

# Media Dos and Don'ts

## Tips and Tricks to Remember:

- An interview is not a conversation, we should fight the natural instinct to treat it as one.
- Think through your key talking points (included above) ahead of time and find creative ways to repeat them.
- Always consider yourself “on the record” (unless you specify otherwise). Anything you say can and will be used in the article unless you ask, “can I speak on-background?” or “can I speak off the record?” (more on the difference between these two below). You should wait for the reporter to agree to those terms before proceeding.
- Know when to stop talking:
  - Avoid rambling - pause once you’ve delivered your key message.
  - Don’t be afraid to let the reporter say the next word.
  - Don’t feel the need to fill silence.
- Avoid jargon, including acronyms and overly technical language.
  - For example: “Veterans Benefit Administration” instead of “VBA.”
- Never lie, never guess, never speculate. If you don’t know, say so and possibly offer to find out.
- When speaking to the press, always identify yourself as a member of the union. While it’s fine to tell the reporter what job you hold within the agency, emphasize to the reporter that you are speaking to the press in your capacity as a union member/officer, not in your capacity as a VA employee. Speaking as a “VA Employee” can result in discipline.
  - **DO say:** “As a local official with AFGE Local XYZ, representing hundreds of employees at the DC VA Medical Center, the VA needs to ensure that all employees have proper PPE.”
  - **DO NOT say:** “As a VA nurse, the VA needs to ensure that all employees have proper PPE.”

## On the Record vs. Off the Record vs. On Background:

- On the record: The information can be used with no caveats, quoting the source by name.
  - **Example:** “Geddes Scott, president of AFGE local 1988 and a practical nurse at the St. Albans Community Living Center in New York City, told *The Post* in August ...”
- Off the record: The information cannot be used for publication.
- On background: The information can be published but only under conditions negotiated with the reporter in advance. Generally, this is used when the source does not want their name published but will agree to a description of their position (e.g. “...said a nurse at the local VA Hospital”). Reporters will sometimes object when a source wants to brief them on background and try to persuade the source to put the briefing on the record. These background briefings have become routine in many venues, especially with government officials.
  - **Example:** “One staffer, speaking on the condition of anonymity over a fear of retaliation, told *The Post* ....”

## Delivering Your Message Effectively:

- Answer the question simply at first, then explain.
- Reinforce the key messages you want to get across throughout.
- Tell anecdotes that bring your messages to life, but follow the below legal guidelines:
  - Do not divulge any information about patients that could constitute a HIPAA violation.
  - Make sure you frame all anecdotes in terms of union members generally, rather than your specific experiences.
    - Do not say:
      - “I’m the union president at the VA in Indianapolis, and I work in the ICU. The threat of my facility closing could lead to me losing my job, or my patients losing access to the quality care I provide.”
    - Do say:
      - “The members that I represent at the VA in Indianapolis are committed to the veterans they care for. The closure of our unit would lead to unexpected layoffs, and would negatively impact our ability to care for our patients - many of whom will be forced to seek private, for-profit services.”
- Signal important messages:
  - Flagging is a verbal cue that makes clear when you’re saying something of particular importance. It helps prevent journalists from drawing their own conclusions or cutting you off before you make your point.
  - Examples of flagging:
    - “There are four main points: one, xxx...two, xxx...”
    - “The critical point is...”
    - “The most important thing to remember is...”
    - “I need to emphasize...”
- Bridge where appropriate, the “ABC’s” - When faced with tough questions, here are a few tips on how to transition and bridge back to your key points:
  - Acknowledge: If a reporter asks a difficult question, rather than ignoring, acknowledge the question and then bridge to your key message.
  - Bridge: When asked difficult or tricky questions, bridge back to your key messages with phrases like:
    - Let me tell you what the real issue is...
    - I can tell you from my own experience...
    - I don’t know about that, but what I can say is...
    - I think what you’re really asking me is...
  - Control: Control what the interviewer walks away with by flagging your key messages. If the person is persistent, keep calm, stay courteous, and stick to your message points