



AFS-USA Media Policy & Guidelines

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Part 1: Policy and Procedures

A. Introduction:

AFS-USA has a communications department that sets media policies and procedures for AFS-USA Staff and Volunteers. This department interfaces with other departments as needed, including Support, Marketing, Program Operations, and Risk Management. When necessary and appropriate, the department also works with AFS International, media, and/or legal consultants.

This department is led by Marlene Baker, Vice-President of Development, Communications, and Alumni Relations.

B. Media Inquiries Regarding Sensitive or Controversial Topics

AFS has a 75-year history of working in countries around the world through all kinds of situations—political turmoil, natural disasters, occurrences that are controversial in nature, and everything in between. We have students from the U.S. living in other countries and students in other countries living in the U.S. Because of the very nature of our history and our work, AFS-USA Staff and Volunteers may be contacted by journalists and asked to provide commentary on topics of global relevance. In some cases, these may involve AFS or other exchange organizations, and in some cases not. Staff and volunteers may also be asked to provide information about a specific student or host family.

In situations such as these, particularly those that involve sensitive or controversial topics, all media inquiries must be channeled through the communications department at AFS-USA. This includes inquiries from any local, national, or international media, regardless of whether the story is about AFS-USA. Volunteers as well as non-appointed staff outside the communications department, are not official spokespeople for AFS-USA, and thus they cannot provide commentary, information, or statements on behalf of the organization. The same holds true for our exchange students, host families and natural families.

Protecting anonymity of students and families is also a concern when sensitive or controversial situations arise. We are committed to ensuring the safety and satisfaction of our participants, and to this end the communications department serves as a buffer between participants and the media. Additionally, as many of our students are under 18 years of age, they cannot be included in media of any kind without a written release from their natural parents.

If you are contacted by a media person about any topic that is sensitive or controversial in nature, please adhere to the following procedure:

- **If Emailed:** Do not engage with the individual. Forward the email immediately to [Marlene Baker at mbaker@afsusa.org](mailto:Marlene.Baker@afsusa.org) and copy [Melvin Harmon at mharmon@afsusa.org](mailto:Melvin.Harmon@afsusa.org) and Candace O'Malley at COMalley@afsusa.org.
- **If Called:** Say, "I am not an official spokesperson for AFS-USA, but I can relay your request to our national office who may be able to help you." Then email the individual's

contact information, along with everything you know about the request (e.g. outlet name, story angle, etc.), to Marlene Baker at mbaker@afsusa.org and please copy Melvin Harmon at MHarmon@afsusa.org and Candace O'Malley COMalley@afsusa.org

If you are pressed to provide the contact information of an official spokesperson, you can give the email address of Marlene Baker (mbaker@afsusa.org) and copy Melvin Harmon (mharmon@afsusa.org). **Do not provide phone numbers unless a reporter is truly insistent.** In that case, you can provide Marlene Baker's office number: (646) 751-2006. In either scenario, you should immediately notify Marlene Baker of the inquiry by email (mbaker@afsusa.org) and by calling her cell phone: (908) 884-3600. Please do not engage with the media person. Do not confirm or deny, do not say 'no comment,' just pass the information along to the communications department for AFS-USA.

C. Handling Inquiries from Major, National, or International Media (All Topics)

The AFS-USA communications department asks that inquiries from any major media outlet (print, online, television, radio, etc.) be channeled to the NYC office. This includes media with national or international coverage, or those representing large cities. If you receive an inquiry from [a major outlet, please forward it immediately to Marlene Baker at mbaker@afsusa.org , copy Candace O'Malley at COMalley@afsusa.org, and Melvin Harmon at mharmon@afsusa.org.](#)

D. Do You Have a Great Story Idea that Might Appeal to a Major News Outlet?

If you have an idea for a news story that you would like to pitch to a major media outlet, please let us know! You can send ideas to the Marketing Department at marketing@afsusa.org with a CC to Marlene Baker at mbaker@afsusa.org.

E. Handling Local Media Activity of a Routine Nature (Positive Stories)

Media love "feel good" human interest stories, and AFS-USA has plenty of them! AFS-USA Staff and Volunteers can work directly with local media when pitching positive stories or responding to inquiries of a non-controversial nature. These may include feature stories about the experiences of students, interviews with host families on the benefits of hosting, stories about the achievements of AFS-USA Volunteers, or stories about positive Area Team events. If you need assistance or have questions, please email the Marketing Department at marketing@afsusa.org. We are happy to help you shape stories and prepare for interviews as we are able.

- **Press Release Templates:** All AFS-USA Staff and Volunteers are encouraged to use the existing press release templates wherever applicable. Templates, along with tips for pitching stories to the media, can be found on [MyAFS Help & Learning](#).
- **Local Media Interviews:** On stories of a positive nature, AFS-USA Staff and Volunteers may speak to media as a representative of their own Area Team or region. However, if asked to make a statement on behalf of AFS as a national or international organization, please contact Marlene Baker, Melvin Harmon, or Candace O'Malley. We will work with you to make sure an appropriate spokesperson for the organization is available.

Part 2: Tips and Guidelines for Interacting with Media

A. General Tips

Remember that you are representing the organization any time you interact with members of the media or general public on matters related to AFS-USA. For that reason, please always try to do the following:

- **Be Polite:**
Always be gracious with the media, regardless of the topic or the style of inquiry. For example, if a journalist contacts you about a negative or sensitive topic you can say, "I'm sorry, I'm not an official spokesperson for AFS-USA, but I would be happy to forward your inquiry to someone who might be able to help."
- **Never Say, "No Comment":**
"No Comment" is a comment. It implies that we *could* provide a statement but are choosing not to, and thus we are withholding information. If a negative or sensitive question arises while discussing a local story of a routine nature, simply state that you, "don't know the answer but would be happy to forward the inquiry to someone who may be able to help." Then immediately notify Marlene Baker at mbaker@afsusa.org and copy Melvin Harmon at mharmon@afsusa.org. If you are approached by the media about a story of a sensitive or controversial nature, follow the procedure outlined above in Part 1, Section B.
- **Assume it's "On the Record":**
Unless you specifically state that something is off the record, anything you say to the media can be used. To be safe, always choose your comments carefully and assume that every word you say will appear in the article or TV/Radio segment.

B. Publicizing the Need for Host Families

When publicizing the need for host families, all AFS-USA Staff and Volunteers must adhere to the following guidelines, which are based on U.S. Department of State regulations for J-1 Visa sponsors:

- **DO** use promotional materials that professionally, ethically, and accurately reflect AFS's purpose, activities, and sponsorship.
- **DON'T** convey an urgent need for host families. (Any media placement within three weeks of students' arrivals must not specify the program cycle for which host families are needed. Instead, use the phrase, "host families are always needed").
- **DON'T** appeal to public pity or guilt as a means of recruiting host families.
- **DON'T** imply that an exchange student will be denied participation if a host family is not found.
- **DON'T** provide identifying photos or information of incoming hosted students (e.g. names, phone numbers, physical or email addresses, etc.).

C. Ensuring Participant Consent for Media Features

All AFS participants being featured in media interviews or articles must first provide their consent. Most hosted and sending students will have already given consent in their application; however, you should confirm this before proceeding with media involvement. Here's how you can easily do so:

- **Step 1:** Open the student's application in Global Link.
- **Step 2:** Find and click on the consent form (usually under "Placement Detail -> HOPS" section for hosted students and in the "Service Case Detail -> Application" section for sending students).

- **Step 3** - If a Sponsored Programs Student, **view instructions here**.
- **Step 4 - Hosted Students:** Confirm that the consent box is unchecked for hosted students (if the box **IS** checked, then they have **NOT** given consent and will need to do so before being interviewed or featured in a story).

Example: Student did not check box, therefore you have consent.

The screenshot shows a form titled 'HOPS'. It includes fields for 'Participant App. Received', 'Direct Place Request' (Yes/No), 'Direct Place Accept Status', and a checkbox for 'Denied Media Consent' which is currently unchecked. There are also sections for 'Follow up needed', 'Immunizations' (Meningitis, Varicella, DTAP/TDAF), and 'Late Traveler Date Range' with corresponding comment fields.

- **Step 3 - Sending Students:** Confirm that the consent box is marked allow for sending students (if the box checked is **Not Allow**, then they have **NOT** given consent and will need to do so before being interviewed or featured in a story).

Example: Student indicated Allow, so you have consent.

The screenshot shows a form with tabs for 'Inquiry', 'Application', 'Admission', 'Preparation', and 'Participation'. The 'Application' tab is active. It includes sections for 'Applied for Scholarship' (Yes/No), 'Applied Scholarship Date', 'Scheduled Interview Date' (January 21, 2021), 'Graduated' (Yes/No), 'Month' (2), 'Year' (2022), 'Diploma Required' (N/A/Yes/No), and 'Permission to use photographs and video' (Allow/Not Allow). The 'Allow' option is selected and highlighted with a red box.

If you need to procure consent from a student or host family member, you can use the Media Consent and Release form [here](#). If students are under 18 years of age, their natural parents will also need to sign this form. For assistance contacting the natural parents of a hosted participant, please contact your AFS-USA Support Specialist. For general questions, please contact the Marketing Department at marketing@afsusa.org.

D. Identifying Candidates for Interviews

If a media person wants to interview AFS students or families in your area, you should first talk with the individuals to determine whether they would be appropriate candidates for the interview. A good interviewee should:

- Be comfortable speaking English.
- Understand and represent the mission and values of AFS.
- Be free of any ill repute (e.g. students who have faced significant disciplinary action during their AFS program should not be interviewed).
- Be briefed on key talking points related to the interview topic.

Please do not allow the media to contact interviewees directly until you have screened and briefed the interviewees, and until you've confirmed their consent to be interviewed. For assistance, please contact Marlene Baker at mbaker@afsusa.org.

NOTE: AFS Participants should not be interviewed on subjects of a sensitive or controversial nature.

E. Sharing Already Published Stories

Once a story or interview has gone live, please share it with the communications department by emailing communications@afsusa.org and Marlene Baker.

F. How to Define and Speak About AFS-USA

When explaining AFS-USA and our work to the members of the media, always use the correct language and terminology.

- **What We Do...**

- **In a Sentence:** AFS-USA works to foster global competency among U.S. citizens by providing international and intercultural education opportunities for students, schools, families, and communities through a global volunteer partnership.
- **In a Word:** AFS-USA is an “intercultural education organization.” It is NOT:
 - A travel company
 - A student exchange organization
 - A study abroad provider

NOTE: While our work touches each of these areas, none of them sufficiently describes who we are, what we do, and how we should be regarded within our industry.

- **The Official AFS Mission...**

“AFS-USA empowers people to become globally engaged citizens by delivering meaningful intercultural experiences that provide the knowledge and skills needed to help create a more just and peaceful world.”

- **The AFS-USA Website...**

Whenever possible, provide media with the correct URL where people can learn more about AFS-USA.

- General Information: afsusa.org
- Study Abroad Information: afsusa.org/study-abroad
- Hosting Information: afsusa.org/host-family