

August 28, 2025

Police Chief Chris Skinner
Eugene Police Department
300 Country Club Road
Eugene, OR 97401
policechief@ci.eugene.or.us

Dear Chief Skinner:

The undersigned press freedom and civil liberties organizations were alarmed by recent [footage](#) of a police department public information officer, Michael Rea, wearing a vest labeled “PRESS” and being permitted to record footage that an actual journalist was prohibited from filming.

We [understand](#) that the department has said it will end this practice in light of the backlash it received and will instead use the word “videographer” (which, although better than “PRESS,” is still problematic because it fails to identify the videographers as police employees).

We appreciate the department attempting to correct itself, but this should never have happened in the first place. We are writing to you, and copying the National Information Officers Association and the International Association of Chiefs of Police’s PIO Section, to ensure that this unfortunate occurrence doesn’t repeat itself, in Eugene or elsewhere.

According to an [article](#) published by Double Sided Media on August 15, 2025, the department believed press vests were the best available option to identify public information officers because the role of PIOs may be somewhat unfamiliar to the public. We strongly disagree.

Impersonating journalists is not an acceptable solution to hypothetical confusion about PIOs. In fact, misstating the role of PIOs by referring to them as “press” causes far more confusion than it dispels. The department was correct that the word “press” is common and widely understood, and that’s precisely the problem – no one would ever assume that someone wearing a press vest is a police department employee.

The term “public information officer” is self-explanatory and would work just fine for identification purposes, but, in any event, [vests](#) and [patches](#) of all kinds are widely available. The department can order inexpensive customized gear with whatever term it prefers — police department employee, city staff, etc. There was never a need to use false and misleading language, as evidenced by the department’s quick [pivot](#) to “videographer.”

Surely police departments would not [allow](#), for example, nightclub bouncers to wear “police” vests, even though police is a more commonly understood term and there is some overlap between the job responsibilities. Many of the same considerations apply here. Police personnel wearing press identifiers threatens public safety, press freedom, and police officers themselves in any number of ways. For example:

1. **Risk to officers and reporters alike.** At a time when assaults on both [police](#) and [journalists](#) are rising nationwide, misrepresenting officers as members of the press puts both groups in danger. Those who would target law enforcement may attack anyone they believe to be police in disguise, while those hostile to journalists may direct violence toward officers posing as reporters.
2. **Erosion of trust in journalism.** When police present themselves as press, sources cannot be sure that the reporter they are speaking to is not in fact a government agent. This undermines the credibility of all journalists and chills the flow of information on issues of public concern. Plus, potential sources could inadvertently approach a police employee dressed as a journalist with confidential information intended for the press. This could also implicate the Fifth Amendment if someone were to make incriminating statements to a police employee believing them to be a member of the press. The need to draw a bright line between the press and government is one reason why most states — including Oregon — have enacted a [reporter's privilege law](#).
3. **Potential for abuse and surveillance.** Police employees posing as press could surveil journalists. We have no reason to believe this is the department's intention, but there is a long history of unlawful police surveillance of reporters. Dressing as a journalist obviously opens the door to abuse. Even if police employees don't intentionally spy, journalists who assume they're in the company of their peers may discuss information, including confidential newsgathering and source information, that they would not divulge if they knew the disguised police employee's identity.
4. **Misleading the public about transparency.** Courts around the country have [upheld](#) the right to record police, and state laws requiring journalists and others to maintain a certain distance from police while reporting have been repeatedly [struck down](#) as unconstitutional. Whether police in Eugene respect journalists' constitutional rights is a matter of significant public concern. But journalists and others recording police operations in Eugene are likely to capture images that depict an individual in a press vest filming police up close. Members of the public who view those images will be misled into believing that real journalists were allowed to film police up close, as the Constitution requires, when in fact only police employees were allowed to do so.

Even in cases where law enforcement agencies believe they have far more compelling justifications for impersonating journalists — such as conducting an [undercover operation](#) or as part of a [security strategy](#) — those agencies have invariably ended up apologizing and/or paying settlements. In Eugene, there was no claim of any legitimate law enforcement reason for the press vest. We have not found any examples outside of Eugene of PIOs posing as journalists merely to film police operations that real journalists are restricted from recording.

Right to record police

The above-referenced video is also disturbing in that it shows Officer Jackson Stramler threatening to arrest documentary filmmaker Tim Lewis, who was attempting to film an arrest, if

he didn't back away from the scene. Contrary to the officers' claims, the video shows no indication that Lewis was interfering with police operations. Even if officers believed they were within their rights to ask him not to talk to handcuffed suspects, they continued forcing him to move back even after he was a significant distance away.

The denial of Lewis's First Amendment [rights](#) is highly problematic on its own – the fact that a PIO in a press vest was allowed superior access only adds insult to unconstitutionality. The PIO's filming is itself proof that it was not dangerous or disruptive for a person with a rolling camera to be standing far closer to the activity than Lewis was.

The extent of the “disruption” appears to be the officers' perception that, unlike their own hired cameraman, Lewis might not depict them in a flattering way -- a textbook case of unconstitutional viewpoint discrimination. That is made even clearer by the fact that [the video](#) the PIO ultimately produced portrayed officers in a highly flattering light, with sound off (the sound that the PIO muted likely could not be captured from the distance officers forced real journalists to keep), and omitting footage of newsworthy events that the PIO obviously saw and that a real journalist would have reported – for example, Stramler's confrontation with Lewis.

The Constitution protects the press precisely because of its independence from the government and the watchdog function it serves. Allowing a government employee to pose as a journalist and affording him preferential treatment over actual journalists so he can produce government approved videos in place of journalism is contrary to everything the First Amendment stands for.

We request you confirm that you have informed your employees that wearing press insignia or identifying themselves as “press” or “journalist” is not acceptable. We also urge the department to stop ordering journalists exercising their constitutional right to record police to move back an unreasonable distance for the circumstances. Any distance from which a PIO is allowed to film is inherently a reasonable distance from which journalists must be allowed to film.

Thank you for your attention to this important matter.

Sincerely,

Freedom of the Press Foundation
ACLU of Oregon
Defending Rights & Dissent
Electronic Frontier Foundation
Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression
Los Angeles Press Club
National Press Photographers Association
PEN America

Radio Television Digital News Association
Reporters Without Borders (RSF)
Society of Environmental Journalists
Society of Professional Journalists
The Association of Foreign Press Correspondents, USA
The Coalition For Women In Journalism
The Media and Democracy Project

Cc: National Information Officers Association
International Association of Chiefs of Police, PIO Section
Mayor Kaarin Knudson