

Public Information Officer

Roles and Responsibilities

v1.0

Firefighters Support Foundation

Permission is granted to reproduce or distribute this material so long as the Firefighters Support Foundation is credited as the source

Permission

The Firefighters Support Foundation is a 501c3 non-profit organization whose primary mission is to develop, produce and distribute training programs to firefighters, EMTs, Search & Rescue personnel, and Emergency Management professionals. All of our programs are distributed free of charge.

About FSF

This program will address the department's public information officer as well as all fire department personnel who operate at any fire department scene or event. Ability to deviate from the guideline lies with the fire chief or his appointed designee.

Scope

The fire department recognizes the need to communicate openly with the general public and the media. The fire department will strive to provide correct and factual information to the public and news media in a timely and impartial manner.

General

Responsibilities of the Public Information Officer (PIO)

The PIO is responsible for coordinating the flow of information concerning departmental policies and operations and on specific statements concerning issues that could arise concerning the department.

Coordinating

The PIO will act as the main source for media contacts. The Incident Commander may be responsible for the release of news information at the scene of an emergency. At no time will the emergency operation be compromised for the release of news information.

Main Source

In the event of an extremely newsworthy incident the IC will notify dispatch and have a PIO dispatched to the scene. Dispatch will notify the PIO and immediately advise him/her of the situation.

Activation

A PIO will report to the scene of all major incidents to coordinate media information.

Activation (2)

- Multi-alarm fire incidents involving industrial or commercial occupancies
- Fire incidents involving fatalities or serious injuries
- Any incident involving multiple fatalities or serious injuries
- Hazardous materials emergencies or any other incident requiring major evacuations
- Extended or complicated rescue operations

Major Incidents Are:

- Any incident involving death or serious injury to Fire Department personnel
- All serious accidents involving fire vehicles that result in injury or fatality to civilians or fire personnel
- Serious aircraft or railroad accidents
- The PIO along with the Chief, and the Safety Officer are to be notified any time a supply line is laid at a fire

Major Incidents Are (2):

Upon arrival at the scene of a major incident, the PIO shall report to the command post to confer with the IC on the information to be released.

On Arrival

If requested by the media and with agreement of affected personnel, the PIO, via chain of command, may coordinate an interview with employees having first-hand knowledge of a particular fire/EMS related activity.

Interviews

The PIO will obtain approval through the Fire Chief prior to release of information on: Internal Investigations, Personnel Matters and Citizen complaints to the fire personnel or media representatives.

Release of Information

Incident Command (IC)

The IC shall be responsible for the management of public information on the fire ground.

Incident Command (1)

Any major incident (as described before) likely to attract news media attention, shall be brought to the attention of the PIO by the IC.

Incident Command (2)

When practical, the IC shall establish a Media Sector and advise Central of this location, Central will in turn notify the news media of this location. The IC can request that this be done via a media page and/or a group media fax.

Incident Command (3)

At multi-agency incidents, the agency having primary jurisdiction will be responsible for the coordination and release of information to the media.

Incident Command (4)

Members of the media will often respond to a scene that normally would not require the presence of a PIO. In such cases, the IC should be prepared to provide a media briefing as soon as their command responsibilities permit.

Incident Command (5)

Information Release Guidelines

Information released to the media should relate only to the facts of the incident.

Info Release Guidelines

No determination as to the cause of an incident shall be released. Questions relating to the cause shall be referred to the appropriate investigative agency (i.e. on scene Fire Investigators, Fire Marshal, and/or Law Enforcement).

Info Release Guidelines (2)

Under NO circumstances shall the names of fatalities or injured persons be released unless authorized by the PIO or the appropriate investigative agency.

Info Release Guidelines (3)

At no time shall Fire personnel information be provided to the news media. All requests for such information shall be immediately referred to the PIO via the chain of command.

Info Release Guidelines (4)

When in the opinion of the IC an incident results in what may be a potentially controversial situation, the PIO will be notified immediately.

Info Release Guidelines (5)

When a representative of the news media request interviews or information from departmental personnel at any time other than that described in the above section, the request shall be referred to the PIO via the chain of command.

Info Release Guidelines (6)

Do not release the following information:

- The identity of the victim of a sex crime
- The identity of a juvenile suspect
- The identity or other identifying information (i.e. captain of football team, cheerleader) on an attempted suicide
- Information on an active fire investigation regarding cause
- Standard operating procedures written for emergency response or pre-fire action plans
- Information on suspects who have been interviewed but not charged.

Info Release Guidelines (7)

Release of victim information on fire or medical emergencies

- The release of names and identifiable biographical information of victims, including minors, is not restricted. No information on the identity of any critically injured or deceased person shall be made prior to notification of next of kin (usually 24 hours from the time of death).
- Individually identifiable health information obtained by the fire department is confidential.
- The release of names of deceased persons shall be handled by the primary responder.

Info Release Guidelines (8)

Media Relations

It is very important that the PIO or his designee very early on make arrangements to guide the media to vantage points to safely get coverage without interfering with emergency operations. Failure to do this will result in free-lancing by the Media.

In large scale operations it may require that a Media Sector be set up in Staging or other locations where transportation to the incident site can be arranged by the PIO. (Consider the use of a City Bus.)

Media Relations

At the scene of any event of public interest, representatives of the news media will be permitted to conduct interviews, take photographs, and otherwise perform their assigned tasks, provided that their actions are not in violation of the guidelines established in the SOG, and provided such activity does not interfere with fire department operations.

Media Relations (2)

Photographs and videotapes, may be taken from any area where the news media has been given access to by the IC or PIO.

Areas of access for the news representatives on the scene of an incident will include:

- Any areas open to the public
- Any designated area set aside for news media briefings
- Any areas to which the news media representatives are provided guided access to by the PIO, IC, or his/her designee.

Media Relations (3)

News media representatives shall be permitted to interview victims of an incident who have consented to such interviews providing:

- The victim is not undergoing medical attention.
- The victim appears to be able to make sound decisions, is not visibly upset, severely injured or emotionally distraught.
- Investigative personnel have completed their interviews.
- If the victim desires not to be interviewed, the media representatives will be so advised.

Media Relations (4)

Planning for Public Information through Message Mapping

Message mapping is the process of creating a “playbook” of pre-scripted messages, tailored to specific incident scenarios.

- As responders we agree that being prepared to effectively respond is critical to successful operations.
- Like any emergency discipline, Public Information Officers can plan for and prepare responses for known stakeholders.
- Who are stakeholders for information on-scene?

Managing Public Information

- Responders And Their Families
- Regulatory Agencies
- Citizen Groups
- Media
- Parents
- Public
- Elected Leadership

Who are Stakeholders?

A Strategic Planning tool for PIO's

- Provide an integrated structure to determine and collect information needs.
- Core content developed in message maps provide consistency
- Provide the Emergency PIO a process for the strategic development of message materials BEFORE the incident; outside the incident stressors.

* The message mapping process was developed by Vincent T. Covello, Ph.D. of the Center for Risk Communication, NY, NY.

What is Message Mapping?

1. To organize information in an easily understood and accessible framework
2. To express the current organizational viewpoint on important issues, questions, concerns
3. To promote open dialogue both inside and outside the organization

Three Goals of Message Mapping

Draft Overarching Message Map for (Insert Topic Here)

Title of Map (Should refer to topic of map and also timing, e.g. Pandemic Flu Pre-

Title of Map (Should refer to topic of map and also timing, e.g. SFH Initial Suppression , Map #1

Stakeholder: General Public (could be any group, e.g., policymakers, media)

Question or Concern: (e.g., what should we know about pandemic influenza as of 3/16/05?)

Overarching Messages (short form): This message should contain three sentences and three related concepts at most. It should require roughly 27 words. It should be stated as simply as possible.

Key Message/Point 1 (9 seconds 27 words each)	Key Message/Point 2	Key Message/Point 3
Most important message here.	Second most important message here.	Least important message here.
Supporting Information/Facts 1-1	Supporting Information/Facts 2-1	Supporting Information/Facts 3-1
Supporting information should add detail to overarching and key messages.		
Supporting Information/Facts 1-2	Supporting Information/Facts 2-2	Supporting Information/Facts 3-2
Supporting Information/Facts 1-3	Supporting Information/Facts 2-3	Supporting Information/Facts 3-3

- Title of the map: [insert]
Should refer to topic of map and also timing,
- Stakeholders (or target audience): [insert]
 - Teams identify a target audience for map exercise
- Question or concern: [group brainstorm]
 - Discuss data sources for audience questions or concerns
 - What questions are predictable?
 - Where can you get data to help identify trends?
 - Primary research? Secondary research?
 - SME's, role playing
 - Sort concerns into manageable chunks (see handout)
 - Concerns become questions that you need to prepare answers for

Starting Your Message Map

Messages must be concise, Brief, and Clear.

- Develop 3 key elements or points (**conciseness**)
- Deliver each in no more than 9 seconds (**brevity**)
- Use no more than 27 words for entire set of messages (**clarity**)
- Written to a 6 to 8th grade level
 - (For reference, TIME magazine is written to 9th grade level)

Building Your Messages

“In an emergency, our future may hang on a few words, provided by someone in authority, as we face a fateful decision.”

- **Risk communication expert Baruch Fischhoff,
Washington Post**

Why Plan Public Information?