

# WHRO Statement On Editorial Integrity And Independence

Last Updated: Jan. 13, 2020  
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## Purpose of this document

This document recommends policies based on journalism ethics and best practices at other news media companies for:

- WHRO journalists covering WHRO
- WHRO journalists covering owner member school districts
- The editorial relationship between WHRO and HRETA

## WHRO's Mission

Our mission statement: WHRO Public Media improves the civic, educational and cultural life of the citizens of Eastern Virginia through the production and distribution of important and impactful local, national, and educational content.

As a part of the work that supports that mission, WHRO is dedicated to journalism based on facts and focused on public service and the public interest. It is built on the core principles of editorial independence free of outside influence, a commitment to accuracy, verification and a diversity of voices, as well as high standards of transparency and the courage to embrace controversy. WHRO has adopted the NPR Code of Ethics as a way of expressing its journalism standards. WHRO has also adopted the Public Media Code of Integrity.

WHRO is dedicated to reflecting and serving the diverse Hampton Roads, VA region. The local news team and national news programs do that through fair, thoughtful, intelligent and independent journalism. The station's goal is to provide Hampton Roads residents with the information and perspectives they need to make the region a better place to live.

WHRO's relationship with HRETA is based on those precepts.

## WHRO'S Editorial Independence

To ensure that WHRO remains independent and can fulfill its mission, the boundaries between WHRO and HRETA on all editorial matters must be real and understood by both sides. At no point in the editorial process should HRETA owner members have special access or influence over how WHRO's editorial work is published, broadcast or conveyed. This includes both official and unofficial interactions between WHRO and HRETA owner member staff or affiliates at

any level of seniority. It is by observing this editorial separation that WHRO can best provide the information Hampton Roads residents count on to make decisions, understand their region and learn about their neighbors.

Editorial independence and accountability means WHRO welcomes criticism of its coverage from HRETA owner member district officials or its employees. But it also requires that the owner members not have special access or ability to demand special treatment.

If a HRETA owner member district has substantial concerns about a news report that has been broadcast or published, he or she will be directed to the WHRO CEO and President, Chief Content Officer. The CEO and President, Chief Content Officer and News Director will decide whether other WHRO journalists should be brought into any discussion.

The same firewall exists between HRETA member owners and the WHRO newsroom. Like any member of the public, HRETA owner members do not have direct or special access to the WHRO newsroom or WHRO programs. Their point of contact is the CEO and President. The same principle would apply to any causes or entities they represent, are invested in or affiliated with. Such groups or causes would not have any special status or be treated as priorities for editorial consideration.

## The responsibility of WHRO staff to properly identify themselves

This is how WHRO staff members should identify themselves in different situations regarding HRETA:

- If working in a non-editorial capacity (i.e. on a HRETA owner member campus for training or other business) WHRO staff should identify themselves as such.
- If working in a purely editorial capacity (i.e. working on a story about an owner member district), WHRO staff should identify themselves as staff on duty. In this capacity, WHRO staff should not expect or be granted special access to HRETA owner member districts, resources or locations.
- If in a “bridge” capacity (i.e. appearing at a HRETA owner member district event) WHRO staff should make every effort to clearly explain that HRETA holds WHRO’s license but does not influence WHRO’s editorial decisionmaking or journalism.

## Publicly describing WHRO’s relationship with HRETA

Whenever WHRO content refers to HRETA or a person associated with it, WHRO ought to be transparent about the relationship. Whether on air or online, a version of this phrase generally should be used near the first reference to HRETA: Hampton Roads Educational Telecommunications Association, Inc. holds the license to WHRO Public Media.

## WHRO’s coverage of HRETA when an owner member makes news

WHRO should cover HRETA owner member districts as it would any other public or private school district in the Hampton Roads region. Any special programs or events sponsored by HRETA or held on owner member district property should be accorded the same news judgment as would any event or program done by a local school district. Similarly, any negative news related to HRETA, an owner member district or its faculty, staff or students should be judged as if it occurred at any school district in the region.

WHRO, at its discretion, may seek guidance from an independent journalism expert when deciding whether and how to cover news related to HRETA owner member districts.

# WHRO's coverage of itself when it makes news

When WHRO makes news, the coverage takes its cue from the NPR Code of Ethics . In this case, WHRO journalists seek to cover WHRO as they would any other entity.

When such events occur, the journalists involved in reporting on WHRO separate themselves as best as possible from internal events, and any individuals in WHRO's senior leadership avoid imposing any influence on those journalists. Any coverage of WHRO itself is handled by WHRO journalists with no involvement in the issue at hand — or by contracting an independent entity.

This means that when a WHRO journalist's actions or work are “news” — for good or bad — those who were involved in the assigning, reporting, editing and producing do not then play any part in the coverage. Our goal is to cover any such story just as we would if it involved another organization, and to take all such actions necessary to ensure that is possible.

On-air coverage should have a disclosure that includes a version of this sentence:  
WHRO's executives were not allowed to review what was reported for this story before it was broadcast.

Online coverage should have a disclosure that includes a version of this sentence:  
WHRO's executives were not allowed to review what was reported for this story before it was published.

## About the task force

The WHRO Journalism Task Force held in-person meetings, teleconferences and exchanged ideas electronically as part of this process. Note that the task force believes that this should be treated as a living document, that as new situations arise or technology changes, the statement itself might need amending.

The members of the WHRO Journalism Task Force are:

- Rebecca Feldhaus Adams, WHRO News Director (Task Force Chair)
- Bill Bartel, former politics reporter for The Virginian-Pilot
- Judith Smelser, Independent Journalism Consultant and Trainer
- Alicia Montgomery, Senior Supervising Editor/Producer for NPR's Morning Edition
- Mark Memmott, NPR Supervising Senior Editor for Standards & Practices

## Public Editor

WHRO utilizes the service of Elizabeth Jensen, a Public Editor, who stands as a source of independent accountability and strives to listen to the audience's concerns and explain the newsroom's work and ambitions. By design, the Public Editor is not an employee of WHRO Public Media as the intent is to elevate independence and help serve our audience.