

## 2.1.1 Working with the Public



YOUR ORGANIZATION  
STANDARD OPERATING PROCEDURES/GUIDELINES

**TITLE:** Working with the Public

**SECTION/TOPIC:** Public Information and Education

**NUMBER:** 2.1.1

**ISSUE DATE:**

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**PREPARED BY:**

**APPROVED BY:**

X

Preparer

X

Approver

These SOPs/SOGs are based on FEMA guidelines FA-197

### 1.0 POLICY REFERENCE

CFR

NFPA

NIMS

### 2.0 PURPOSE

This standard operating procedure/guideline addresses special populations, use of information technology, distribution and dissemination channels, personal and professional behavior.

### 3.0 SCOPE

This SOP/SOG pertains to all personnel in this organization.

### 4.0 DEFINITIONS

These definitions are pertinent to this SOP/SOG.

### 5.0 PROCEDURES/GUIDELINES & INFORMATION

#### 5.1 Special Populations:

## **INTRODUCTION**

Our stated mission as a department is to provide for the safety and welfare of the public. We are a public entity. The public has a legal right to know not only what we do, but how we do it. The vehicle for informing and educating the public is the news media.

Within an atmosphere of public apathy, our department and its programs (hence the public itself) will suffer. We can only benefit from an accurate portrayal of the things we do on a daily basis. The more the public knows about us, the greater will be its support. It is for this reason that the Tempe Fire Department shall aggressively pursue a positive relationship with the media.

This standard operating procedure will establish guidelines for Public Information Officers (PIO), emergency scene information management, special programs information, and the handling of routine daily information. It will also provide guidelines, goals, and directives for interactions of emergency personnel with the news media.

## **MANAGEMENT OF PUBLIC INFORMATION**

### **Public Information Officers (PIO)**

The transmission of information to the public is the responsibility of each member of the department. The primary responsibility for contact with the media rests with our three public information officers. Since their main focus is an area separate from public information, i.e., training, EMS, and prevention, it is imperative that newsworthy information be transmitted to them in a timely manner.

Public Information Officers must make every effort to be available for comment to members of the media. If unavailable, phone calls will be returned at the earliest possible time and questions answered. If information must be gathered to make a response to a media inquiry, the PIO responding should inquire about the caller's deadline, and make every effort to beat that deadline with the information requested.

Media requests for information shall be treated by PIOs as top priority in most cases. Inconvenience is not a reason not to respond to a request for information on a current incident. Requests for information about matters not related to active or recent incidents can be managed by scheduling a convenient time for response.

PIOs will coordinate with Community Relations in seeking effective ways to communicate with the news media.

PIOs will communicate with other city departments, concerning coordination of information gathering and dissemination, when those departments may be impacted by the release of information or if they are involved in operations at an emergency scene.

The Alarm Room will make PIO notifications when requested by Command.

### **Emergency Scene Information Management**

The Incident Commander will make the determination that a Public Information Sector (radio designation: "Information") is needed. This function may be assigned to a company officer until the arrival of a PIO. It will be the responsibility of the sector officer to obtain a Public Information Worksheet (located in BC-7) (see Forms policy) and begin to gather the necessary information.

This worksheet, when completed, will have the basic information necessary for the basis of a news story. It will also be the Public Information Sector officer's responsibility to contact media representatives and respond to their inquiries, thereby relieving Command from the necessity to interact with the media. Give them the information that you have at that time, emphasizing that it is tentative. If it gets to the point questions from reporters are keeping you from gathering information, use these alternatives:

- 1 Tell the reporters to gather in one place and that you will return shortly with more information.
- 2 Tell the reporters to get pictures and film footage without interfering with fire ground operations while you are gathering information. Make sure they know the location of the hazard zone.
- 3 If they have deadlines to meet, get names and phone numbers where they can be reached, and phone the facts to them as soon as possible.

**Note:** Before releasing names of persons injured or deceased make sure next of kin have been notified. Notifications are usually handled by police and/or hospitals. Ask the Alarm Room Supervisor to check with PD or the hospital to confirm that the next of kin has been notified. Do not use the names of the injured or deceased persons over the radio.

The Public Information Sector may be required to escort members of the media on an orientation tour of the fire damaged area. This must be cleared with Command and coordinated with operating sectors and/or investigator before entering the area.

If media personnel create a safety problem or hinder operations, they should be requested to move in a positive manner. Avoid confrontations.

If the Public Information Sector Officer is a company or chief officer, he will be relieved upon the arrival of a department PIO, after information has been passed on about the incident, what information has been given to the media, what agreements (if any) have been made with media

representatives, information concerning notification of next of kin, and any other pertinent information.

PIOs, on arrival at an emergency incident, will report to Command and be utilized as necessary. Every effort will be made by operating crews to supply "Information" Sector or PIO with requested information after fire control or emergency mitigation. At times, operating crews may be asked to participate in an interview for one or more members of the media, especially if they were involved in a rescue, an extremely hazardous condition, or similar situation. Operating crews will cooperate with this request if at all possible. Requests for interviews will be coordinated with Command.

Members of this department are to interact with members of the media in a positive manner. You are encouraged to be available to have your picture taken and give brief statements about your activities at the scene (see "Guidelines for Fire Department Interaction with the News Media" portion of this policy).

### **Emergency Operations Center**

Upon activation of the city's Emergency Operations Center (EOC), information gathering and distribution will be coordinated through the city PIO located in the EOC. EOC phone numbers are located in a file on BC xxx. Mobile phones will be made available at the command post for communicating with the EOC as part of the initial EOC action. As "Information" Sector, you will be directed to one of the following functions:

1. Gather information at the emergency scene and relay that information to the PIO located in the EOC. (The EOC will be gathering information from several operating departments and agencies.) You will be made aware of the location where another PIO will be receiving information from the EOC to give to the news media so that you can direct members of the media to that location should they arrive at the scene seeking information. Your function is to gather information and keep the EOC aware of developments in Fire Department operations. It should be explained to members of the media that you are operating only as a segment of the information gathering network, and to receive a complete overview of the situation they should seek the PIO operating remotely from the scene.
2. You (PIO) may be directed (as coordinated by the EOC and Command) to operate as the remote PIO; gathering information by phone from the EOC for release to the media. You should use the Media Alert system as soon as possible after set up for media notifications. If a mobile phone is not available, you will be responsible for securing a phone that can be used for continuous contact with the EOC.

### **Daily Information Flow - Exception Reports**

Department PIOs are in contact with the media (mostly the print media) on a daily basis. In order to relate significant Fire Department actions or operations, accurate information must be made readily available to them daily. The vehicle for this exchange is the daily exception report.

Company officers are required to contact Fire Prevention with an exception report explaining

significant incidents before going off shift. It is preferred that information be sent as soon after an incident happens as possible. Along with keeping department personnel informed regarding significant happenings at other stations and on other shifts, the exception report is our primary source of information for the media.

Significant happenings would include working fires, serious EMS incidents (including all extrications and fatalities), fire department personnel injuries (emergency or non-emergency), missing equipment or equipment to be picked up, serious fire code violations, and any problems encountered with civilians or personnel from other agencies. Other information that would be helpful in preparing a media release would be those things that contributed to the outcome of an incident that have value as public education tools, i.e., working smoke detectors that led to an early evacuation, seatbelt use or non-use, a malfunctioning self-latching gate, etc. Also, information that you feel the public should be made aware of, humorous incidents, and anything else that you feel is newsworthy should be included.

Address all information as follows:

#### Fire Prevention

Information on emergency incidents should include:

- Time.
- Shift.
- Type of call (2-1, etc.).
- Companies involved.
- Incident number.
- Location - name of occupancy.
- Value - loss.
- Brief description of fire, EMS, or hazardous materials incident, action taken, information of public education value.

#### **Handling Routine Daily Information**

Department PIOs will review exception reports at the beginning of each work day and will coordinate with each other and the Community Relations Department to contact the following news outlets on a daily basis:

- 1 State Press.
- 2 City Daily.
- 3 Sister City Tribune.

Clerical staff will make exception reports available to PIOs on a timely basis at the beginning of each work day.

### **Media Requests for Information**

Upon a request for information from the media, the person receiving the call will make every effort to connect the caller with a department PIO. If unable to contact a PIO, obtain the caller's name, phone number, information requested, and ask about the caller's deadline. Make sure this information is relayed to a PIO at the earliest possible time.

When a PIO is contacted by the media with a request for information, a response to that inquiry will be given high priority. Information will be obtained by use of computer records and contact with crews involved.

When contacted by a department PIO, Fire Department personnel will place a high priority on response to the inquiry. PIOs are attempting to accommodate reporters in meeting deadlines. What is news today won't be tomorrow, so timely response to a request for information from a PIO may get an important fire department story in front of the public that might not be reported if deadlines aren't met.

You may be requested at times to speak directly to a reporter. Speak freely, keeping in mind the guidelines written in the "Guidelines for Fire Department Interaction with the News Media" section of this SOP.

### **Reporting Special Programs and Operations**

The Fire Department is involved in special programs and operations, both to educate the public and improve our capabilities. It is to our advantage to make the public aware of these programs. There are several ways to accomplish this, i.e., press releases, press conferences, interviews, etc.

The most frequently used method of getting word out is the news release. Media outlets are inundated with news releases, most of which are seen by them as being trivial and self-serving. We should guard against becoming a non-productive contributor to this trend. We should, however, take advantage of the media as a resource for significant public education activities.

News releases will be written by department PIOs using material supplied by members involved in the activity to be publicized. A standard news release format will be utilized under a Tempe Fire Department News Release letterhead. A valuable resource for assistance in preparing a news release is the Community Relations Department.

### **Guidelines for Fire Department Interaction with the News Media**

Interviews with company officers and operating crew members can be a good way to get fire department information into the public's view. Here are some things to think about should you be

picked for an interview.

First of all, relax and be yourself. Understand that you know more about your job than the reporter or the public. Be prepared to share educational information based on your present incident that could save lives or property or make your job easier, such as "smoke detectors save lives" or "constant supervision prevents drowning." Give pertinent information and facts--do not speculate or give personal opinions.

Be aware that traffic accidents have two parts: Cause and effect. The cause will be determined by a police department investigation and is not ours to speculate. The effect of what happened, injuries, damaged, etc., is within our jurisdiction and we can report it. Accidents present an opportunity to educate the public on seatbelt use.

Whenever discussing events with the media, use words and phrases that don't pin you or the department down unless you are absolutely sure of what you are saying. Helpful words and phrases are: "possibly," "allegedly," "under investigation," "made a statement" (don't say "confessed"), "witness said," etc. Also use the word "accelerant" instead of flammable or combustible liquid, gasoline, kerosene, etc. Don't name suspects or motives. Talk to investigators for dollar loss, cause, and other pertinent information.

Here are some tips for a successful television interview. Sit or stand still while being interviewed. Look the reporter in the eye, not at the camera or the photographer. Don't wear sunglasses--they make you look evasive. If a question is unclear, ask the reporter to repeat or explain it. Think before you speak--pauses can be edited out of the tape. Say what you mean to say. If you don't know the answer, say so. If you make a mistake, correct it. Be brief. Television is looking for a 10-15 second "sound bite" that can be used to add to the impact of the story.

Don't accept facts or figures quoted by the reporter if you aren't sure they're reliable. Never go "off the record." If you don't want to see something in print or on TV, don't say it.

Don't use fire department jargon. The public won't understand it and the media won't use it. State the most important facts at the beginning. Don't argue with a reporter. If a reporter wants information you can't release, don't evade and don't say "no comment" (it sounds incriminating). Simply state that you can't release the information, and explain why.

Welcome the reporter and the reporter's questions. Take the attitude that the reporter represents the public--you want the public to know your story.

Be honest and as straight forward as possible in your answers.

## **5.2 Use of Information Technology:**

**5.3 Distribution and Dissemination Channels:**

**5.4 Personal and Professional Behavior:**