WREATHS ACROSS AMERICA INTRODUCTION TO VOLUNTEER MEDIA RELATIONS

**WHAT ARE EARNED MEDIA AND MEDIA ADVOCACY?**

Earned media is publicity or exposure gained from methods other than paid advertising. Earned media is the result of sharing or pitching your story/news to media channels (reporters, producers, journalists, editors, etc.).

* Media channels include newspapers, TV, Radio, Websites, social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, etc.), Blogs, Other
* Methods of receiving this media include, print, broadcast, digitally on computers, iPads, or smart phones.

Media advocacy is defined as the strategic use of mass media to advance public initiatives. Through medic advocacy volunteers can:

* Change the way community members currently honor veterans.
* Create a reliable, consistent stream of publicity for your local WAA efforts, and
* Motivate community members and people of influence to get involved.

**HOW DO YOU BUILD MEDIA ADVOCACY?**

* Establish personal relationships with local media contacts.
* Be available for interviews or background when needed.
* Be open and generous with information about the mission.
* Be trustworthy and accurate.
* Keep media informed and up to date; and
* Be pleasant, respectful, understanding, and grateful when coverage does appear!

**WORKING WITH THE MEDIA (roles of the media):**

* Serving the community.
* Protecting the community.
* Informing the community, and
* Making money and staying in business to fulfill the above.

**You can work with the media by:**

* Informing the local media outlets/reporters about the mission and the way volunteers are sharing it locally.
* Utilize relevant news pegs to insert the work you are doing for the mission to add to another larger topic, such as Veterans’ Day, Military Appreciation Month, etc.
* Encourage other professionals and community members to find out more about the organization.

**What the media is looking for:**

* Quality information (detailed press releases).
* Organizations and contacts, they can rely upon.
* Information in advance with timely reminders (usually one month in advance with reminder two weeks in advance); and
* Understanding of their work and limitations.

**WHY SHOULD YOU WORK WITH THE MEDIA?**

* To inform you community about the work you are doing.
* To persuade your community to become involved in the mission.
* To influence the media to engage and share WAA messaging; and
* To do something positive for the community!

**WHEN SHOULD YOU FOCUS ON THE MEDIA?**

* Year-round!
* Key in on dates important to the media, public and WAA.
* Pick and choose dates that are manageable but create a consistent message year-round, breaking down into manageable timeframes (quarterly is great).
* Watch for opportunities that may arise in national news about veterans and military families and be seen as a relevant source to local media.
* Pass along information about achievements and announcements, special events and other important information such as fundraising come from WAA HQ.

**SETTING GOALS**

* Set a calendar with stories to share throughout the year.
* Inform the media and the public about your planned fundraising events.
* Utilize template press materials provided by WAA HQ:
	+ Public Service Announcements (PSA) tv and radio, and
	+ Press releases and media advisories.
* Share regular content posted on HQ owned channels: Social media (Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, LinkedIn and Twitter), Wreaths Across America Radio, website and blog content!

**HOW DO YOU SET UP A MEDIA CAMPAIGN?**

* Prepare your calendar and research media journalist/contacts in your area.
* Pay attention to area happenings throughout the year.
* Seek help (WAA has resources that can offer guidance and information).
* Don’t leave things to the last minute in December and expect media to get involved; and most important...
* Keep at it and don’t give up, this is a process that will take time!

**WHAT IS MEDIA?**

Media, which is the plural form of ‘medium,’ are channels of communication: television, radio, news- papers, magazines, and other written materials (or ‘print media’), and more often now, the Internet (which includes, Webpages, social media, blogs, and podcasts).

These channels are used to spread or transmit information. Which in this case, will be about Wreaths Across America (WAA) and your work in the local community. As a registered volunteer, you will be acting as a local representative of WAA to the public.

To help WAA communicate the mission to “Remember, Honor and Teach” and to realize success to honor local veterans in your community, it requires a yearlong commitment to communication and media efforts. The best way to think about National Wreaths Across America Day is to think of it like a car. If you want to drive your car, you must go outside, turn the key, and start it up. If you drive it every day, then a successful start also becomes assured. However, if you let the car sit for an entire year without starting it and then go outside and try and start it when you need it most, it’s more likely not going to work for you. Media works in a very similar manner!

**As a WAA local representative, you can work with the media by:**

* Informing the local public about the WAA mission and WHY it is important.
* Encourage other professionals and community members to find out more about the organization, to help spread the word to other community leaders, and influencers and to personally get involved.

**BE AWARE!**

Often, we have heard the complaint: “I submitted my press release information to the media, and they did nothing with it.”

Understand that there could be several reasons for this situation:

1. **The quality of your press release.** The media is looking for community information that will interesting to their audience and speak to the positivity of the people living there (something uplifting or informative.) They want the WHO, WHAT, WHERE, WHEN and WHY clearly and concisely noted.
2. **They don’t know you.** Although we all hope that everyone has heard about WAA, we can’t assume that everyone has. Therefore, it is important to take the opportunity to introduce yourself to local media outlets, build relationships, build trust, find the reporters most likely to report on military and veteran/military stories in your area and if that person doesn’t exist, help someone(s) in your area become that person. The more you make yourself a good resource of information for a media person, the more likely they will start seeking you out for media opportunities or be willing to pass along your media information.
3. **Administration.** All media outlets track their community service and maintain a public file of all the organizations and efforts that they helped publicize. To meet their administrative needs, these requests must be submitted at least two weeks in advance (some organizations have more stringent requirements, and we suggest that you consider sending them concrete information one month in advance with “a friendly reminder” follow-up about two weeks before your event).
4. **Resource Management.** Continuing from the thought above, many media outlets have a finite set of resources. For example, a small TV station may only have one news van. This means, if you contacted a media outlet at the last moment, their staff, van, and cameras may already be heading off to do another story when you contacted them.

**WHEN SHOULD YOU FOCUS ON THE MEDIA?**

You should always focus on the media. As you now know, media coverage is a year-round endeavor. To make a year-long effort work, you’re going to need to plan.

**For example:**

**Quarter one** (Jan – March) highlight volunteer and sponsor efforts with thank you’s and stories in the media all while encouraging others to get involved for the upcoming spring and summer events.

**Quarter two** (April - June) Execute events with your new volunteers and sponsors while fundraising. Building upon their passions and circles of influence can help jumpstart your donation efforts for Wreaths Across America Day.

**Quarter three** (July - September) As most people take vacations before their kids go back to school, this is a good time to get involved with the community. People as looking to get out with their families for community events such as parades and town fairs. To be at these events letting folks know we are in the community and looking for volunteers and donations for Wreaths Day which will be coming up in a few short months. It’s also a great time to see what businesses get involved in supporting local efforts for future sponsorships.

**Quarter four** (October – December) If you’ve done everything in the first three quarters, you will hopefully have put yourself in a good situation in terms of volunteers, donations, and sponsors as your heading into the busy season which really starts in October as you can approach the media with some great information about local veterans buried in your cemetery for veterans Day. From Veterans Day to National Wreaths Across America Day and beyond into Wreath Retirement Day (when your year starts all over again) will be a very active time with much attention stemming from the relationships in the media and community that you have been fostering all year.

**GOOD TIMES TO FOCUS EXTRA ENERGY ON THE MEDIA INCLUDE:**

* During the announcement of a new project. For example, a group in Ohio mapped their cemetery using drone technology. The undertaking of this project showed others how a new technology could be utilized and at the same time drew attention to WAA and its mission.
* When you have information that can be tied to community news. For example, a veteran’s birthday parade. If you know of a local veteran who is fortunate enough to have a town parade in their honor, simply by knowing his/her history and sharing it with the media you are living the mission to Remember, Honor, and Teach.
* Opportunity for publicity. For example, Memorial Day Parades, Fourth of July, Veterans Day.

**Some other items that you may want to add to your calendar for outreach in your community include:**

* The WAA Mobile Education Exhibit coming to your area.
* New participating location or group to announce.
* Partnerships will a new company sponsor or trucking partner in your area.
* Reached wreath sponsorship goal!

**WORKING WITH THE MEDIA (establish personal relationships)**

As we’ve mentioned, the first step in working with the media is to establish personal contact with at least one of the people at any media outlet you’ll need to deal with. Having a personal contact means that there’s a specific person to talk to whenever you call or e-mail, and that you can develop a relationship with that person.

Developing a relationship doesn’t necessarily mean starting a friendship – although that can happen – but rather establishing a working relationship that’s friendly and comfortable. That implies mutual respect and a willingness to help the other person. It also implies both the comfort to say “no” when you’re asked to do something that you can’t or that wouldn’t be appropriate for your organization, and the comfort to accept a “no” to your request without it damaging the relationship on either side.

**GIVE AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE**

An important part of establishing and maintaining a relationship, and of working with the media in general, is giving media people what they need to do their jobs. This includes:

* Be available when you’re needed. When your contacts in the media call, answer. If you can’t respond immediately, get back to them as soon as you can or locate a fellow volunteer that can. Remember, the media we receive at the grassroots level is a free and appreciated service the media provides.
* Be as open and generous as you can with information without getting yourself or your organization in trouble. The first rule of marketing is “do no harm.”
* Be trustworthy. Always tell the truth. As a representative of the WAA brand, we expect volunteers to always be truthful when discussing the program.
* Be accurate and concise. Make sure you have the facts before you make a statement. If you don’t have the answer to a question, promise to get it and contact your liaison or HQ to get back to the reporter quickly. If you quote statistics, make sure they’re from a recent reliable source – WAA HQ. If your information is consistently accurate, the media will turn to you as a source of information about your issue.
* Alert the media to stories that they might be interested in. These might include human interest stories, awards, or fundraising efforts. We urge everyone to tell the stories of your local veterans in your cemetery, not only is it a good community human interest piece, but it makes Wreaths Across America Day seem more relevant especially if you can tie it into the community.

**ALWAYS BE PLEASANT AND RESPECTFUL**

You’re much more likely to be treated well and to get what you want if you treat everyone you deal with – not only media people – with respect and good humor. That doesn’t mean that you must suffer abuse, but rather that you’re far less likely to experience any if you don’t offer any reason for it. It also means that people are much happier to hear from you and return your calls and messages if they know that they’ll be talking to someone who values them.

**GOALS FOR WORKING WITH THE MEDIA**

Agenda setting is what you accomplish when you influence what the media covers (media agenda), what people talk about (public agenda).

**To set an agenda:**

* Let the media and public know what you are trying to accomplish,
* Get the public talking about what is important to the mission. This step may have several stages. You may have to start by persuading the media to cover the issue at all (that’s setting the media agenda).
* If they’re already doing so, the next stage is to draw the connection between your efforts and what it means to your community. Often, people are aware, but assume that others will take care of business and they don’t need to get involved. Once people understand that the effort could impact local families, maybe friends, or who knows maybe even them, it’s time to help steer the media toward reporting on your effort, and its impact.
* This whole process may take some time, but it will be worth it for several reasons: you will have educated the media about your efforts (so they don’t approach it in a simplistic way) and convinced them that it is truly important. They will have, in turn, raised the consciousness of the public to the point where the community is ready to act.
* Generate some sort of action (in media and marketing it’s called “a call to action”). This is the best time to hold an event and get more people involved.

Agenda setting helps you make connections with the media and the people who pay attention to them. It also sets the stage for your next step which is continuing the conversation and building towards National Wreaths Across America Day.

**Shaping the Conversation**

Shaping the conversation is trying to change the way people talk about Wreaths Across America**. For example, we DO NOT decorate graves, we are honoring the lives of these heroes and remembering them for their service and sacrifice.** Traditionally, the media tells an audience, exactly what they have already heard or read, so if you say or write it correctly there is a high probability that they will mirror what you have stated. We have a particular problem with the term “Christmas wreaths” as this is a heavily ingrained slip of the tongue stemming from the similar holiday wreaths at the same time. **The wreaths being placed by WAA volunteers are Veterans’ Wreaths or Remembrance Wreaths.**

Once you able to get across your simplified message in the media, it will offer you the opportunity to get more in-depth with the community you now can interact with.

**GETTING ATTENTION**

**The primary methods used to public eye include:**

* Eared Media - television, newspaper, and radio journalists - provide the broadest and most in-depth coverage of your organization. Placing interviews and stories is free, and the news media are reasonably credible – people take seriously what they read in the papers or hear and see on radio and television.
* Public service announcements (PSAs) are like paid ads. However, PSAs are free because broadcasting stations use them to fulfill a regulation requiring them to ‘serve in the public interest.’ While PSAs can help you keep your issue before the public, they give you very little control over when and how they will air, and the content is usually short (often 30 seconds).
* Press releases are write-ups – usually one to two pages – that inform the media about your news. Press releases let you control what you want to say and when, but media outlets may or may not use them, or may edit them down or change them. They may not always look the same when they go out to the public as they did when you turned them in. The WAA PR department writes many generic templates that have a high probability of use and can be customized for your local group.
* Local Events are media opportunities created by you and your volunteers that interacts with the public in some fashion (whether in person or virtual). Through these events, the mere fact that you are being proactive in supporting a cause and effort as big as Wreaths Across America is a newsworthy event worth inviting the media too.

**Takeaway:**

There are a lot of different ways to get the attention of the media and the public. Which one, two, or three is right for you? What you choose to use in your media campaign depends on what you want to say, who you want to say it, and who you want them to say it to.

**SEEK OUT HELP**

Last, and most importantly, we want to remind you that you are not in this alone. We are here to help! The WAA Communications Team is stacked with knowledgeable professionals from varying backgrounds and levels of expertise. Feel free to contact us and use us as a sounding board for ideas and to learn best practices. We are here for you, and we are motivated to see that you succeed as your success means we all succeed in the mission to Remember, Honor and Teach.

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**Resources**

* Media Advocacy 101 is a website provided by the Berkley Media Studies Group that includes an hour-long keynote address by Lori Dorfman about the approach of media advocacy. http://www.bmsg.org/resources/media-advocacy-101/
* Media Communication Tip Sheet provides tips on contributing to the local news, tailoring language, and style for the media, developing messages to reach the public, and evaluating media coverage.
* Using Print Media as Advocacy is an article titled, “How to Write a Letter to the Editor,” with tips on effective communication with the media.

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