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Rules for serving the public: Don't

By [MARK BONOKOSKI](#)

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Back in March, one of Toronto's unsung heroes got his song sung, winning the first-ever Community Award for Youth Service presented by the Committee of Youth Officers for Ontario, an association of police officers dedicated to combating and preventing youth crime.

It was no small honour.

The winner, as it turned out, was Al Crawford, a recreation specialist with the City of Toronto.

But he was muzzled from talking about it.

His City of Toronto overseers had issued him a gag order, specifically warning him that if he said a word to the media, his job would be on the line.

Why? Well, as I wrote at the time, no one in authority would say, and no one in authority would say exactly who issued the gag order.

But here's how it went down:

A call was placed to Crawford's supervisor in the parks, forestry and recreation department (PFR) who, in turn, passed the buck to the department's media hotline.

"Unfortunately Al Crawford is not a spokesperson for the City of Toronto or for the division," said James Buttivant of the parks department's media hotline. "So he is not authorized to speak to the media or to answer questions."

But he just won an award, Buttivant is told.

"Doesn't matter," said Buttivant. "That's the way it is."

'END OF THE LINE'

Who told you that? I asked.

"I can't say," said Buttivant. "And, no, I cannot connect you to the person who told me because that person isn't authorized to talk to the media either."

So, who's next up the line? I asked.

"No one," said Buttivant. "This is the end of the line."

That column obviously hit a nerve.

At the end of August, the Sun has since learned, a memo went out to all PFR staff from Brenda Patterson, the general manager of that city department, outlining how, effective Labour Day, the so-called media hotline will only be staffed during regular business hours.

The second page of that memo, also obtained by the Sun, provides the game plan for parks staff should some pesky media types "unexpectedly" show up.

They are called "procedural changes."

What these "procedural changes" do, in fact, is tighten the clamps on the gag order that had Al Crawford unable to speak to his prestigious award.

They also ensure that the media, no matter how harmless the inquiry, will be endlessly frustrated with the process, possibly to the point of aborting the assignment.

According to Patterson's directive, for example, if a member of the media shows up "unexpectedly" at a PFR program or facility after hours -- remember, the PFR media office is now closed by 4:30 p.m., even though most city recreation programs take place after hours -- the staff person is to "politely explain to the reporter that all requests for interviews must be processed through GM's office or the media line, during regular business hours."

If a reporter wants to interview an "adult participant" in some program, it cannot be done on city property or at the particular facility -- whether it be a city-run hockey rink or a ball park.

These interviews, orders Patterson, must be conducted off city property ... "on the sidewalk, for example."

When it comes to the media taking photographs, it gets even more restrictive.

The staff person must obtain details from the reporter/photographer on "what they are requesting to do, and why," and then an "on-call recreation supervisor" must be contacted to "facilitate" permission.

"Permission may be granted in some cases, such as a 'weather shot' at an outdoor pool during extended hours, or at the ski hills during the winter season," writes Patterson.

But there is a "but."

RELEASE FORM

"If permission is granted, an announcement must be made at the program or the facility allowing anyone who does not wish to be involved the option of removing themselves from the shot," says Patterson, indicating that, if that permission is granted, all participants in the photograph "must sign" a model release form.

Repeated calls to Brenda Patterson went unreturned and then, three days later, an e-mail arrives from John Gosgnach, a manager with the city's communications unit, indicating it was his decision to discontinue after-hours service as a "cost-saving measure."

And so a call was placed to John Gosgnach who gave his "solemn assurance" that the new media policy had "absolutely nothing to do" with any gag order on Al Crawford.

"It had everything to do with budget," said Gosgnach. "The after-hours hotline cost us \$45,000 annually, all to respond to an average of 120 calls from the media.

"That works out to \$375 a call -- which is a bit pricey."

With the city's new 311 information system up and running, Gogsgnach said citizens will now have less hassle accessing the information they need and that, after business hours, the media will have access to a city supervisor on stand-by.

Time will tell, but the red tape appears to be endless.

And deliberate.

MARK.BONOKOSKI@SUNMEDIA.CA OR 416-947-2445

