

Managing the Media During Disaster

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When things do not go as planned, it is news. This includes injuries, fatalities, serious property damage, freak events, and controversy. It is human nature that makes these things news: tragedy, heroism, what happened and who is to blame are the things people want to know about and discuss.

Disasters will *always* draw the attention of the media and the public. If you are engaged in civic planning or management, emergency intervention or long-term recovery you can be sure that during a disaster your organization will be in the spotlight. And what you say will be as important as what you do.

During critical incidents the goal is to give accurate, timely information that helps the public understand: what happened, what is being done about it, and what it means to them. This can be done through press conferences, interviews, news releases, public meetings, and a myriad of other communication strategies.

In early phases of an incident there is very little verified information, forcing spokespeople to talk about the response and recovery *process* rather than details of the incident. Later there can be an overwhelming amount of information that must be organized and distilled to create a clear understanding of events. By designating informed and cooperative spokespeople to keep the media and the public informed, you avoid an *information vacuum* – a situation that leads the media to guess and speculate, frustrates the public, and could cause the public to take inappropriate action that would put them in harms way.

The Joint Information System/The Joint Information Center

Sharing information between responding agencies and across jurisdictions improves incident response, and speeds long-term recovery by ensuring that all players – first responders, state and federal partners, elected officials, the media, and the public - have a realistic idea of what is being done to stabilize the situation and what must be done to create a more secure future.

This strategy was used with great affect during the tragic shootings at Columbine High School in the United States. Public information specialists took notes during each of the hourly news briefings delivered by the public information officer (PIO), and shared them with all partner agencies. This helped ensure that anyone who might speak on the issue had the same accurate information. It also reduced pressure on the prime information sources – the school and the law enforcement PIO. This concept, now known as the Joint Information System, helps agencies responding to critical incidents to coordinate information and manage expectations.

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It is important to stress that the Joint Information System does not prevent an agency from releasing emergency information, and rather it provides a forum through which to coordinate information about incident response.

On large incidents, it is useful to co-locate spokespersons from each participating agency in one facility called a Joint Information *Center*, or JIC. A JIC serves as a central point of information for the media and the public. Within the JIC participants work as a team to gather, organize, analyze, produce and disseminate information about the incident: what occurred, what is being done, and what the public should do. Following September 11 Mayor Giuliani coordinated his news briefings through the Joint Information Center, helping reduce the number of unhappy surprises. A lack of accurate, coordinated emergency public information has been cited as a key failing before, during and after Hurricane Katrina.

Start Before Disaster Strikes

But in reality, emergency public information must be a concern during all four phases of disaster: preparedness, prevention, response and recovery. Following are recommended emergency public information strategies to implement during each of these four phases:

Prepare

- ✓ Create Talking Points – In Portugal it is probable that there will be floods, fires, earthquakes, tsunamis, auto accidents, drug traffic, and perhaps terrorism. By developing talking points in advance of such incidents, spokespeople have something useful to talk about before there is verified incident information, and can add incident information as it becomes available.
- ✓ Identify Spokespeople – Before disaster strikes decide who will talk to the media and how you will accommodate the needs of the press. And remember that while most news can be delivered by a functionary, when news is serious it should be delivered by the top authority.
- ✓ Provide Training/Certification – Delivering news briefings and being interviewed is difficult, particularly during moments of high stress such as a disaster. Practicing in advance helps make it easier. And practice makes perfect.

Prevent

- ✓ Interagency Relationships – The time to build relationships between partner agencies is before disaster strikes. This is when trust is built, and information sharing starts. Agreements should be made for how information will be gathered, approved, shared and released. This sets clear expectations and allows everyone to understand and perform their role in each phase of disaster.

- ✓ Public Education – Educating the public about appropriate risk mitigation and emergency response strategies helps ensure that the public takes appropriate actions before, during and after disaster events.
- ✓ Media Relations – Fostering relationships with local media, before disaster strikes, improves journalists understanding of civil protection and builds confidence in response and recovery efforts.

Respond

- ✓ Show Up – As stated previously, it is important to show a clear presence of first responders, technical experts and civil officials addressing what has happened, what is being done, and what it means. The watchword is “maximum disclosure, minimum delay”
- ✓ Anticipate – Anticipate emerging issues throughout response and recovery. By guessing what the public and the media might need to know next (and preparing talking points on the subject) one can sometimes stay ahead of the game.
- ✓ Utilize Joint Information System – The Joint Information System referenced above is an invaluable tool in ensuring the release of accurate, timely, coordinated emergency public information.

Recover

- ✓ After Action Analysis – Insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting a different result. After incidents or disasters it is essential to assess what went right, what went wrong, and how to improve in the future.
- ✓ Lessons Learned – Capturing and sharing lessons learned through post-incident analyses is a great tool to educate the public, cultivate public trust and build stronger more disaster-resistant communities.
- ✓ Crisis Counseling – Remember that even in situations where nothing actually happens – such as a bomb threat – there will be some people deeply affected and in need of counseling. And not just among the first responders, but anyone associated with the incident.

While the media can sometimes seem like a pack of vultures, they play an essential role in informing the public before, during and after crises. The Joint Information System is an excellent tool in helping you communicate more effectively.