

# Mental Health America Mission Kit Series



## PR 101:

## A Guide to Media Outreach



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## I. Introduction

Media outreach is an invaluable organizational tool that can build your Mental Health America profile and help educate your community about important issues. It also strengthens advocacy efforts, penetrates the public with important mental health information and improves your organization's visibility, leading to countless opportunities.

Here at Mental Health America, strong public relations is key to our successful advocacy and education. Since the public gets almost all of its information through newspapers, internet, TV and radio, a variety of "earned" media tactics help amplify our messages and build public awareness.

With the knowledge that each MHA may feel tugged in many directions, Mental Health America developed this PR 101 guide to help you build and strengthen your communications program. You'll find useful tips and tools, as well as information on how to build and maintain media lists, set up interviews, write letters to the editor and much more.

For additional assistance or information, contact the Mental Health America media relations office at (703) 797-2588 or email [mediainfo@mentalhealthamerica.net](mailto:mediainfo@mentalhealthamerica.net).



## II. Creating a Media List

The first step to successful media outreach is developing a good media list. If you do not already have one, you should organize a media list that includes current information about every TV station, cable network, radio station, daily and weekly newspaper, organization newsletter, website, trade publication and community bulletin in your community. A Microsoft Excel spreadsheet usually works best for keeping and updating this information.

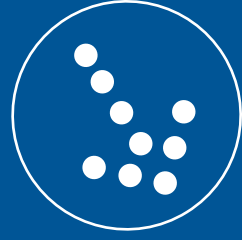
Your media list should include the following information, which you can gather by making a quick telephone call or visiting a website:

### **Radio.** For each station in your community, include:

- Time of newscasts
- Call letters and radio dial numbers
- Broadcast hours
- Names of news directors, political and health reporters, and editorial commentators
- Deadlines for submitting press releases and preferred delivery method (e-mail, snail mail, fax or hand delivery)
- Telephone and fax numbers (including direct numbers for the newsroom for after business hours)
- Addresses (mailing and delivery)
- Website
- Formats (classical, rock & roll, urban contemporary, easy listening, news)
- Special programs (call-in, public affairs) and a profile of program hosts

### **Television Stations.** For each station in your community, including cable networks, include:

- Channel
- Network affiliation
- Times of local newscasts
- Names of political and health reporters, news directors and assignment editors (including home numbers, if possible, for key contacts)
- Telephone and fax numbers (including direct numbers in the newsroom for after business hours)
- Deadlines for submitting press releases and preferred delivery method (e-mail, snail mail, fax or hand delivery)



- Addresses (mailing and delivery)
- Website
- Public affairs programs and a profile of each program and host, including producers
- News ratings in market

**Wire Services (e.g., the Associated Press).** For each wire service, include:

- The state and national bureaus that serve your local newspapers and media outlets
- Names of bureau chief, health and political reporters (get home numbers for wire reporters, if possible) and any specialty issue reporters (e.g., women’s issues, mental health)
- Contacts for the “Daybook,” a listing of the day’s local events that is posted on the wire

**Daily Newspapers.** For each newspaper with circulation in your community, include:

- Names of health and political reporters, city desks, editorial writers or columnists, photo editor, specialty reporters who may cover style, entertainment or women’s issues
- E-mail, telephone and fax numbers, web address and mailing addresses (including direct numbers for the newsroom for after business hours)
- Deadlines (daily and weekends) for submitting press releases and preferred delivery method (e-mail, snail mail, fax, hand delivery)

**Weekly Papers.** For each weekly newspaper with circulation in your community, include:

- Names of publishers, editors and reporters
- E-mail, telephone and fax numbers (including direct numbers for after business hours), web address and mailing addresses and hours (mailing and delivery)
- Deadlines (may be a week in advance) for submitting press releases and preferred delivery method e-mail, snail mail, fax or hand delivery)

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#### Specialty Press. For each specialty press, include:

- Names of parent organization (local Chamber of Commerce, The Rutgers Institute, Seattle Parenting Magazine, etc.)
- Names of reporters and editors
- E-mail addresses and telephone and fax numbers
- Deadlines (weekly or monthly)
- Addresses (mailing and delivery)
- Targeted audiences or issues—mental health community, ethnic community, seniors, etc.

#### Sample media list:

OUTLET	FIRST	LAST	TITLE	PHONE	FAX	EMAIL	BEAT
Clarion Ledger	Jim	Loftus	Reporter	(555)555-5555	(555)555-5555	jloftus@cl.com	Health
Daily Star	Kate	Mason	Reporter	(555)555-5555	(555)555-5555	kmason@star.com	Health
Sun Herald	Bob	Smith	Reporter	(555)555-5555	(555)555-5555	bsmith@sun.com	Health
Boston Globe	Vivian	Vincent	Reporter	(555)555-5555	(555)555-5555	vvincent@globe.com	Business
Hartford Courant	Gabriel	Lustig	Reporter	(555)555-5555	(555)555-5555	glustig@courant.com	World



You can make the best use of your press list by following these guidelines:

- **Organize the list by outlet.**
- **Confirm all information with news outlets.** Do not rely on directories, which quickly become outdated.
- **Call assignment editors and reporters to introduce yourself.** Provide them with your contact information and let them know that you are available to provide information when they need it.
- **Know past editorial positions taken on similar and relevant issues.**
- **Pay attention to the specialty and trade publications in your community, including union, church and organization publications.**
- **Put your media list on a computer, so you can generate mailing labels and update information.**
- **Create the ability to broadcast fax reporters, either by fax machine or by using one of the many computer or Internet programs available to do this.** You may need a separate dedicated modem line to use a computer broadcast fax, but the small cost will save countless hours of waiting.

### III. The Rules of the Game.

**Understand the Vocabulary.** During an interview, nothing is ever “off-the-record.” If you want something to be off-the-record, do not tell a reporter.

Off-the-record and other terms can have very different meanings to different reporters. The following definitions are common practice, but beware—they are subject to each reporter’s own interpretation.

**On-the-record:** Anything you say can be used or quoted in any news story.

**Off-the-record:** In reality, off-the-record does not exist. Do not tell a reporter anything you do not want included in a news story. In theory, off-the-record means you can give a reporter information that you do not want associated with your organization, but again, do not say anything you don’t want to see used or discuss topics that make you uncomfortable—either “on the-record” or “off-the-record.”

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**On background:** A reporter can use information that you provide, quoting you as a source without mentioning your name. Such quote may read, “A source inside MHA said...”

**Not for attribution:** Also referred to as “deep background.” A reporter can use the information you provide, but cannot reference, in any way, the source of this information. Be careful.

**Stick to Your Message.** It is a reporter’s job to frame a story in a way that is newsworthy and interesting. A reporter may ask you questions that appear intrusive, leading, biased or inflammatory. If this happens, don’t feel rushed to answer. Instead, **stick to your message.** Use your answer time to steer the conversation back to the question you want to answer. It is difficult to master finessing these kinds of transitions and it is worthwhile to practice before an interview.

**Always Meet Deadlines.** If your MHA receives a routine news inquiry, always ask the reporter’s deadline and try your best to meet it. If you are unable to get accurate information back to the reporter in time, let the reporter know that you are pursuing information but may not meet the deadline, or provide the reporter an alternate contact.

If you want press coverage of an MHA event, plan the event to **accommodate the deadlines** of the media outlets you expect to cover the story. Generally, media events should be planned for the morning and early afternoon hours in order for both print and electronic reporters to meet their deadlines.

**Be prepared.** When announcing new initiatives or accomplishments, be prepared. Anticipate questions that reporters will ask and have fact sheets or talking points available to respond to their questions. If unanticipated questions arise, pursue the answers quickly—or give reporters a reasonable timeframe in which you will get back to them.

**Be Honest.** Never misrepresent information to a reporter. If you do, you could destroy your personal credibility with that reporter and possibly that of your MHA. Reporters do not want to receive misleading, false or inaccurate information. Be honest and factual when you give information to reporters—but **stick to your organization theme** at all times, and use supporting issues and messages that reinforce that theme.

**Be Quotable.** **Being quotable means being brief** first and foremost, but it can also mean being compelling, insightful or dramatic. It is important to be factual and use comparisons, analogies or metaphors to deliver a good quote. If you talk on a subject for 10 minutes or issue a three-page press release, the reporter or editor gets to decide how s/he will quote you. If you limit your comments to a few sentences, you are more likely to influence the message that is printed or aired.

**Repeat, repeat, repeat.** Don’t be afraid to repeat your messages. Be sure the reporter understands your key messages. The public will only hear them once, regardless if you repeat yourself several times to a reporter during an interview.



## IV. Get To Know Reporters and Editors

Once you compile your press list and have basic information about broadcast and print media outlets, you must gain an understanding of the types of stories these outlets are interested in covering.

The first step is to develop a relationship with the reporter. Has the reporter written mental health-related stories in the past? Has mental illness touched the reporter's life personally or through a family member? What does the reporter find most intriguing about covering similar issues? What kinds of stories has the reporter covered in the past?

If the reporter is new to covering mental health issues, you may want to invite him or her to lunch, or offer to provide a background information interview on your issues and share important statistics and facts related to mental health.

**Distribute Press Kits.** Like you, reporters are busy professionals. The more you assist them in doing the legwork, the more likely they are to use your stories. Press kits can help.

You should distribute press kits in 9 x 12-inch folders with pockets that contain the following information:

- A statement of why the issue at hand is relevant and vital, and how it specifically affects your community (usually a press release).
- Organization history; or an "About MHA."
- Existing clips that highlight your MHA's past accomplishments or are relevant to the issue at hand.
- An informal black and white photograph of local volunteers and advocates, or another relevant photo (if available).
- An MHA fact sheet that includes who's on staff, where your office is located, information on Mental Health America/your affiliation, contact phone numbers, who the press contact is, etc.

**Visit Editorial Boards.** You should arrange for your MHA spokespeople to meet with the editorial departments of newspapers and radio and television stations in your area or state. Try to arrange one such meeting per month with different media outlets.

**Invite Reporters to Travel With Your MHA.** You should invite reporters, particularly those who appear favorable to your issue, to spend time with your MHA staff for an afternoon, go for coffee or attend an event. This invitation gives reporters an opportunity to get an inside look at the day-to-day operations of your MHA. In addition, if a reporter travels with you, s/he will realize just how hard you and your volunteers work (and will hopefully write about it). Adopt this tactic only if your MHA is running smoothly, is active and if you can handle informal press contact all day.

**Note: Remind all MHA staff and volunteers that everything they do and say is "on-the-record" when a reporter spends the day with them.**



## V. The Top 10 Survival Tips for Talking to Reporters

- Number 10: Honor deadlines
- Number 9: Don't be afraid to say "I don't know"
- Number 8: Prepare your spokespeople before interviews
- Number 7: Tell the truth
- Number 6: Don't fill awkward silences
- Number 5: Know your facts
- Number 4: Return calls promptly
- Number 3: Give reporters what they need to write/produce a story
- Number 2: Understand/establish definitions of the vocabulary (e.g., "recovery" may mean something different to you than to a reporter)
- Number 1: Niceness counts: reporters always have the last word



## VI. Other Forms of Good Press

**Letters to the Editor.** You can write letters to the editor (LTEs) to print outlets in your community on topics or issues that you deal with as an MHA. The most successful LTEs are direct responses to articles that already ran in a newspaper or magazine. Responding to an article enables you to make a pointed yet brief argument. LTEs should be no more than 700 words (the length varies at each outlet, so it is important to find out the publication's length requirements) and should always cite the article to which you are responding. You should feel free to submit letters on topics that relate to your organization—either reactively or proactively.

**Television and Radio Public Affairs Programming.** Most local television stations and cable networks run public affairs programming at least once per week. Shows can focus on such topics as local politics, culture or a particular ethnic group. Although these shows are often aired late at night or early in the morning, people do watch them. Schedule time to become familiar with the host and his or her style. Then, call the station and solicit opportunities to participate as a host, panelist or speaker.

**Radio Talk Shows.** Almost every community has a local call-in radio talk show, usually with an opinionated host. Unless the host is unusually belligerent, you can make a habit of calling in to talk shows regularly, as often as once a week. Comments should be kept brief and to the point. Calling in regularly may make the host of the program supportive of your MHA. This could lead to the host promoting mental health issues without solicitation.

### The Tools of the Trade

**The Telephone.** News travels fast. If you have good relationships with reporters and a creative approach, you can pick up the telephone and call these reporters to make statements or comment on relevant events.

Your MHA will sometimes become a part of a news story because a reporter requests a comment from your office. Other times, you may want to actively solicit coverage of your MHA's comments on breaking news.

**Statements.** When a quick response is needed to tie into events of the day, you may want to issue a statement rather than take the time to draft a news release, and risk missing deadlines. A few concise, quotable sentences can be faxed or emailed to news organizations.

**Press Releases.** Press releases must be news—relevant, concise and interesting. If they are overused, or used improperly, your MHA may jeopardize its appeal as a credible source. (A sample press release is included at the end of this guide.)

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There is a standard format for news releases that includes:

- Organization name
- Contact person and phone number
- Dateline (e.g., Month/Day, Year—ANYTOWN)
- Headline

Ideally, press releases should be written in a pyramid form, which means you lead with the most important facts or messages and add detail as you progress. A good press release will:

- Limit information to news of interest today or tomorrow—other topics should be covered in media advisories.
- Put the most important information in the lead sentence or first paragraph.
- Use colorful, quotable and creative language.
- Be grammatically correct, proofread carefully and contain no spelling mistakes.
- Provide all the information a reporter needs to write the story (e.g., if the release is on federal funding there should be a section localizing the issue or story with facts on how consumers in your community will be affected).

**Media Advisories.** Media advisories are informational releases that announce an organization’s schedule, upcoming events or press conferences. Media advisories give reporters the who, what, when, where and why of an upcoming event. They can also include a background paragraph that provides reporters why with necessary additional information. Remember to place “MEDIA ADVISORY” at the center of the top of the page.

**Your Website.** Studies have shown that the majority of reporters get the bulk of their information from the internet. By building a virtual pressroom on your website and updating it frequently, you create a place that they can rely on for up-to-date mental health information and your MHA’s views on the issues. Helpful documents to post on the site include fact sheets, press kits and archived releases. This also helps drive consumer traffic to your website and helps position your MHA as the local authority on mental health issues.

**Localized Information.** Although Mental Health America is a great resource for fact sheets and information on a variety of mental health topics, sometimes the best way to capture a local reporter’s attention is with a local “angle.” Take some time to research how mental illness affects your community, and build a simple list of statistics and facts that can help a reporter understand why a national mental health issue affects his or her own smaller community. It is also helpful to identify consumer spokespeople willing to share their personal stories with the media.



**Radio News Release.** A radio news release is a recorded voice transmitted over the phone to radio stations for use in their newscasts. Radio news releases are generally no more than 30 seconds in length. Radio stations take your sound bite and package it as a news story, with a reporter providing the lead-in. You will need to use an outside vendor that specializes in distributing radio news releases.

As with press releases, there is a certain protocol for preparing a radio news release:

- **Be consistent.** Make sure your quote is echoed through all your communications about a particular event or issue—press releases, interviews with reporters, etc.
- **Be relevant.** Tie your announcement to a current national story.
- **Be brief.** It is better for you to make editing decisions than the radio station.
- **Plan ahead.** Record your spot at the end of the day for the following morning's news.
- **Be courteous.** If a station is not interested in a particular feed, respect their decision and know that you “can’t win them all.”

**Keep copies of all press releases, statements and radio news releases.** Develop a filing system that categorizes releases and notes when and to whom you sent each item. This filing system is a key component of your ongoing research program; you should keep track of what you are saying about your MHA and your issues. It is also helpful to post archived documents (e.g., press releases, media advisories) on your website's pressroom.

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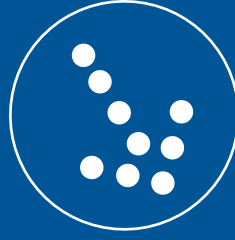
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## VII. Worksheet: Earned Media Timeline

Task (Rough Order of Completion)	Date
Complete Press List	_____
Create Press Kits	_____
Buy Needed Equipment	_____
Meet Key Press Contacts	_____
Arrange for Someone to Monitor Media Coverage	_____
Hire Communications Staff, Consultant or Engage Volunteer	_____
Research and Prioritize News Outlets According to Target Audience	_____
Assess Minority Press Opportunities	_____
Write Earned Media Plan	_____
Build Online Pressroom and Keep Information Up-to-date	_____
Initiate "Letters to Editor" Program	_____
Schedule Media Training/ "Dealing With Press" Training for MHA Spokesperson	_____
Schedule Individual Meetings With Key Opinion Leaders	_____
First Visit to Editorial Boards	_____
Schedule TV and Radio Public Affairs Program Appearances	_____
Invite Press to Coffees, Town Meetings and "Day With an MHA Executive"	_____
Second Visit to Editorial Boards	_____



## VIII. Checklist for Preparing Spokespersons for a Public Event

1. **Event Memo.** A detailed memo should be created outlining the event specifics, including where, when, who will be present, why the event is being held, length and any other important information.
2. **Talking points.** A series of talking points or key messages—presented in a bulleted format—should be created. Talking points should be written with the audience in mind, hit the main message points and preferably be only one page, certainly no longer than two pages. Talking points should also reinforce the key messages of your press release.
3. **Q&A.** A list of possible tough questions—with recommended responses—should be created.
4. **Materials Review.** The event memo, talking points and Q&A document should be reviewed by your MHA staff content experts to make sure that responses are accurate and properly framed for the media. The materials should be completed and provided to your spokesperson at least one day before the event to allow time for review and changes. All documents, including the talking points, Q&A and press release, should reflect any changes.
5. **Pre-Event Prep Meeting.** Schedule a meeting one to two hours before the event to prepare the spokesperson. In this meeting, the briefer should:
  - Provide information on breaking news related to the announcement.
  - Walk through the event “flow,” or how the event will run.
  - Review the talking points and important messages.
  - Ask your spokesperson the tough questions contained in your Q&A, providing him or her an opportunity to use the prepared guidance to answer questions in his or her own voice.
6. **Time to Prepare and Focus.** Allow your spokesperson time to review the talking points and Q&A as well as prepare for the event.
7. **Prior to Entering the Room.** Shortly before the event is set to begin, the lead staffer should walk with the spokesperson to the event and give them a run-down of media in attendance. Provide water on the podium or table for your spokesperson.

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8. **Last Question.** Designate one person to call for the last question and end the event by thanking attendees for coming.
  
9. **Stay With Your Spokesperson.** The communications or lead event staff should stay with your spokesperson in the event that reporters have follow-up questions or want an interview.
  
10. **One-on-One Interviews After Event.** Generally, one-on-one interviews should be conducted following the event, especially television interviews. There may be exceptions based on TV deadlines, but spokesperson prep must be completed before any interview.



## IX. Sample News Release

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE  
DATE

CONTACT: NAME  
PHONE NUMBER

### **Back to School: Take Time to Talk With Your Child** **New [NAME OF MHA] Resources Help Parents and Children Communicate**

[NAME OF TOWN, STATE] – As children return to school, [NAME OF MHA] encourages parents to set aside at least 15 minutes a day to listen and talk with their children to promote positive behavior and prevent school bullying.

“Parents who develop a strong relationship with their children through communication are better able to guide them toward more positive, healthy activities and friendships,” said [MHA SPOKESPERSON AND TITLE]. “Back-to-school time provides parents with a great opportunity to start talking with their children about what is going on in their lives.”

Research shows that children whose parents actively engage them in daily conversations about their lives in and out of school tend to have better grades, are less likely to abuse drugs and alcohol, have higher self-esteem and are more likely to attend college. Positive parent-child communication includes being supportive, listening to your child, tolerating differences and being understanding.

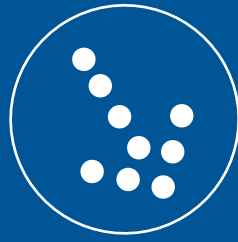
Mental Health America’s free materials for parents and educators include:

- **Activity Planner**—A list of ideas and upcoming events to generate parent/child conversation.
- **Reading List**—A list of books for children at different reading levels that allows for more conversations.
- **Children’s Mental Health Matters**—Series of fact sheets on the basics of mental health and resources for more information.

For copies or for more information, call [NAME OF MHA] at [TELEPHONE NUMBER] or visit [NAME OF MHA’S WEBSITE].

[BOILERPLATE, OR BRIEF DESCRIPTION, OF YOUR MHA]

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*bringing wellness home*