax and tell me exactly what it is that you need."
  2. "I understand that things seem confusing and I may not be the best qualified to answer your questions. May I have your name and number and have someone who can answer your questions contact you?"
- o Be sincere and try to give the person an answer. Remember, the public and media can be provided at a minimum, the following information on request:
  - a. Name of person in custody;
  - b. The person's custody status, i.e., sentenced, pre-trial, bondable, work release, detainee; and
  - c. Specific charges for which the person is detained.
- o If it is not possible to provide information at the present moment, inform the person as to where and when an answer will be available.

Several things that you might do can inadvertently antagonize an individual and escalate a problematic situation into something more volatile. Behavior to be avoided includes:

- Using abusive or unprofessional language;
- Providing false or confidential information;
- Ignoring questions the person asks;
- Making the person feel their questions are stupid;
- Disconnect someone during a telephone call;
- Being terse or impatient;
- Guessing or trying to anticipate rather than providing only known, reliable and accurate information;
- Disregard or fail to pass along any messages or communication left unanswered.

Positive communication and demeanor should allow you to maintain better control and hopefully defuse agitated individuals. The following principles should be employed in all communications whether it be with the public or staff from another agency.

- Always remain calm;
- Listen actively;
- Answer questions with precision and refer to policy and procedure manual when needed;
- Don't hesitate to check with your supervisor or refer them to another person or agency;
- Be empathetic and understanding;
- Answer questions honestly;
- Be professional.

As you may well know, the media like the general public is very interested in the activities of the criminal justice system. Naturally, if your facility is involved in some type of emergency situation such as an escape, disturbance or fire, or if holding an offender who has received a lot of news coverage, media representatives will be actively seeking information. Remember that the news media has free access to many sources of public record. Your responsibility is to see that the information provided by you and your agency is correct and timely. If you supply them with clear and concise information it is less likely that there will be misquoted misinformation and conflicting views from related sources. When speaking with representatives from the media, it is important that you:

- Be direct, honest and straightforward;
- Never try to "cover up" a fact or be misleading;
- Be cooperative;
- Never release confidential information;

The news media is generally seeking several types of information. Once you have your facts together, be prepared to answer any of the following questions:

- Incident that occurred;
- Who was involved;
- When and where did the event occur;
- How much damage;
- What are the nature and extent of injuries;
- Who are the sources of your information and is it reliable.

Before you discuss any issues with the media, you will need to determine the answers to the following items:

- Should your agency alert the news media;
- What items are confidential;
- What items are only preliminary;
- What items require further examination;
- Are you authorized to release information to the news media;
- Are you properly briefed and supplied with accurate information.

Most importantly, you must remember that the way you present yourself and the information you provide to the public and the media is a representation of your agency and profession. Your relationship with the public will have a direct influence on the public's relationship and cooperation with you. If you intend to generate and benefit from community support, expect the community to interact frequently with your agency and demand professionalism from yourself and your fellow staff members.

--Prepared by Michelle Schindler,  
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Jail Standards Division

References: Waricopa County Juvenile  
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## QUIZ

Nebraska Jail Standards require that jail staff receive eighteen (18) hours of in-service training each year. The Jail Bulletin may be used to supplement in-service training if an officer studies the Bulletin, completes the quiz, and this process is documented by the jail administrator for review during annual jail inspection.

SUBJECT: PUBLIC RELATIONS SKILLS

NAME \_\_\_\_\_

NUMBER: 54

DATE \_\_\_\_\_

1. You are speaking on the telephone with a person who becomes abusive, you should:
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Hang-up on the caller;
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Remain calm, and try to provide the necessary information;
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Be silent until the caller quiets down; or
  - \_\_\_\_\_ Raise your voice and demand respect
  
2. If an attorney calls about his/her client and you are not sure of the answer, guess the best you can, it should be alright.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ TRUE      \_\_\_\_\_ FALSE
  
3. If a visitor asks you a question about an inmate and you are not sure you should give out the information, give it out anyway, no one should question it.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ TRUE      \_\_\_\_\_ FALSE
  
4. Using your experience to provide people with necessary information even when it is not requested is a valuable strategy to employ.
  - \_\_\_\_\_ TRUE      \_\_\_\_\_ FALSE
  
5. When communicating with representatives from the news media, it is very important to:
  - \_\_\_\_\_ avoid giving any details or facts;
  - \_\_\_\_\_ be properly briefed and supplied with accurate information;
  - \_\_\_\_\_ have them contact staff on the next shift; or
  - \_\_\_\_\_ consider all information from your agency as "confidential."

CREDIT: 1/2 HOUR CREDIT FOR JAIL IN-SERVICE TRAINING REQUIREMENT.

ANSWER SHEET SHOULD BE RETAINED BY JAIL ADMINISTRATOR.

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