Collaborating With the Media: Establishing Strategic Partnerships for Emergency Operations Plans

READINESS AND EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT FOR SCHOOLS TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE CENTER

The media can be an asset to schools, school districts, and institutions of higher education (IHEs), helping contribute to safety efforts within each of the five National Preparedness System mission areas (prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery). Interacting with local news media outlets — including print and online media, radio, and television stations — can be a highly effective strategy for enhancing school and campus safety, security, emergency management, and preparedness efforts. The media can promote positive messaging about these efforts before any emergency occurs, as well as communicate vital information to school and campus communities during and after an emergency. The stronger a school, district, or IHE's partnerships with media representatives, the more effectively the media can help them communicate with the community.

In addition to maintaining ongoing relationships with media representatives, schools and IHEs should also prepare for media engagement during and after emergencies by developing and maintaining comprehensive emergency operations plans (EOPs) that account for media engagement. High-quality EOPs with clear directives on working with the media can help reduce confusion during and after an emergency; contribute to organized response and recovery efforts; and ensure clear, consistent communication between schools, school districts, and IHEs and their communities. This fact sheet shares information and strategies for establishing partnerships with media representatives and for developing EOPs that consider the role of the media before, during, and after emergency incidents.

Develop Proactive Partnerships Before, During, and After an Incident

Schools, school districts, and IHEs should make proactive efforts to initiate relationships and build trust with their local media. These cooperative relationships help facilitate the delivery of timely and accurate information to the community. The stronger the relationship, the more likely the media will trust that the information provided to them is accurate and complete, and the more likely the school, district, or IHE can rely on the media to follow directives and enhance their efforts to communicate important messages to the whole school or campus community.

Before an emergency incident, the media can be an effective vehicle for promoting a school, school district, or IHE's safety, security, emergency management, and preparedness efforts. The media can serve as universal communication lines, helping increase a school or campus community's awareness of the effective steps schools are taking to prevent, protect against, mitigate, respond to, and recover from emergencies.

The media can also play a role in helping communicate school safety initiatives to the community

and in raising community awareness of preparedness efforts happening at schools, school districts, and IHEs. Media can

- Communicate potential hazards at or near a school or IHE (e.g., highways, dams, nuclear power plants).
- Enlist participation in and raise awareness of prevention (e.g., reporting suspicious activity), protection (e.g., driving at appropriate speeds when near schools or campuses), mitigation (e.g., preparing for natural hazards), and recovery activities (e.g., assisting with cleanup efforts).
- Inform the community and contribute to effective response and recovery efforts during and after an emergency incident.

There are several ways that schools, school districts, and IHEs can proactively communicate with the media about their ongoing safety, security, emergency management, and preparedness efforts. The *Guide for Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (*School Guide*), *The Role of Districts in Developing High-Quality School Emergency Operations Plans* (*District Guide*), and the *Guide for Developing High-Quality Emergency Operations Plans for Institutions of Higher Education* (*IHE Guide*) all state that copies of a school or higher ed EOP without sensitive information, or select portions of an EOP without sensitive information, may be shared with the media, in accordance with public records laws. Sharing portions of a school or higher ed EOP with the media can provide information to the school or campus community about planned courses of action for specific emergency management functions and inform media representatives about their role during and after an emergency. The media can help remind the community to refer to these established plans and procedures when there is an emergency for up-to-date details and directions. In addition, the media may play a role in helping to carry out specific courses of action outlined in portions of the EOP, such as the Alerts, Communications, and Warning Annex. Schools, school districts, and IHEs can also alert the media about upcoming drills and exercises, or even invite media representatives to observe or participate in them. Through increased positive media attention, schools, school districts, and IHEs are more likely to garner community support for their preparedness efforts and increase community confidence in the school or IHE's

ability to manage emergencies effectively.

During and after an emergency incident, schools, school districts, and IHEs should be prepared for a convergence of media representatives (local and national). Strong working relationships with the media and a well-designed EOP with pre-established policies for this scenario, supported by school or campus personnel trained to work with the media, will facilitate the on-site coordination of the media and help maintain order from the onset of an emergency. Local media personnel can serve as allies to the school, school district, or IHE by providing guidance on these policies to their national affiliates. These cooperative relationships and predetermined plans may strengthen the process for escorting the media to the designated media staging area, establishing behavior expectations on both sides, scheduling interviews, communicating information, and creating an atmosphere of compliance.

Managing media relations during and after an emergency incident requires a well-organized approach. The National Incident Management System (NIMS) provides this comprehensive, standardized approach for incident management, offering set terminology and clear direction to help facilitate collaboration before, during, and after emergency incidents. To help manage and coordinate organizations and individuals during and after an emergency incident, NIMS defines the Incident Command System (ICS) as an operational system that dictates how various personnel will work together throughout incident management,

including communication with the media. Within the ICS framework, the primary individual responsible for guiding operations during and after an emergency incident is the Incident Commander, who is supported by additional incident command staff. It is important to note that during and after an emergency incident, the media have a job to do that is not entirely congruent with the Incident Commander's goals, and thus the two parties need to work together. The media's primary goal is to receive information from the school, school district, or IHE to report to the community, whereas communication with the media is only one goal of the Incident Commander. During an emergency incident, when the media are given timely and accurate information, they can help schools, school districts, and IHEs broadcast critical information necessary for efficient response and recovery efforts. Trusting relationships have positive outcomes for both sides, satisfying the media's request for information and the school, school district, or IHE's need to relay that information.

After an emergency incident, the media will continue to report about the event while school, school district, or IHE personnel work through the recovery phases. The media will likely report on the original incident, analyze response actions, describe damages and injuries, and potentially spotlight particular individuals. Repeated exposure to images or video of an incident can be disruptive to the social, emotional, and behavioral recovery of the school or campus community members who were exposed to the trauma, so news personnel should be guided toward presenting ongoing updates and information on recovery activities in a positive and trauma-informed light.

Helpful Hints for Establishing Relationships With the Media

- Send press releases announcing the school, school district, or IHE's ongoing positive efforts in safety, security, preparedness, and emergency management.
- Initiate relationships with local online, television, radio, and newspaper reporters who regularly write about the school, school district, or IHE, and/or community partners.
- Become a resource for local reporters by sending

updates to them about activities and events happening at the school, school district, or IHE on an ongoing basis (e.g., community meetings, sporting events, etc.)

- Write a letter to the editor about the school or IHE's emergency management program.
- Share copies of the school or higher ed EOP, or portions of it, with the media that do not contain sensitive information, and in accordance with public records laws.
- Nurture a relationship with reporters by sending invitations to observe or even participate in emergency drills and exercises.

Helpful Hints for Managing a Designated Media Staging Area

- Designate a media staging area that limits exposure to students and the incident command team and allows easy access for emergency vehicles and equipment.
- Identify and train select personnel to supervise the designated media staging area.
- Escort authorized media personnel to the designated media staging area.

- Provide a concrete set of expectations, such as remaining within the designated media staging area, not speaking with first responders, and not interviewing students without parental consent.

Develop a Communications and Warning Annex

A comprehensive EOP should provide clear directives for communicating with staff, students, parents/ guardians, community partners, and the media before, during, and after an emergency. The Communications and Warning Annex (or, for IHEs, the Communications and Notification Annex) should outline key personnel and their roles and responsibilities for supporting the incident command and communicating with internal and external stakeholders. This annex should also identify key media contacts, procedures for communicating with the media, as well as specific protocols (i.e., relaying key instructions to the community on behalf of the school, school district, or IHE). Processes and procedures include but are not limited to

- Establishing memoranda of understanding to coordinate the release of information.
- Developing preliminary communication guidelines and templates based on the school, school district, or IHE's prioritized risks. These templates can be tailored to meet the unique and immediate needs of the situation. For example, a Public Information Officer (PIO) can prepare a template in advance that informs the community of a student death, available services through the community as well as helpful community partners, and guidance for talking with students about the tragedy.

- Ensuring communications are available in multiple languages and formats as needed by the community and accessible for individuals with access/functional needs.
- Creating standard response protocols to ongoing media requests.
- Providing information on critical emergency management functions (e.g., lockdown, evacuation, family reunification).
- Offering assurance that information released is consistent with applicable state and Federal privacy laws (e.g., *Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act* [FERPA]).

According to the *School* and *IHE Guides*, the Communications and Warning Annex should also explicitly detail how students, staff, and family members who have been impacted by an emergency incident will be supported if they do not want to engage with the media. Potential strategies include keeping the media separated from families and providing support for families that experience unwanted media attention at their homes. The Communications and Warning Annex should provide clear instruction on coordinating information sharing while also providing a means for safeguarding the privacy of impacted members of the school community.

> FERPA protects all students' records and personal information by limiting access to this information. FERPA allows access to student records only by parents, students 18 or older, and select officials with written permission. FERPA-protected information should generally not be disclosed to the media. Additional information on FERPA is accessible at http://www.ed.gov/policy/gen/guid/fpco/ferpa/index.html.

Identify and Train a PIO

The Communications and Information Management component of the NIMS calls for a trained PIO as a key staff member of the incident command team. Additionally, the *School* and *District Guides* suggest employing a PIO as an exemplary strategy for handling the media, and the *IHE Guide* recommends that representatives from the Public Information Office be involved in Step 1 of the recommended six-

PLEASE NOTE: The tools and resources identified in this document are not intended as endorsements and are merely offered as examples that you may consider in your own planning efforts.

step planning process for creating EOPs (forming a collaborative planning team). Because the PIO plays a critical role in all aspects of emergency management, schools, school districts, and IHEs should proactively identify and train a PIO that will serve as the sole line of communication between the incident command and the media in the event of an emergency. The PIO establishes policies for how, when, where, and to whom information will be provided.

Roles and Responsibilities of the PIO

The PIO has multiple responsibilities in supporting school, school district, and IHE emergency management efforts. Ultimately, the PIO's role is to liaise between the incident command and the media, community, and/or other organizations and to ensure all communication is consistent, accessible, and timely.

The first responsibility of the PIO involves gathering information from the incident command team and proactively developing communications for use in press briefings, media releases, and Web or social media posts, using their understanding of FERPA to ensure that communications are law-abiding. This also requires the PIO to ensure ahead of time that all communications are accessible to the community, including those with access and functional needs. This may mean translating communications into multiple languages, enlisting the support of interpreters, and providing information in multiple formats. All communications should be reviewed and authorized through the Incident Commander and then delivered by the PIO, the sole source of information to the media.

Second, under the ICS, the PIO informs the incident command team of all public information matters related to the management of the emergency incident, taking information from the field, and relaying it back to the Incident Commander. This requires monitoring news and traditional and social media outlets for relevant information that can inform ongoing response and recovery efforts. This also involves rumor control. While the goal of the media is to report accurate and timely information, the media may also occasionally get facts wrong, inadvertently reporting rumors or perpetuating misinformation, which can spread and change quickly. In this situation, the responsibility of the PIO is to lean on their pre-established relationships to request corrections or retractions and, if needed, to

schedule additional releases of information to restate facts and correct any misinformation.

Lastly, the PIO coordinates logistics for information sharing and media engagement, making decisions about the time, length, and location of interviews, briefings, conferences, calls, etc. The PIO should proactively develop agreements and coordinate with community partners about the release of information to facilitate this work. This is especially important for incidents that escalate beyond the expertise and capacity of the individual school, school district, or IHE.

A large-scale incident requires support from community partners such as law enforcement, fire personnel, and emergency medical services. Upon arrival of community responders, the school, school district, or IHE transfers command from the Incident Commander to the community partner and forms a multi-agency or joint command. The school, school district, or IHE would then provide background information on the status of the incident to the responding community partners, and the school, school district, or IHE incident command staff would become support personnel to the new Incident Commander. When schools, school districts, or IHEs transfer command to a community partner, the role of the PIO also transfers. The school, school district, or IHE's PIO would become a member of the command agency's Public Information System, providing support to the new command agency's PIO. If the incident requires a multi-agency response that includes numerous community partners, a joint

information center (JIC) would be established. Each participating agency's PIO then becomes a member of the JIC, which is led by the command agency's PIO and Incident Commander. For example, if a detonated bomb prompted an off-campus evacuation and law enforcement led the incident command, directing all services — police, fire, public and mental health, and emergency medical services — each agency's PIO becomes support staff to the JIC, led by the law enforcement's Incident Commander and PIO. The JIC exchanges and verifies information between the response agencies. In this situation, the lead PIO is still responsible for updating the Incident Commander and communicating with the media. The JIC can host joint press briefings with an approved, unified message. Any statements would be delivered collaboratively, side-by-side, and the lead PIO would receive and direct questions to partners as appropriate.

Preparing Communication for the Media

PIOs can prepare for their role well in advance of any emergency, as well as immediately before speaking with the media. Before any emergency takes place, the PIO can develop ready-to-use templates and guidelines, and collect past communications between the school, school district, and the media to develop a clear, unified message. The PIO should also be well-informed about the school, school district, or IHE and the surrounding community. For example, a PIO can gather basic data about a school, school district, or IHE's existing safety and security protocols (including a copy of their EOP), physical grounds or campus layout, and enrollment. Gathering background information on the school, school district, or IHE and

the surrounding community in advance can help provide context about an incident and may become relevant during and after an emergency.

Directly before speaking with the media, the PIO can prepare by conferring with the Incident Commander to supply answers to predictable questions. For example, the media are likely to pose a basic set of questions about the time of the incident, the individuals present, any individual that may be responsible for the incident, and the number and kinds of injuries or casualties, in addition to inquiring about current response and recovery efforts. When developing communications, PIOs should allow sufficient time with the Incident Commander to gather accurate, approved information. A form with prompts for key information can be completed in collaboration with the Incident Commander to be used as a guide during the response. In addition to working closely with the Incident Commander to develop communications, the PIO can also prepare by consulting the school, school district, or IHE's legal counsel for further guidance on information sharing and state-specific public records laws. By taking steps to prepare in advance, as well as immediately before, an emergency incident, PIOs can ensure they are well-equipped to plan, write, and release communications.

Helpful Hints for Writing Effective Communications

When developing written communications (both print and electronic) for the whole school or campus community, as well as media representatives, schools, school districts, and IHEs should

- Be prepared by having a pre-approved process in place for writing, reviewing, and disseminating information.
- Be direct and clear, but not simplistic.
- Identify and maintain a consistent message throughout the communication.
- Stay on topic and do not relay unnecessary or irrelevant information.
- Be calm and reassuring, but do not understate the incident.
- Use plain language, define any technical terms, and provide background information as needed. For example, discussing a school's response to an infectious disease outbreak may require relaying basic facts about the virus and how it spreads, before moving on to discuss the school's specific response activities. This also helps reassure the community that the school is basing its decisions on verified facts.
- Have information accessible in more than one language and format, as needed.

After an emergency incident, the media can either enhance or hinder the response process and a school, school district, or IHE's transition into the phases of recovery. Schools, school districts, and IHEs can take proactive steps to work with the media on an ongoing basis before an emergency incident, which will help facilitate effective collaboration during and after an incident. The media can help advertise a school, school district, or IHE's emergency management program; enlist support; inform the community of a school, school district, or IHE's response protocols; and relay information about short- and long-term support services. Schools, school districts, and IHEs should reach out to the media, establishing an ongoing relationship, providing mutual support, and creating experiences that will instill trust at the time of an emergency. Forming partnerships and cooperative processes and protocols will support response efforts and hasten the recovery process.

Conclusion

The media can play a pivotal role in school, school district, and IHE emergency management. Positive relations; highly trained personnel; and comprehensive, high-quality EOPs are not only vital

Tips for Communicating With the Media During a Response

- Provide clear limits in advance, such as which topics will and will not be addressed, and which types of questions will or will not be answered (if the incident command team is still working through their response, it is okay to inform the media that questions will not be taken at that time).
- Start with the verified facts and most important information and stick to them. Avoid the use of emotionally charged words and illustrative descriptions of the incident.
- Promptly alert the press of response and recovery operations. If response and recovery efforts are still underway, or if key decisions have not yet been made, inform the media and the public that more information will be released as it becomes available.
- Use pre-approved language only.
- Do not speculate or blame. Do not say 'no comment.'
- Provide directives to the community (e.g., details on family reunification or road closures).
- Share steps taken to secure, contain, or mitigate the impact of the incident. As possible, illustrate positive outcomes and response successes.
- Inform the media and public of next steps, including whether updates will be provided and how often, and whether there are specific channels they can use to access additional information, such as a Website or phone line.

to effective response and recovery efforts but are effective strategies for strengthening a school, school district, or IHE's prevention, protection, and mitigation efforts as well. By working collaboratively with the media before, during, and after an emergency incident, schools, school districts, and IHEs can ensure their communities are well-informed and garner community-wide support for their efforts to maintain the safety and security of the whole school or campus community.

Resources

Further Reading — REMS TA Center

- [Communications and Warning Annex At a Glance](#), Web Page
- [Communications and Notification Annex At a Glance](#), Web Page
- [Implementing the National Incident Management System (NIMS): Practitioner-Oriented Strategies for Education Agencies](#), Fact Sheet
- [Tool Box](#), Web Page

Training Opportunities — REMS TA Center

- [Information Sharing for Schools and Postsecondary Institutions — the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA)](#), Webinar

Further Reading — Communication

- [National Emergency Communications Plan](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Homeland Security [DHS], Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency)
- [IS-242.C: Effective Communication](#), Online Course (DHS, Federal Emergency Management Agency [FEMA], Emergency Management Institute [EMI])
- [Countering False Information on Social Media in Disasters and Emergencies](#), Publication (DHS, FEMA)
- [Effective Communications for People With Disabilities: Before, During, and After Emergencies](#), Publication (National Council on Disability)

- [Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication: Working With the Media](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)
- [Communicating in a Crisis: Risk Communication Guidelines for Public Officials](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration)
- [School Safety Communications Planning Guide](#), Publication (National Center for School Safety)

Further Reading — Public Information Officers

- [IS-29.A: Public Information Officer Awareness](#), Online Course (DHS, FEMA, EMI)
- [National Incident Management System Basic Guidance for Public Information Officers](#), Publication (DHS, FEMA)
- [IS-700.B: An Introduction to the National Incident Management System](#), Online Course (DHS, FEMA, EMI)
- [IS-100.C: Introduction to the Incident Command System](#), Online Course (DHS, FEMA, EMI)
- [Public Information Officer Position Checklist](#), Publication (DHS, FEMA, EMI)

Further Reading — Information Sharing

- [Data-Sharing Tool Kit for Communities: How to Leverage Community Relationships While Protecting Student Privacy](#), Publication (U.S. Department of Education [ED])
- [FERPA 101: For Local Education Agencies](#), Online Course (ED)
- [FERPA 101: For Colleges & Universities](#), Online Course (ED)