

Someone is missing – Can the media help?

The media can be a powerful tool in raising awareness about a missing person at the initial reporting phase and throughout the investigation.

The media can help in locating missing people, particularly in the short-term.

How can I prepare myself for media involvement?

For missing persons investigations reported to the police you will need to seek permission from the officer-in-charge before proceeding with media enquiries. Some investigations need to be conducted sensitively and media may not always be appropriate.

Media includes print, television, radio and internet exposure. A mix of these may assist in raising the profile of your case.

As a family member or friend of a missing person it is important to consider the following:

- What personal information you are willing to share and what you wish to remain private.
- Be clear about the details of the case – when and where was the missing person last seen as well as the salient details of the case.
- The questions you may be asked by the media – ask the reporter, prior to the interview, what questions they intend to ask. You might like to practice answering questions with someone, for example, Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit (FFMPU).
- You can be assertive with the media, you are not compelled to answer every question asked.
- Media coverage can be draining; you may wish to organise a support person to attend interviews with you.
- Remember to seek details about media coverage, such as a media release date and whether or not you can have a copy.
- The contact details you will provide to the media. You might think about purchasing a prepaid SIM card for your mobile to ensure your privacy in the future. You need to be contactable so have a message service if you are unavailable.

- Where you would like the interview to take place? A neutral venue (for example, away from your home or office) might be more suitable.
- Setting boundaries but not placing unreasonable demands on journalists.
- Always be polite and never be hostile. Missing persons stories are time limited and your exposure may only be possible for short periods.
- Whether photos or video footage might benefit your story – it may personalise the investigation and your experiences.
- Seeking independent legal advice if you are asked to sign a consent form or exclusivity order.

What should I be sensitive to?

- You may be asked questions about what might have happened to a missing person. If you do not feel comfortable in talking about this it might be easier to answer *'we just don't know but we hope they are safe and well.'*
- Be conscious of the missing person and their privacy if they were to return. You may not want to provide information about the missing person's place of work, health status, relationships or financial situation.
- Questions about a missing persons mental health might also be asked. If you do not want to talk about their mental health you might like to answer *'the missing person requires regular medication'* rather than the details of diagnosis.
- Other family members or friends might not believe that the media should be involved. It is difficult to ensure that everyone's wishes are respected. You can seek support from the FFMPU to generate some family discussion prior to you proceeding with media.
- Media outlets may keep records of your interviews or images of the missing person. Once the information is in the public domain it is difficult to control its use.

How can I get the media interested?

Following approval for media from the relevant police jurisdiction you may decide to do the following:

- request that the police make enquiries about media opportunities
- raise your request with the Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit who will liaise with the Department of Justice and Attorney General media spokesperson
- contact the National Missing Persons Coordination Centre, Australian Federal Police and request inclusion on their family media bank
- contact media outlets directly
- circulate an email and ask that people send it on within their networks
- start an electronic blog to generate publicity amongst internet communities (blogs can be set up free of charge via:

Web: www.blogspot.com

Media rights and responsibilities

Australian Communications and Media Authority

Phone: 1800 226 667 (Freecall)

Web: www.acma.gov.au

The Australian Press Council

The council is a self-regulatory body for print media and aims to ensure that the free press acts responsibly and ethically.

Phone: 1800 025 712

Web: www.presscouncil.org.au

Communications Law Centre

An independent, non-profit, public interest centre specialising in media, communications and online law and policy.

Phone: (02) 9514 9936

Web: www.comslaw.org.au

Contact details

For further information about this material or other topics, please call us on:

Phone (02) 8688 8173 or 1800 227 772 • **National Relay Service** 1800 555 677

Facebook www.facebook.com/missing.501 • **Email** ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au

Additional agencies that may be able to assist:

Families and Friends of Missing Persons Unit

Provides counselling support to families and friends of missing persons, including support during media coverage.

Phone: (02) 8688 8173/1800 227 772 (Freecall)

Email: ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

Web: www.missingpersons.justice.nsw.gov.au

NSW Police Missing Persons Unit

Oversees the investigation of missing persons searches and enquiries relating to those who were last seen in NSW.

Phone: (02) 1800 025 091

Email: ffmpu@justice.nsw.gov.au

Web: www.police.nsw.gov.au/community_issues/missing_persons

National Missing Persons Coordination Centre, Australian Federal Police

Aims to reduce the incidence and impact of missing persons and to educate the Australian community about this significant issue. It does not search for missing people.

Phone: 1800 000 634

Web: www.missingpersons.gov.au

LawAccess NSW

A free government telephone service that provides legal information, advice and referral for people who have a legal problem in NSW.

Phone: 1300 888 529

Web: www.lawaccess.nsw.gov.au