

LPD puts hold on weekend information

New policy also restricts or limits officer contact with the media

Ralph Bartholdt/Lewiston Tribune

A new policy adopted this week by the Lewiston Police Department restricts the flow of public information about criminal activity that occurs on weekends.

The policy, drafted by Police Chief Chris Ankeny, will limit the flow of information from the department for approximately 72 hours from around noon Friday to noon Monday and insulate officers from direct contact with the media.

The reason for the change is a lack of staffed positions to respond to media inquiries over the weekend, Ankeny said.

"The department or the city does not have someone available to respond to inquiries over the weekend," the chief said.

Prior to the policy change, officers were available during the weekend to field occasional phone calls or media questions at their convenience. A member of the police department administrative staff would routinely field questions from reporters during the week.

In the past, Ankeny said, media members got weekend information directly from dispatchers who juggled emergency calls sometimes at the same time they handled reporter inquiries. Dispatch will no longer address those calls. To get weekend information from the department, the media must appear at a crime scene where reporters will be given a brief synopsis or a "sound bite," according to the policy. Any more information will not be relayed until Monday when questions can be addressed in writing to the department's public information officer and may require that a public records request be filed through the department.

The policy went into effect Monday. Media guidelines released by Ankeny Tuesday indicated no police call log would be released on weekends. Updated media guidelines released by the city Wednesday indicate the call log will be available on weekends but that newly hired city spokeswoman Carol Maurer will not answer questions about the log until Monday. Officers will not be available to answer questions about the log, according to the city.

According to the new policy, written questions must be submitted to Maurer between noon and 1 p.m. Monday through Friday "to allow officers time to research information and provide accurate and consistent answers to inquiries," Ankeny said. The department's previous policy allowed reporters access at an officer's convenience during weekday business hours.

The policy, which bypassed the city council, has drawn concern from at least one council member.

"It's kind of upsetting," Councilor Jesse Maldonado said.

He was apprised of the policy change at the same time media members received an email regarding the new policy, he said.

"The city does not stop on the weekend," he said. "The police department doesn't stop on the weekend, the fire department doesn't stop on the weekend, incidents don't stop on the weekend."

Maldonado said he, as well as other councilors as far as he knows, had no involvement in drafting the latest Lewiston Police Department policy.

"City residents reading the newspaper, their interest doesn't stop on Friday," he said. "That's just not how it works."

The new policy is in contrast to those of other area law enforcement agencies.

If something the media deems newsworthy happens on a Sunday, Asotin County Sheriff John Hilderbrand said reporters have his cellphone number and should feel free to call him or his undersheriff.

"If you hear about it, call and we'll get you the information," Hilderbrand said. "If we don't know, we'll find out and get back to you."

The county also provides a log of events every day of the year, including holidays and whenever media members have questions.

The Lewiston department's new policy discourages media members from contacting officers directly. Instead, all inquiries must be written requests sent to Maurer.

The policy is at odds with the Nez Perce County Sheriff's Office, where media members have quick access to call logs and personnel at any time during business hours and can contact the sheriff or chief deputy after hours. An acting public information officer pushes calls to officers during the day, or has officers return calls when they have time.

"There isn't a policy," Sheriff Joe Rodriguez said. "They can come in and talk to anybody."

Clarkston Police Chief Joel Hastings said most departments nationwide are moving toward a similar community policing policy in which officers regularly interact with the media and the public, instead of moving away from those interactions and using a liaison to funnel information.

"As an agency we have a good, efficient, working relationship with the media and we keep those channels of communication open," Hastings said. "It's about the police department being part of the community and not segregated."

Ankeny said Lewiston's new policy provides safeguards to ensure only accurate information is released, sometimes at the expense of expedience.

"To ensure an accurate flow of information with our media partners," Ankeny wrote in a prepared statement. "The city feels that one point of contact for all media inquiries is a best practice that will improve information flow and ensure accurate, timely and transparent reporting of information."

Lewiston Mayor Jim Kleeburg said the policy isn't set in stone and can be readdressed if it is found to impede public information.

"When it becomes a detriment to public information it can be something we can look at," Kleeburg said. "I am willing to let this ride out."

City Manager Jim Bennett, who oversees Ankeny and the police department, did not return calls for comment on the new police policy.

Bartholdt can be contacted at rbartholdt@lmtribune.com or (208) 848-2275.