

WREATHS ACROSS AMERICA INTRODUCTION TO VOLUNTEER MEDIA RELATIONS

WHAT IS MEDIA?

Media, which is the plural form of 'medium,' are channels of communication: television, radio, newspapers, 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.

Helping WAA communicate its mission of "Remember, Honor, Teach" and achieve success in honoring local veterans in your community 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 vehicle, go outside, turn the key, and start it up. If you drive it daily, a successful start is also assured. However, if you let the car sit for an entire year without starting it and then try to start it when you need it most, it likely won't work. Media works in a very similar manner!

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

- Inform the local public about the WAA mission and its importance.
- Encourage other professionals and community members to learn more about the organization, help spread the word to other community leaders and influencers and get involved.

WHAT ARE EARNED MEDIA AND MEDIA ADVOCACY?

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

- Media channels include newspapers, TV, Radio, Websites, social media (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, LinkedIn, TikTok, etc.), Blogs, and others.
- Methods of receiving this media include print, broadcast, and digital on computers, iPads, or smartphones.

Media advocacy is the strategic use of mass media to advance public initiatives. Through media 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 influential individuals to get involved.

HOW DO YOU BUILD MEDIA ADVOCACY?

- Establish personal relationships with local media contacts.
- Be available for interviews or background checks when needed.
- Be open and generous with information about the mission.
- Be trustworthy and accurate.
- Keep the media informed and up to date.
- 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.
- 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 how volunteers share it locally.
- Utilize relevant news pegs to insert your work for the mission to add to another more prominent 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 the media can rely upon.
- Notification in advance with timely reminders (usually one month in advance with reminders two weeks in advance).
- Understanding of their work and limitations.

WHY SHOULD YOU WORK WITH THE MEDIA?

- To inform your 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.
- To do something positive for the community!

WHEN SHOULD YOU FOCUS ON THE MEDIA?

- Year-round!
- Key in on dates significant to the media, public and WAA programs.
- Pick and choose manageable dates, but create a consistent message year-round, breaking down into manageable timeframes (quarterly is excellent).
- Watch for opportunities in national news about veterans and military families, and be seen as a relevant source by local media.

- Pass along information about achievements and announcements, special events, and other essential details, including fundraising 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 the 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, TikTok and Twitter), Wreaths Across America Radio, website newsroom and blog content!

HOW DO YOU SET UP A MEDIA CAMPAIGN?

- Prepare your calendar and research media journalists/contacts in your area.
- Pay attention to area happenings throughout the year.
- Seek help (WAA has resources that can offer guidance and information).
- Do not leave things to the last minute in December, expecting the media to get involved. Most importantly,
- Keep at it, and do not give up; this process takes time!

BE AWARE!

We often hear 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 be attractive 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 do not know you.** Although we all hope everyone has heard about WAA, we can’t assume everyone has. Therefore, it is crucial to take the opportunity to introduce yourself to local media outlets, build relationships and trust, and find the reporters most likely to cover military and veteran stories in your area. If that person doesn’t exist, help someone(s) in your area become that person. The more you make yourself a valuable resource for a media person, the more likely they are to seek you out for media opportunities or to pass along your information.
3. **Administration.** All media outlets track their community service and maintain a public file of all the organizations and efforts 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; for example, magazines need information two months in advance to meet their print schedule). We suggest you send

them concrete information in advance, with a friendly reminder follow-up two weeks before your event.

4. **Resource Management.** Continuing from above, many media outlets have a finite set of resources. For example, a small TV station may only have one news van. This means that if you contact a media outlet at the last moment, their staff, van, and cameras may already be heading to another story.

WHEN SHOULD YOU FOCUS ON THE MEDIA?

It would be best if you always focused on the media. As you now know, media coverage is a year-round endeavor. To make a yearlong effort work, you will need to plan.

For Example:

Quarter one (Jan – March) Highlight the new theme, volunteer opportunities for wreath clean-up, and sponsor efforts with thank-yous and stories in the media about wreath retirement, while encouraging others to get involved in 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. Start sharing details about Giving in July!

Quarter three (July – September*) As most people take vacations before their kids return to school, this is an excellent time to get involved with the community. People want to get out with their families for community events like parades and town fairs. To be at these events, let 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.

****IF YOU HAVEN'T REACHED OUT TO YOUR LOCAL MEDIA BY THIS TIME, YOU ARE HIGHLY ENCOURAGED TO DO SO. Remember this simple rule: bad news happens, but good news doesn't just happen, it's planned!***

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 you head into the busy season, which starts in October as you can approach the media with some great information about local servicemember 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), it will be a very active time with much attention stemming from the relationships in the media and community 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 its cemetery using drone technology), the undertaking demonstrated how new technology could be used 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 learning 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, and 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 is coming to your area.
- New participating location or group to announce.
- Partnerships with a new company sponsor or trucking partner in your area.
- Reached wreath sponsorship goal!

WORKING WITH THE MEDIA

As previously mentioned, the first step in working with the media is to establish personal contact with at least one person at each media outlet you will need to deal with. Personal contact means there is a specific person to talk to whenever you call or e-mail, and you can develop a relationship with that person.

Developing a relationship does not necessarily mean starting a friendship—although that can happen—but rather establishing a friendly and comfortable working relationship. That implies mutual respect and a willingness to help the other person. It also means the comfort of saying “no” when you are asked to do something that you can’t or wouldn’t be appropriate for your organization, and accepting a “no” to your request without damaging the relationship on either side.

GIVE, AND YOU SHALL RECEIVE

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

- Be available when you are needed. When your media contacts call, answer. If you cannot respond immediately, get back to them immediately or locate a fellow volunteer who can. Remember, the media we receive at the grassroots level is a free and appreciated service.
- Be trustworthy. Always tell the truth. As representatives 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 do not have the answer, promise to get it and contact your liaison or HQ to get back to the reporter quickly. If you quote statistics, ensure they are from a recent, reliable source – WAA HQ. If your information is consistently accurate, the media will turn to you as a source on 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; it is a good community human-interest piece and makes Wreaths Across America Day seem more relevant, especially if you can tie it into the community.

ALWAYS BE PLEASANT AND RESPECTFUL

You are 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 does not mean that you must suffer abuse, but rather that you are far less likely to experience any if you don't offer any reason for it. It also means people are much happier to hear from you and return your calls and messages if they know they will 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 (the media agenda) and what people talk about (the 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 persuade the media to cover the issue (especially leadership tasked with setting the media's agenda).
- If they are already doing so, the next stage is to draw a connection between your efforts and what they mean to your community. Often, people are aware but assume others will handle the business and that they do not need to get involved. Once people understand that the effort could impact local families, maybe friends, or who knows, perhaps 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 do not approach it simplistically) and convinced them that it is imperative. They will, in turn, have raised the public's consciousness to the point where the community is ready to act.
- Generate action (in media and marketing, this is called a "call to action"). This is the best time to hold an event and involve more people.

Agenda setting helps you connect with the media and the people who notice them. It also sets the stage for your next step: continuing the conversation and building towards National Wreaths Across America Day.

Shaping the Conversation

Shaping the conversation means changing how people talk about Wreaths Across America. **For example, we DO NOT decorate graves; we honor the lives of these heroes and remember 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 it is a deeply ingrained slip of the tongue stemming from similar holiday wreaths. **The wreaths being placed by WAA volunteers are Veterans’ Wreaths.**

Once you can convey your simplified message to the media, you can get more in-depth with the community you can now interact with.

GETTING ATTENTION

The primary methods used in the public eye include:

- Eared Media (Television, newspaper, and radio journalists) provides your organization’s broadest and most in-depth coverage. Placing interviews and stories is free, and credible news media are usually taken seriously.
- 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. They let you control what you want to say and when, but media outlets may or may not use them, edit them down or change them. They may not always look the same when they go out in public as when you turned them in. The WAA PR department writes many generic templates with a high likelihood of use and can be customized for your local group.
- Local Events are media opportunities created by you and your volunteers that interact 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 significant as Wreaths Across America is a newsworthy event worth inviting the media to.

Takeaway

There are many ways to get the media and the public's attention. Which one, two or three is suitable for you? What you choose to use in your media campaign depends on what you want to say, who you want to say it to, 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 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 are motivated to see that you succeed, as your success means we all grow the mission to Remember, Honor, 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/>
- Using Print Media as Advocacy is an article titled “How to Write a Letter to the Editor,” with tips on effective media communication.