



Responding to the media

What to do when you receive an unsolicited media request

The criminalization of HIV non-disclosure has generated a significant amount of media attention. Often when a new case emerges, local journalists will approach AIDS service organizations to gather specific information for an article or special report, or for comment. It is important that you have a plan of action in place to respond to media inquiries. By preparing for media inquiries before they arrive, you will ensure that any potential coverage will be accurate, well-received and will enhance the profile of both your organization and the communities you serve. The following are some general guidelines for responding to media inquiries.

- **Always be friendly and show interest in helping the media**, regardless of whether you decide to go through with the interview or not. This is a great way to cultivate relationships with your local media and keep them open to covering you or your organization's work at a later date.
- **Make sure you get basic details surrounding the request.** Record the journalist's name and relevant contact information including the name of the media outlet, what the story is about and the intended angle; which other organizations or individuals will be interviewed or featured in the piece; the anticipated air date or publication date for the piece; and the deadline for your organization's response. You will want to keep this information in your media files for future reference.
- **Resist the urge to respond to the request immediately.** It is important to take some time to assess the request and determine if it is a worthwhile opportunity for your organization. Often it is helpful to check out the media outlet and journalist, as well as any coverage they may have done on this subject in the past to determine their possible angle on the story. Be cognizant of the journalist's deadline and let him or her know that you need to consider who is best placed to take their request and when, and that you will call them back. If you decide not to go through with the interview, try to provide the journalist with a referral to another individual organization that you think will be able to respond. This is a great way to develop good relationships with local journalists even when you are unable to respond favourably to media requests.
- **Beware of the confidentiality obligations you have to your clients.** AIDS service organizations are often contacted if one of their clients is involved in an HIV disclosure case. Your organization must always uphold your clients' right to

privacy and should not provide the media with any confidential information about your clients.

- **Do not comment on the facts of a particular case.** The facts of any case are not always made clear to those who are not directly involved in the case. Any comments you make about a particular case can very easily be taken out of context and misconstrued. You should keep your comments general and always stay focused on your key messages.
- **It is important that you are well prepared before the interview.** Take a moment to organize your thoughts by reviewing you or your organization’s position on criminalization of HIV non-disclosure, review your talking points, and practice what you want to communicate. (For guidance on crafting these talking points, contact the Legal Network at info@aidslaw.ca.) This will help you keep your messaging clear and consistent with your organization’s position on criminalization.
- **During the interview, be friendly, relaxed and professional.** Pause before answering each question to help organize your response and try to provide brief and concise statements. Your responses should always reinforce your key messages. Do not hesitate to keep a copy of your talking points in front of you during a phone interview. If you do not understand a question or are not comfortable with the direction that the interviewer is taking with a particular question, ask for clarification or reword the question to make sure you understand the interviewer’s intentions. This will also give you a chance to organize your response. If there is a question you are not prepared to answer, let the interviewer know that you’ll need to look into it and that you will be happy to let them know your answer afterwards, if you have one. It is also always acceptable to state that you do not know the answer — and much better than trying to “fake” your way through a topic. If you know someone or an organization that may be able to respond, provide the interviewer with an appropriate contact.
- **You should know that misquotes can and do happen.** Always check the piece carefully once it has been published to make sure you were quoted correctly. If you are misquoted and believe it should be corrected, always call the journalist to explain the error and offer clarification. Most journalists are very receptive to this type of attention, and this is another good way to develop a relationship with journalists.

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