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# Media, <sup>800</sup> city talk PD report issues

Special police board meeting yields few results to resolve access to incident, arrest reports

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Mistakes and public misperceptions — not malice — caused Lebanon Police to withhold public information from the public last week, but things are getting better, city officials told the media Wednesday.

A special meeting of the city's Police Board was called for Monday by Mayor C.P. Craig after the city came under fire last week for a new information control policy that seemed to some not to conform to the state's open records law.

Members of three media organizations met with the Police Board at the Wallace Center on Harwood Avenue Wednesday in a strictly controlled meeting during which the public was prohibited

from speaking.

"Changes within the police incident report procedures with the press were undertaken as a matter of routine review of the procedures and policies and processes within the police department," explained Craig to kick off the meeting.

That review has been conducted during the past few months "to ensure that our procedures, our processes and our policies are, A, relevant, B, compliant with state law, and C are indeed being adhered to," Craig said. "As with any changes, there are potential for mistakes or error."

Craig justified the policy revision by saying previously the media had access to information that must be protected from release under state law.

The mayor made no bones about whom he believed to be

to blame for that.

"The prior chief and administration were in violation of state law and federal statutes under the U.S. Code. Because of that, we instituted a change after legal review by the city counsel, Mr. (David) Wilhite, but unfortunately there is misperceptions that became apparent, and I personally take responsibility for those misperceptions on the part of the public as well as the media."

Craig said he apologizes to the citizens for their misperceptions.

Lebanon Police Chief Joe Brauer admitted his department has probably erred on the side of caution when deciding what information to release about police incidents

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since the department implemented its new information control policy on July 1.

Previously, members of the media were admitted to the police computer system with a police department issued user name and password and could directly view each incident and arrest report, which are open records under the Missouri Sunshine Law.

Since July 1, however, incident reports have not been provided to the media despite numerous requests. Instead, a "press report," often heavily censored, has been generated and distributed.

Brauer explained that initially the new policy included a daily report summarizing every incident from the previous 24 hours, compiled by each shift supervisor. Now, however, it has been discovered that the software system technology at the police department includes a way to generate media releases from the incident reports, so that is how the department currently dispenses information, he said.

"What we are able to do is go in and take out those items that are restricted as confidentiality that protects the rights of the people whose rights, the suspect's rights, and that information that was allowed accessible in the past was information such as date of birth, Social Security numbers and telephone numbers and VINs on your car and so on and so on," Brauer said.

"... This is new to the department," Brauer said. "Our redacting may have been a little overbearing, and we have retracted that where we may not have contained this information, now we are, such as the officer's name and our victim and an age, an approximate age, as long as that victim is not a juvenile, as long as the victim, it's not detrimental to their safety to announce their name, or ... for sexual offenses."

Julie Turner-Crawford, edi-

tor of The Daily Record, refuted the chief's assertion that the media's access to the police computer system included access to the Missouri Uniform Law Enforcement System, MULES, as well as scanned statements, and crime scene and booking photos.

"I have never seen those," Turner-Crawford said. "We've never seen any of those."

"We're not saying that you did see that," Craig said. "What we are saying is they were on the system and accessible."

Craig said there is either an ordinance or a policy that restricts access to city computers to city employees. "That's been

on the books before I became mayor," he said.

Turner-Crawford reminded the chief that he had admitted during a meeting with her and KJEL radio news director Patty Burns that there has never been an issue with the newspaper or the radio station getting into information that was restricted.

At that time, Brauer cited an instance in which an officer failed to seal a report concerning a juvenile to justify the new information control policy.

"We know our jobs. We know what we can and cannot do," Turner-Crawford said. "If we had gotten into that report, we'd close it. We don't touch it."

Turner-Crawford asked the chief if there has ever been an instance in which The Daily Record or KJEL reported something that interfered with an investigation.

"What I'm saying, Julie, is that between the both of you, sure there's not been a problem. Can there be a problem with some other people? ... There can be, and because of that, this has got to happen for the protection of the privacy of everybody, not just the public, but for all of us."

Turner-Crawford stood on her right under the Sunshine Law to have access to incident

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reports — not media releases. "I would like to have access to full incident reports. Redact the Social Security numbers. I don't care. Redact the Master Card numbers. I don't care.

"We don't need those, and I have absolutely no problem with that," she said.

"... I don't agree with just getting what the police want to give us," she said. "If they just give us what they want us to have, that means they don't want the public to know what's going on. If you're limiting my information, you're also limiting their information.

"You have a responsibility to your citizens to inform them what's going on in their community," she said.

"Just ask the people of the city of Lebanon what they think," Turner-Crawford said, gesturing toward the citizens in attendance. "Open up the floor for questions. Ask them what they would like to see in these reports."

The mayor and the board did not allow the citizens to

express their views during the public meeting.

The conversation ranged from how the media can be useful in helping to solve crimes to the possibility of allowing a dedicated computer system at the police department on which media members could view media releases, despite Craig's earlier assertion that it is illegal.

The board and media members discussed how and when cooperation is necessary between the government and the media.

"The relationship is not meant to be a marriage," said KTTK radio program director Dave Hutton. "The relationship — its very basis — is adversarial."

Turner-Crawford agreed, saying the media have a Constitutional responsibility to be a watchdog to ensure the government is serving its citizens.

Craig said he recognizes and appreciates the obligation the media have to the Constitution.

"It's not an obligation; it's a right," Burns told him.

She also demanded on behalf of KJEL the information to which the public is lawfully entitled. "We want to be able to do our job," she said. "We don't need anyone else doing it for us and deciding what we should report as news."

After the meeting, which lasted nearly two hours, members of the media said they didn't believe it had served any purpose.

Turner-Crawford expressed her disappointment in the lack of concern for the public's right to information that she felt was displayed.

"Craig campaigned on a promise of open, honest and transparent government," she said. "I don't see how withholding or altering incident and arrest reports to which we are legally entitled can be viewed as open, honest or transparent."

Turner-Crawford said her policy will be to continue reporting on the city's violations of the Sunshine Law.

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