

Egg Harbor Fire Department and First Responders Standard Operating Guideline

SUBJECT: PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

SOG 702

PURPOSE: To establish a guideline for the fire department's flow of information between the department, the news media and the general public.

SCOPE: This action will cover 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.

GENERAL: 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.

RESPONSIBILITIES OF THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER (PIO)

1. 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.
2. 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.
3. In the event of an extremely newsworthy incident, the IC will determine the need for the PIO. When a PIO is needed, the IC will appoint PIO at the scene. The IC will notify the PIO and advise him/her of the situation.
4. A PIO will be used at the scene of all major incidents to coordinate media information.

MAJOR INCIDENTS shall be defined as:

- 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.
- Any incident involving death or serious injury to Fire Department personnel.

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- All serious accidents involving fire vehicles that result in injury or fatality to civilians or fire personnel.
- Serious aircraft accidents.

5. 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.
6. 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.
7. The PIO will obtain approval through the Fire Chief prior to release of information on: Internal Investigations, Personnel Matters and Citizen complaints to fire personnel or media representatives.

INCIDENT COMMAND (IC)

1. The IC shall be responsible for the management of public information on the fire ground.
2. Any major incident (as described above) likely to attract news media attention shall be brought to the attention of the PIO by the IC.
3. When practical, the IC shall establish a Media Sector and advise the Comm. Center of this location, the Comm. Center will in turn notify the news media of this location.
4. At multi-agency incidents, the agency having primary jurisdiction will be responsible for the coordination and release of information to the media.
5. 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.

INFORMATION RELEASE GUIDELINES

1. Information released to the media should relate only to the facts of the incident.
2. 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).
3. Under NO circumstances shall the names of fatalities or injured persons be released unless authorized by the PIO or the appropriate investigative agency.
4. 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.
5. When in the opinion of the IC an incident results in what may be a potentially controversial situation, the PIO will be notified immediately.
6. 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.

7. 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 guidelines written for emergency response or prefire action plans
 - Information on suspects who have been interviewed but not charged
8. 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.

MEDIA RELATIONS

1. 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 location where transportation to the incident site can be arranged by the PIO. (Consider the use of a Bus.)
2. 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.
3. Photographs and videotapes may be taken from any area where the news media have been given access to by the IC or PIO.

Areas of access for 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.

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4. 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.

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