How to Work with the Media and SMP Fraud Victims

One of the most effective ways to help educate the public about scams and how to avoid becoming a fraud victim is to hear from someone who has experienced it themselves. However, SMP and other federal grantees must proceed cautiously to ensure the integrity of their grant and the continued safety and well-being of the beneficiaries they serve. This document offers some guidance to help support you in navigating this delicate process.

Talk to beneficiaries about the value of sharing their story with the media. Having beneficiaries who are willing to talk about their experience can be extremely useful. Explain how sharing their story may help prevent others from becoming victims of fraud.

- “You have an amazing story! Your information could help to prevent someone else from experiencing something similar.”
- “There is no shame or embarrassment in what happened to you. Scammers are extremely convincing, and there are likely many others who also have fallen for this same scheme.”
- “By telling your story, the media can get the word out in our community about this scam. This information can help empower others to protect their medical, personal, and financial information.”
- “There are different ways to tell your story based on your comfort level. You could do an in-person, phone, or video interview. If you want to remain anonymous, you can make arrangements with the reporter in advance to ensure your identity is protected. In the end, if you aren’t comfortable or confident that your privacy will be protected — or you simply change your mind — you always have the option to decline the interview.”

Establish a media policy. It is important to determine who is and who is not authorized to speak to the media within your SMP program. Then make sure all staff, including part-time employees and volunteers, are aware of your policy. Remember that a member of the media could reach out to your program at any time and a senior level team member may not always be available to respond.

All team members should be trained on what to do when they receive a media request. In many cases, especially if someone is a part-time employee or a volunteer, you may want the team member simply to state they are not authorized to speak with the media but can direct the reporter to their program director who handles all media inquiries. In other cases, you may want direct staff to provide a basic statement (sometimes called a “holding statement”) that has been drafted in advance and then refer the reporter to the program director to respond to further questions.

Provide media training to select team members. Directors and team members who might be responsible for working directly with the media should receive professional media training. This training should include how to respond to questions, including sensitive and difficult questions. The SMP Resource Center can also always assist with how to respond to specific questions.

Get to know your local media. For team members who have been authorized to speak to the media, be proactive in building relationships with local journalists so they are aware of your organization and your ability to serve as a resource when they are working on stories.

When you have someone who is willing to share their story, contact the reporter yourself. If the reporter is interested, have the beneficiary contact the reporter. *Never give the beneficiary's contact information to a reporter.* A reputable journalist will understand and respect this decision.

After speaking with the reporter, immediately contact the beneficiary to pass along the journalist's contact information, any specifics about the story they are working on, and when their deadline is.

Clarify expectations in advance of doing any media interview. For those team members who are authorized to speak to the media, talk to the reporter in advance before agreeing to an interview. Make sure you are able to provide the information they are seeking and have time to prepare any specific responses or resources. Also discuss the type of fraud, the preferred interview method for both parties (in-person, phone, or video), and the reporter's desired result from writing and publishing the story.

Ask the journalist how they are able to protect the beneficiary. Sometimes a beneficiary will be more willing to tell their story if their identity is not given, their voice is changed, or their face is blurred out. It is your responsibility to gauge the comfort level of the beneficiary and then communicate that to the media source. If the media source is unwilling to work with the beneficiary's needs, then it may not be wise for the beneficiary to give an interview.

If you are encouraged by the media to pressure the beneficiary to tell their story, exercise extreme caution. Reinforce the sensitivity of the situation and the program's responsibility to ensure that beneficiaries feel safe and aren't pressured to share beyond their comfort level. Always gather plenty of information about the interview to share with the beneficiary and gauge their comfort level before moving forward. Keep in mind that if either you, or the beneficiary, are uneasy about doing the interview, you can always decline the request.

Prepare "talking points" in advance. Draft answers to potential questions a reporter is likely to ask ahead of time. This will help to ensure that the key information you want to communicate is included in the story.

You may also want to consider preparing talking points for beneficiaries and even doing a practice interview, so they are better prepared. However, it is important for a beneficiary to be themselves and not sound like they are reading from a script. A beneficiary needs to speak in a way that is natural to them. Yet, with some advance preparation, beneficiaries can help to deliver or reinforce key information that can be useful to others in the community.

Follow appropriate SMP media protocols. Ask team members to help keep an eye out for beneficiaries who might be willing to share their story and notify their directors about anyone they think would be a good fit. Team members should never pass along media contact information to a beneficiary without their director's approval. Team members should also be reminded to never give out a beneficiary's contact information to a reporter.

In addition, directors should not share media contact information with their full team. Be purposeful with sharing media contact details and passing along beneficiary stories. This ensures that the relationships you've built with media sources will remain intact and that SMP will continue to be able to provide information as needed. If contact is not purposeful, a media source may be discouraged from contacting or working with SMP in the future, so be considerate of both parties' needs.

Contact the SMP Resource Center if you would like assistance. If you do not have a direct media contact but have a beneficiary willing to talk to the media, contact Nicole Liebau, the SMP Resource Center director, at nliebau@smpresource.org.

Be ready to provide the SIRS reference number, which she will need in order to review case details and contact media as applicable. Complete as many details in SIRS as possible prior to contacting Nicole.

If the beneficiary would like an SMP representative to support them while they talk with the media, SMP can do so if appropriate. Remember that in all cases, SMP should not be the one to tell the beneficiary's story – all information regarding the beneficiary's story should be provided directly by the beneficiary, not SMP.

If you are ever in doubt about what to do with a media request, or if you receive a request from a national media outlet, contact Nicole Liebau, the SMP Center director, at nliebau@smpresource.org.

Other Media Tips

- Understand that most reporters require an "on-the-record" interview with the ability to quote you. If part of the conversation is to be "off the record" (not quoted), that will need to be part of the agreement with the reporter beforehand. If it is stated after, then the reporter may still consider it on the record.
- Avoid specific statements that can't be backed up or for which there is no additional public information.
  - Example: "We suspect there's international involvement in this scheme."
- Do not mention specific entities, companies, or individuals.
- Do not mention individuals of interest.
- Do not mention enforcement actions or investigations that are in progress.
  - Even when quoting official press releases, caution is warranted under appeal.
- Use, and provide to the media, ACL/SMP Resource Center-approved public resources from the national website.
- If mentioning specific states, locations, or statistics, do so with caution.
  - Example: If you say, "There has been a significant increase in genetic testing fraud in Iowa," this may prompt a congressional inquiry regarding the number of complaints in that state compared to others.
  - This includes putting company names in flyers, brochures, or other materials as examples.
- A good rule of thumb is to ask yourself, "How would this look on the front page of *The New York Times*?"

This project was supported, in part, by grant number 90MPRC0002 from the U.S. Administration for Community Living, Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C. 20201. Grantees undertaking projects under government sponsorship are encouraged to express freely their findings and conclusions. Points of view or opinions do not, therefore, necessarily represent official Administration for Community Living policy.