

Dealing With the Media During an Emergency

It is an all too familiar scene for emergency responders. You arrive at the scene of an accident or fire and before you can unload your equipment, a reporter is on the scene asking questions and taking pictures. Depending on your training and working relationship with the media, these reporters can be seen either as an adversary or just one of the many people you must deal with during any emergency.

This is why it is important for every township to have personnel who are trained to work as the Public Information Officer (PIO) for any incident. All too often we find there is only one person who does this and when that person is not available, a crisis develops where we simply extend the yellow tape well beyond the incident in an effort to keep the media at a distance with the excuse that they are interfering with the incident. This is only going to cause the media to become angry and some may actually interfere with the scene by seeking information from spectators or arriving responders. Remember, if you're willing to swim with the sharks; don't get mad if one bites you. That is what sharks do if you swim around them without training.

In its simplest form, the mission of the media is to inform the public, while the mission of emergency services is to protect the public. While these missions seem to conflict, I would ask you to recognize that trained PIO's can help to make these two groups work well together. Remember, in the end, both groups serve the public. The PIO not only acts as the spokesperson for the incident, but also gathers information and coaches other officials who will be asked to provide information to the media. This is especially useful when a Unified Command group is asked to meet with the media to answer questions.

Keep in mind that on any given day you may find yourself as the Incident Commander during some emergency. The media is going to show up and start asking questions. They will want someone to speak to them. Remember, if you won't speak to them, they will find someone who will. At the very least, be prepared to give the media a staging area and some basic information about the incident and let them know that a PIO will be on scene shortly to keep them informed of the situation as it unfolds. Remember, they need some information to put on the TV or out over the radio. You will find that most legitimate media personnel will act professionally when treated professionally. I am not attempting to ask you to go against department policy concerning media statements, but giving your name, title and admitting there was a fire is not going to interfere with any investigation or threaten the safety of those on scene.

Once the PIO arrives on the scene it is important that this person work closely with the Incident Commander. One problem that develops here is that the PIO for the township may be a police supervisor while the incident commander may be from the fire service. If these two people have never talked before, there may be

a breakdown in communication. The result being that the wrong information or no information is given to the media.

The Incident Commander should normally approve all information given to the media. The PIO will then interact with the media on a scheduled basis throughout the incident. A trained PIO will most likely have a good understanding of the needs placed upon the emergency responders and also the needs of the media that might include deadlines for the delivery of the story and the need to provide pictures, audio or video.

There are any number of classes given for the PIO function. One that I would highly recommend is the Basic PIO class given by the New Jersey State Police through the Office of Emergency Management. This class is geared towards Emergency Management and is open all members of state and local officials involved in emergency response.

Dealing with the media can be handled in only two ways. You can see them as a partner in serving the public or you look upon them as somewhere between an annoyance and the plight upon mankind.

I recommend developing the media as a partner not only in responding to emergencies, but also in everything you do to serve the public. Remember that the key to a good partnership is building a relationship based upon understanding and trust. Your willingness to get training for yourself and those involved in the PIO function will help you in building that trust as it will help you to understand the needs of the media.

Or, you can simply order more yellow tape.