**Public Information and Media Guide for Spokespeople**

Depending on the disaster, the PIO, senior management or board member, may act as the organization’s principal spokesperson, providing information and reassurance to the community through:

* Personal appearances
* Media interviews
* Written communications and
* Meetings with officials from other levels of the organization

When a disaster strikes, communicating important information through the media is one way to keep the public informed of existing dangers, areas to avoid, and where to go for help.

To ensure that information being released to the public is accurate and up-to-date, Emergency Public Information is coordinated through the Management Section of the Emergency Operations Center or the Incident Commander when the EOC is not activated. ***Only provide information to the media that has been approved by one of these representatives.***

All media requests should come through the PIO for consistency and accuracy. The Public Information Officer will coordinate and handle incoming media requests and prepare statements. The Public Information Officer will support any organization representative who is asked to meet with the media.

On a small incident Public Information may be managed by one person; however, on a large-scale incident public information is accomplished through a Joint Information Center (JIC) with a team of individuals supporting public information.

It is up to everyone to help manage public expectations about what the organization can or cannot provide during or after a disaster. It is helpful when you reassure constituents that the Organization is still functioning and working very hard to get back to normal as quickly as possible.

Cultivating a good relationship with the media prior to a disaster may provide better support from the media during the hectic hours of responding to an emergency. If is important to create an environment where the media feels it has a vital role during the response efforts. The media, when supportive, can convey important information to the public about issues such as evacuations and disaster assistance information.

**The guide on the next page provides best practices when talking to media.**

**Tips for working with the Media in a Disaster**

* If you know you are going to be interviewed please contact the PIO or EOC Director for talking points and rehearse, if possible.
* Focus on the reporters, not the camera. Stand up straight, don’t lean on the podium. Maintain eye contact. Be conversational, confident and relaxed. Don’t sound like you’re reading a police report or prepared statement out loud.
* Don’t try to lighten a serious situation by using humor.
* Be direct, and to the point. Speak in simple, short sentences “sound bites” rather than compound sentences. Repeat questions so that the microphones hear them.
* Speak distinctly and clearly – adhere to speaking time.
* Test speaking volume as needed.
* Don’t get flustered if you don’t say it right – just back-up and re-state it.
* Body language and facial expression say more than words! Use gestures as appropriate.
* Credibility is vital to getting your message across. Listen carefully, respond thoughtfully. Show empathy, where appropriate.
* Have a clear message ready – always bridge back to the clear message.
* Do not make promises or guarantee that anything is going to happen unless it’s part of the talking points.
* Don't answer questions outside your area of responsibility. (Don’t speak on behalf of the county or first responders, etc.)
* Speak naturally and avoid using “jargon”, acronyms or terminology that isn’t familiar to the general public.
* If you don’t know the answer to a question, say so. Don’t speculate. Erroneous information can cause the public to take incorrect actions and can damage your credibility. It’s OK to say, “I don’t know, but I’ll get back to you.”
* Do not exaggerate, provide hearsay or use inflammatory words or phrases
	+ Give facts as you know them and cite your own sources. Speak only on areas of Organization responsibility. Let police and fire speak for themselves. In an emergency or disaster, the information you reveal could threaten lives if it is incorrect.
* Avoid using “no comment”. Explain why you can’t answer certain questions, rather than saying “no comment.”
* Never give “off the record” information. It could come back to haunt you. Don’t over-explain. Answer the question and wait for the next one. DON’T SPEAK TO FILL THE SILENCE! It’s okay to be silent.
* Never argue with reporters or lose your cool. Don’t be rude even if the interviewer or reporter appears to doubt your credibility. Always diffuse confrontational questions or situations.
* If you are interrupted, wait for the interrupter to finish and then proceed with your answer. You may wish to repeat the original question to bring the reporter back on track.
* Politely challenge any efforts to put words in your mouth. If you don’t, you may end up appearing to agree with something you actually disagree with.
* Be alert. Avoid answering speculative “what if” questions. Be prepared to lead the interview from problems and negatives to positive points you want to make.
* If you must read a prepared statement, review the information before going “live”. Ask how to pronounce any unfamiliar words. Read in a relaxed manner.