

From: **Kathryn Foxhall** <kfoxhall@verizon.net>

Date: Tue, May 7, 2024 at 10:35 AM

Subject: Journalism groups call for removing barriers to newsgathering around Key Bridge incident

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Governor Wes Moore

Office of the Governor of Maryland

100 State Circle

Annapolis, MD 21401

Dear Governor Moore:

The undersigned organizations representing journalists and news outlets in Maryland and the Mid-Atlantic region call on you to remove barriers to newsgathering around the Francis Scott Key Bridge incident, which have been in place both before and after the ship strike that caused its collapse.

The Unified Command and Joint Information Center set up to coordinate response to the disaster have proven to be an information bottleneck. This arrangement prevents journalists and the public from getting timely and complete information about the bridge collapse and ensuing salvage operation as well as efforts to reopen the Port of Baltimore and replace the crucial highway span.

Under the Unified Command, officials with Maryland and federal agencies responsible for protecting public safety and the environment and for ensuring safe transportation are prohibited from granting interviews or answering queries directed to them. All communication is funneled through the Joint Information Center managed by the U.S. Coast Guard, resulting in delays, miscommunication and incomplete or even inaccurate information being relayed to the public.

As just one example of how the public is left in the dark as a result, state officials aboard a Coast Guard vessel with a New York Times reporter were [not authorized to speak](#) to him. In another instance, a reporter querying the Maryland Department of the Environment about potential water quality issues posed by the salvage operation was directed to contact the Joint Information Center. Instead of providing or authorizing an interview with a subject matter

expert, the Coast Guard responded with an emailed statement indirectly characterizing MDE's findings that lacked detail or substantiation.

The D.C. Chapter of the Society of Professional Journalists, the Society of Environmental Journalists and the Maryland-Delaware-DC Press Association have long fought the restrictions in federal, state, local agencies and elsewhere that ban staff from speaking to reporters without permission or without notifying authorities. These "gag" rules amount to government censorship, which recently was [successfully challenged](#) by a Pennsylvania journalist after local jail employees were forbidden to speak to reporters without the warden's approval.

We ask you to eliminate all such restrictions on people speaking to the press about the bridge incident in agencies over which you have authority. Further, we urge you to pro-actively communicate to state staff that they have the same First Amendment right to free speech that private individuals do to discuss matters of public concern with which they have personal knowledge.

Given the gravity of the situation, we would appreciate a prompt and positive response to our appeal.

Sincerely,

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