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Office of Governor Mike Dunleavy
P.O. Box 110001
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To the office of Governor Mike Dunleavy,

During a global health emergency, economic crisis, and with national elections approaching, Alaska journalists are working to distribute accurate information critical to Alaskans' health and safety and to maintaining our democratic institutions. We are troubled by what we see as a pattern of abandoning long-held professional standards and practices as the administration interacts with the media. This obstructs our ability to serve the public interest, which is of concern to all Alaskans.

In communications with state officials and the governor's office, our reporters across platforms are experiencing an unprecedented lack of transparency and lack of adherence to generally accepted professional communication practices. Press conferences are routinely held at times that make statewide broadcast difficult. Access to information has been withheld for certain news organizations while it is offered to others that are perceived to provide more favorable coverage. New concepts are introduced without details or written information. Questions to the Department of Health and Social Services go unanswered. Public information requests stall. Most troubling: The governor will no longer answer reporter questions without vetting them first.

Following the resignation of Attorney General Kevin Clarkson in August — and the predictable questions about the incident by reporters on Sept. 1 — Alaska's democratically elected governor has granted no media availability to reporters aside from one-on-one, subject-specific interviews and appearances on social media, with questions vetted and controlled by the governor's staff.

As a candidate, Gov. Dunleavy pledged to restore trust in state government through honesty and transparency; yet his refusal to answer unscripted questions is unprecedented among Alaska governors.

We are also deeply troubled by instances, such as a Facebook video posted on July 30, when the governor has taken to social media to undermine the credibility of local news organizations publicly because he does not agree with either the topic or the frame of the story.

Journalists are human and they sometimes make mistakes. Sometimes information is missing from a story and can be added to provide clarification. If this happens, we ask that the governor's office follow the established professional procedure of contacting a news outlet immediately to report the error and ask for a correction or clarification. Should the governor want to frame a narrative differently, a full publicly funded community relations apparatus exists to do so.

The National Governors Association provides guidelines for American leaders. These practices include maintaining credibility and timeliness with the press; dealing fairly with all media; and establishing a positive working relationship with reporters. The guide highlights that adhering to these best practices is actually in the best interest of a governor. One-sided stories are less likely to occur when "relationships have been established with the media and when the governor is known to be sensitive to the needs, interests, and deadlines of the press." Guidelines read: "It is hard to blame a reporter for not presenting the governor's side of a developing story if he or she could not reach anyone who could express the governor's point of view."

Credible, journalistic organizations follow a code of ethics that puts the public interest first and a set of professional standards that prizes civil discourse and transparency.

We ask that the governor, like all governors before him, return to the practice of taking reporters' questions. We also urge him, in the interest of Alaskans, to return to a civil and professional relationship with the state's media corps.

Sincerely,

The Alaska Press Club board

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