

UNIT EIGHT

PUBLIC INFORMATION AND MEDIA RELATIONS



Public information and media relations were not covered in FEMA’s *the Fundamentals Course for Radiological Monitors* nor the *Fundamentals Course for Radiological Response Team* courses. However, you may have studied effective communications in other professional development courses or attended FEMA’s *Basic* or *Advanced Public Information Officer* courses. If you have experienced working with the media or have attended these courses, this section will be a review. If not, it will provide valuable new knowledge for you to apply in your radiological response role.

GATE FRAME QUESTION



You are at the scene of a major radiological incident and the Incident Commander calls you to the command van. There you find a group of reporters gathering and see a satellite truck setting up just beyond the site perimeter. The Incident Commander asks you to handle this group until the Public Information Officer (PIO) arrives. What do you do next?



ANSWER

Your answer should include the adjacent information

First, introduce yourself to the reporters and ask them to stand by for information regarding a briefing. Then contact your agency's Public Information Officer, who will establish a time and place (usually at the Emergency Operations Center, or EOC) for the briefing to be held. The first briefing should be held as soon as possible, perhaps 15 to 30 minutes after your announcement.

Once you have this information, announce to the reporters where information will be available and the time for the first briefing. Because of the shortness of time, many will leave to attend the briefing. Others may stay to capture the event on film and ask for access to get a better shot. You will follow agency guidelines on working with the media at the scene.

Some of the media will try to interview you. Explain that all questions will be answered at the briefing, and that you do not have all the information they will need. Provide directions to the briefing or whatever you can do to encourage them to attend the briefings. If you find yourself speaking to the media despite the agency's guidelines, look directly at the reporter (not the camera), speak in plain English, and do not use jargon.

- Do not say "No comment."
- Do not speculate or hypothesize about the situation.

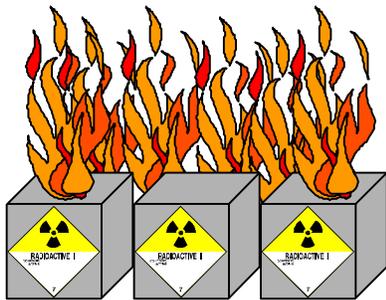
If your answer included all or most of the above points, you should be ready for the Summary Questions at the end of this unit. Turn to page 8-20.

If your answer did not include these points, you should read the programmed instruction for this unit. Turn to page 8-3.



THE NEED FOR GOOD PUBLIC INFORMATION PROCEDURE

You've seen it . . . a radioactive materials transportation accident was handled correctly by the response agency. Any radiological response expert reviewing the incident report would have seen a flawless response. But the community saw the incident through the eyes of a reporter who arrived on the scene before Incident Command.



Not understanding anything about radioactive materials, the reporter's first live remote caused massive panic in the neighborhoods nearest the industrial loop. The responders worked around calls from the mayor's office and interruptions by a growing number of media. The ambulance, delayed by a traffic jam caused by panicked residents evacuating the area, had to thread through several satellite trucks and mini-cam support vans. The camera's confused view led the evening news and featured interviews with firefighter, law enforcement, and emergency medical personnel at the scene. None of them had the whole story, and this gave the impression that they were all confused and untrained.

There was an editorial in the morning paper about a "lack of caution" in the department's response to the accident; a front page story registered concerns from the hospital that their emergency room was contaminated when the injured truck driver was brought in for treatment. Despite having only a broken arm and a gash on his forehead, the hospital administrator assures the community that the patient is in "isolation for the protection of the public." One radio station is calling for the Chief's resignation.



Although the event just described is not based upon a real situation, it is realistic. With increasing technology, a small event can be live on national television. CNN and most local stations have the capacity to utilize home videos and often advertise for citizens to join their “news hawk” or “video reporter” team. Wherever you respond to an incident (even in the middle of nowhere), it is important to know that you will not be far from a camera. The event above demonstrates both the power of the media to form opinion and the importance of agencies developing a method to deal with the media in such an incident.

Answer the following question to assess your understanding.

QUESTION

If your radiological response team controls a radiological event successfully and according to procedure, but does not have a single point of contact for public information,

- a. the media will see that the public is informed about your success.
- b. the media’s version of the events may not accurately reflect the actual events.

Turn the page to check your answer.



ANSWERS

- a. Not always. In fact, if the media hears the story in “bits and pieces” they interpret based upon incomplete information.

Try another question.

- b. Right. The example in this section showed you how it can happen.

Turn to page 8-7.

QUESTION

As a radiological responder who is not associated with your agency’s public information office, you are likely to be approached by the media.

- a. true.
- b. false.

Turn the page to check your answer.



ANSWERS

- a. That is correct. If you are involved in an event that may interest the public, the media will consider you “fair game” for questions.

Turn to page 8-7.

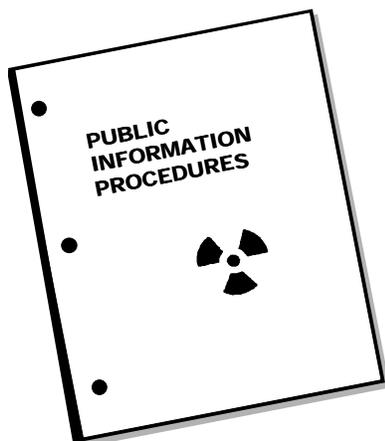
- b. No. It is not always true. In fact, it is likely to occur.

Review this section before proceeding to page 8-7.



BEFORE AN INCIDENT

Responding correctly to a radiological incident takes knowledge and practice, accomplished through training and exercises. Responding correctly to the needs and concerns of the public and the media also takes knowledge and practice. Although a few people seem to be naturals with public relations, most of us are not. This course is not intended to make you a media expert; rather, its goal is to familiarize you with the best way to work with the public and the media during an incident, a method that will enable you to concentrate on responding appropriately to the event rather than reacting to interruptions and questions of the public and media.



Your agency should have a plan for working with the media during an incident (whether natural or technological). The plan should outline how information will be disseminated to the media and the public during an emergency. Most plans will describe the Emergency Alert System resources in the area. Most plans also will designate a PIO. This person will probably be the main contact with the media during an emergency. Depending on the size and nature of your agency, you may have a full-time public relations officer who works with the media on a day-to-day basis, writing routine media releases and speaking to the media regarding day-to-day activities. If the local media know that your PIO understands deadlines, knows video reporters need pictures, and knows print journalists need a lot of information, they will prefer to work with the PIO. The local media will feel comfortable with this person during an emergency.

Find out the name of your agency's PIO. Depending on the nature of your agency, the PIO may be very knowledgeable regarding radiological concerns and response. If so, breathe easier. In a real emergency, your PIO is unlikely to call you away from response work to talk with the media. If, however, your agency works with many hazards, the PIO may have little knowledge of radiological hazards and



response and so will need more input from you during an incident.

Answer the following question to test your understanding of this section.

QUESTION

Circle the correct answer

If, after responding to a transportation incident involving medical radionuclides, a reporter asks you to do a live remote, you should

- a. assume that because you are a member of a radiological emergency response team, you will be able to respond to the reporters questions.
- b. refer the reporter to your PIO and explain that you will be glad to answer further questions if the PIO thinks that would be necessary.

Turn the page to check your answer.



ANSWERS

- a. No. Even if you have had training in dealing with the media, you should refer the reporter to the PIO. Because the PIO works with the media every day, he/she will be in the best position to provide the media with what they need to tell their story.

Review page 8-7 and try the next question.

- b. Correct. The PIO will have most of the information the reporter needs. If some technical data is needed, the PIO may ask you to provide this information to the reporter.

Proceed to page 8-11

QUESTION

Although it is just an exercise, you find a large number of media showing up at the scene. They are trying to get close enough for a good “shot,” and one reporter is trying to interview the Incident Commander. You should

- a. have someone contact the PIO to assist by coming to the scene, working with the media from the operations center, or giving some suggestions for controlling the situation.
- b. threaten to have the media removed from the scene and ask law enforcement to start making arrests.

Turn the page to check your answer.



ANSWERS

- a. Right. Although the media should not interfere with the task at hand, you should not try to keep the media from getting a story. In the post-exercise briefing, the problem with the media should be addressed and changes in procedure should be made as necessary.

Turn to page 8-11.

- b. Wrong answer. Remember, the public will see you shouting at the camera. They will not see the earlier footage of you doing your job. Your reaction to the media could be a bigger story than the actual event. Overreaction to the media could be perceived as an indication that the situation is very “serious” and that local agencies do not have things under control; this could contribute to panic during an event and complaints after the event.

Return to page 8-7 and reread this section before moving on.



USING THE MEDIA TO DISSEMINATE INFORMATION



After a cyclone devastated a remote portion of Australia, one of the first items distributed by relief flights was transistor radios. No local broadcasting systems had survived the storm, and there was no power and few backup systems. The transistors allowed the response agencies to give information directly to the people who needed the information through broadcast.

After the 1989 San Francisco earthquake, one vacationing firefighter made the national news when he got a free ticket from Chicago to San Francisco by presenting his firefighter's badge to an airline official. He had been watching CNN when his boss held a media conference to say he was canceling all leave and needed all available firefighters. While the firefighter's dedication made news, it is important to note that the media can play a very important role in providing accurate and important information to those who need to know that information.

While these are good examples of the positive approach to working with the media during a crisis, there are plenty of examples of the negative approach. Soviet officials denied the presence of a problem until the radioactive cloud from Chernobyl could no longer be kept secret. At Three Mile Island, the lack of a controlled central point for information lead to misinformation, rumors and panic.

Media often have been used to announce evacuation areas due to threat of natural or manmade disasters. The Emergency Alert System is one resource for disseminating this kind of information. However, sometimes communications are not clear between the responders and the media. In one instance, residents called headquarters to ask why the police were asking them to leave when the media was reporting that the toxic spill at a train derailment was under control. At another incident, persons in an



affected area kept evacuating long after the threat to the area had passed; authorities had failed to advise the media that the situation was under control and residents could return to their homes.

Apply the above information to the following scenario.

QUESTION

Circle the correct answer

A fire occurs at a radiopharmaceuticals factory in your jurisdiction. The downwind area is evacuated as a precaution. It is soon apparent that there is no contamination in the area and residents can return to their homes. How do you let them know they can go home?

- a. You work with your PIO to develop a media release explaining that the area is safe and announcing that residents should return. The PIO will distribute this information to the media.
- b. You pick up the phone and call the local radio station and tell them to announce that residents can go home.

Turn to the next page to check your answer.



ANSWERS

- a. This is the correct response. The release should reassure residents that neither the area nor their homes are dangerous. Having the PIO distribute the information to the media will ensure a thorough dissemination of this good news.

Turn to page 8-14.

- b. Incorrect answer. By calling one local station directly, you will create a lot of problems for your agency and the PIO. If only one source reports something, some people will not trust the information. Because most people do not understand radiation nor contamination, they may be reluctant to return home without assurances from “authorities” that they are safe. The public realizes that the reporter will know little more than they do about radiological dangers. By reporting to only one source, you also may create problems for your agency in the future. PIOs do not play favorites with the media; neither should you.

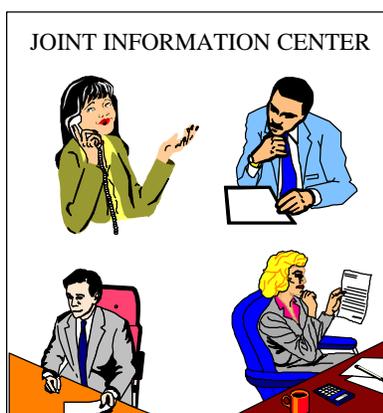
Please review page 8-11 before continuing.



INTERACTING WITH THE MEDIA DURING AN INCIDENT

As mentioned earlier, it is important for your agency to have someone to work with the media—someone who understands the needs of the various mediums (print versus broadcast, etc.) and understands the pressures of deadlines.

The PIO will work with local media during non-emergency conditions so all members of the media are familiar with your agency and your procedures.



If you have a central point to distribute information during an emergency, the media will probably report there for primary information. The central point is sometimes called a *Joint Information Center* (JIC), especially for multi-agency incidents, or a Public Information Center. From this point, information can be controlled and coordinated to allow all information to flow as quickly and correctly as possible.

In some communities, the site for the JIC may be located in the Emergency Operations Center. Wherever your agency locates the JIC, most agencies use the briefing as a method to provide information to media during a crisis. Because the media will want to be part of the briefings, they will accept your format and rules. Providing fast, accurate information without playing favorites will get respect and attention from the media. If you give information only at these briefings and all media are treated equally, it is possible to maintain an effective control of the flow of information.

Even though the PIO will be the main contact with the media, it is sometimes necessary to have “experts” present at the briefings. This is often true for technical and manmade disasters, including radiological accidents. Reporters have always been generalists, and recent cost-cutting at the networks has done nothing to change this. It



uhms,” and “you knows.”

- If you normally wear eyeglasses, keep them on. Sunglasses or glasses with self-darkening lenses should be removed. When people cannot see your eyes, you look as if you are trying to hide something.
- Listen to all the questions and all the answers. If you look bored or disinterested, the audience will know.
- Do not look at the camera; instead look at the reporter.
- Speak in plain English and avoid any jargon. If you must use jargon, explain it.
- Do not accuse other responders, agencies, the media, or the public of causing the problem or making matters worse. Talk about solving the problems, not who caused them.
- Do not feel pressured into answering questions for which you are not responsible or prepared to answer. Tell reporters that this is not your area of expertise and either direct them back to the PIO or say that you will find out the answer.

- Remember the answer “No Comment” leaves the wrong impression on the public and may cause the media to dig deeper to see just why you would not comment.
- Ask for clarification of questions you do not understand.
- If you do not know the facts, do not speculate and do not hypothesize. You cannot easily retract statements later.

Check your comprehension by answering the following question.

QUESTION

Circle the correct answer

Suppose while you are attending a briefing a reporter directs a question to you regarding a particular aspect of the response. You suggested a different approach, but after much discussion another method was chosen. You tell the reporter

- a. that you believe this approach is more costly and too cautious as well as very time consuming.
- b. that this method should accomplish the goals of the response team and explain why it should work.

Turn the page to check your answer.



ANSWERS

- a. Telling the reporter that you did not agree with the decision would only cause problems for you and the team even if you are later proven correct. The media and the public will have little faith in anything your team does if they think that even the experts cannot agree.

Please review the suggestions for conduct at a briefing on page 8-15. Then answer the next question.

- b. That's right. Even though you may feel that your method would be the best, you are a member of a team and your job is to support and participate in team actions in order to accomplish the overall goal of protecting the population from harmful radiation effects. The public must see a synchronized team effort in order to have confidence in the instructions they receive. An alternative answer would be to tell the reporter that someone else could probably answer the questions better and then refer the reporter to someone who supports and has with knowledge of this particular method.

Turn to page 8-19.



QUESTION

You have been called to participate in the briefing early on in an accident involving a van containing the medical radioisotopes technetium-99m and iodine-131. A reporter asked you to explain what type of danger this material presents to the residents of the new homes along the interstate.

- a. You explain that these amounts and forms of technetium-99m and iodine-131 do not pose hazards to residents along the highway unless they come into direct contact with the material. The perimeter of the accident scene has been cordoned off temporarily until all of the material has been removed.

- b. You tell the reporter that these radioisotopes emit penetrating gamma radiation that has the potential to cause internal and external biological damage.

Turn the page to check your answer.



ANSWERS

- a. Yes this is the proper response. The reporter may ask a couple of follow-up questions for clarification, but speaking plainly will help get the information to the public in a non-threatening manner.

Turn to page 8-19.

- b. If this is your response, you have just caused panic in the streets. The average reporter does not understand most of what you said, and the public just heard the part about penetrating gamma rays. Most of what they know about gamma rays came from watching movies about aliens when they were children. It is very important that you speak clearly and calmly and use plain language.

Reread the section on working with the media on page 8-14 before moving on to the Summary Questions on page 8-19.



SUMMARY QUESTIONS

QUESTION

Circle the correct answer

1. Part of the Incident Commander's responsibilities include working with the media or assigning one of the responders to do so at the scene.
 - a. true.
 - b. false.

Turn the page to check your response.



ANSWERS

- a. Incorrect. Although on a very large scale accident, the media may work with a member of your agency at the scene, all contact with the media should be directed to the Public Information Officer.

Go back to page 8-7 and review before answering the next Summary Question.

- b. Correct.

Move to the next Summary Question.

QUESTION

Circle the correct answer

2. The Public Information Officer has asked you to attend a briefing at the Emergency Operations Center later in the day. You review the situation board to update yourself on the accident and feel well prepared for the media. When you are asked to explain a specific, technical concern and how you hope to solve this problem, what do you do?
- a. You should look at the reporter who asked the question and speak clearly, honestly, and in plain language to explain the situation. Go into more detail only if the reporter feels it is necessary.
- b. Look into the camera and explain the situation in minute detail using all the correct scientific terms. This shows that you are very knowledgeable and that the public should not worry.

Turn the page to check your answer.



ANSWERS

- a. Correct.

Move on to the next unit.

- b. Incorrect. The basic rule for appearing on camera is to look at the reporter who asked the questions rather than into the camera. Looking into the camera will make you look vain. Speaking in scientific jargon also will make you look vain. By using words the public cannot understand, you may increase their anxiety rather than calm them. They may assume the situation is much worse than they feared because you are disguising the information behind jargon.

Before moving on to the next unit, go back to the suggestions for attending a briefing and review.

