

News Media and Community Relations

313.1 PURPOSE AND SCOPE

The purpose of this policy is to provide guidelines for communicating with representatives of the media, community leaders, residents and businesses, and to establish procedures for interacting with media representatives at emergency scenes. Additionally, this policy establishes an operating framework for integration of the Fire Chief (PIO) into the incident management system.

313.2 POLICY

It is the policy of the Blue Ridge Fire District to establish and maintain a positive working relationship with the community and the media in order to effectively communicate timely and accurate information.

313.3 PIO DESIGNATION

As soon as practicable on incidents where news media are present and requesting information, the Incident Commander (IC) will designate a PIO if the District does not have a full-time PIO. The PIO shall interface with and provide timely and relevant information to representatives of the community and media during critical command stages. A single PIO will typically be designated for each incident, including incidents operating under Unified Command and multijurisdictional incidents.

In multi-agency or multijurisdictional incidents, it may be necessary to establish multiple PIOs and a Joint Information Center (JIC) with a PIO and Assistant PIO. In all cases, the PIO shall be responsible for coordinating the dissemination of information that has been approved by the IC for release to the media, the community and other parties that may have been affected by the incident.

Upon arrival at the scene of the incident, the designated PIO will report to the IC, obtain an incident briefing and be assigned the PIO radio designator for the incident.

313.4 DISSEMINATION OF INFORMATION

The PIO should gather and disseminate the following information as deemed appropriate:

- (a) Incident response information, including the number of units and personnel on-scene
- (b) Appropriate human interest or safety information
- (c) Nature of the incident and expertise of the fire personnel deployed (high-rise, technical rescue, etc.)
- (d) A description of any particular hazards present at the incident
- (e) Identification of life-saving or heroic acts that may have occurred, including any rescue scenarios
- (f) Projected duration of the incident
- (g) Approved evacuation notices and restricted areas

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313.5 RESTRICTED INFORMATION

The PIO shall ensure that legally protected information is not released to the media. The PIO should consult with the IC or the authorized designee about any issues or concerns regarding legally protected information.

Refer to the Line-of-Duty Death and Serious Injury Notification Policy for additional considerations regarding communication with the media concerning a line-of-duty death or serious injury.

313.6 MEDIA INQUIRIES

All media inquiries received by incident personnel shall be forwarded to the PIO for response. The PIO will endeavor to provide accurate information that is available at the time while clearly communicating that any such information is preliminary. The following communication strategies may be employed:

- (a) Reporters should be directed to assemble in a designated staging area to wait until additional information can be obtained.
- (b) If the PIO finds it necessary to remain with media representatives, he/she may request assistance from the IC in gathering information. Media representatives may be allowed to take photographs and video, provided they do not interfere with incident operations or create a safety hazard.
- (c) Prior to releasing the names or identifying information of persons seriously injured or deceased, the PIO shall confirm that the next-of-kin has been notified. Next-of-kin notifications are generally handled by law enforcement and/or hospital personnel. The PIO should contact Dispatch supervisor to confirm that notification has been made.
- (d) The names of deceased or seriously injured persons shall not be transmitted over the radio.

The PIO or the authorized designee should not speculate as to the cause of an incident.

313.7 MEDIA ACCESS AND SPECIAL TOURS OR BRIEFINGS

Authorized members of the media, local leaders, their representatives and other visiting dignitaries may be provided access or tours of scenes of floods, storms, fires, earthquakes, explosions or other emergency scenes when such access can be accomplished safely and when the IC has authorized such activities.

The PIO shall be responsible for scheduling and arranging special tours or briefings in accordance with established National Incident Management System (NIMS) procedures.

Access by the media is subject to the following conditions:

- (a) The media representative shall produce valid press credentials that shall be prominently displayed at all times while in areas otherwise closed to the public.

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- (b) Media representatives shall be prevented from interfering with emergency operations and criminal investigations.
 - 1. Reasonable effort should be made to provide a safe staging area for the media that is near the incident and that will not interfere with emergency or criminal investigation operations. All information released to the media should be coordinated through the PIO or other designated spokesperson.
- (c) In the case of a fire incident, the PIO may escort media representatives on a tour of a fire-damaged area following knockdown and after receiving authorization from the IC, in coordination with operations personnel. The PIO will be responsible for ensuring that all media personnel wear proper protective clothing as warranted.

313.7.1 TEMPORARY FLIGHT RESTRICTIONS

If the presence of media or other aircraft pose a threat to public or personnel safety or significantly hamper incident operations, the IC should consider requesting a Temporary Flight Restriction (TFR). All requests for a TFR should be routed through Dispatch. The TFR request, either for a pre-planned operation or an unplanned incident, should include specific information regarding the perimeter and altitude necessary for the incident. The TFR should be requested through the appropriate control tower. If the control tower is not known, the Federal Aviation Administration should be contacted (14 CFR 91.137).

313.8 NEWS RELEASES

News releases are documents specifically prepared for release to the media. News releases should be authored by the PIO and approved by the Fire Chief, IC or the authorized designee prior to release. News releases should be structured to facilitate use by the print media, typically containing no more than two pages of concise information. News releases should be formatted in accordance with the approved district standard.

313.9 NEWS CONFERENCES

A news conference is a pre-scheduled event intended to highlight a newsworthy event such as a promotion or opening of a new fire station; news conferences can also be used when a representative of the District desires to make a public appearance. The Fire Chief will determine the purpose and scope of the conference. Any accompanying news release will include details, such as the date, time and location, and may reference other officials, dignitaries or agencies that may be in attendance.

The PIO should prepare the news release and/or a prepared statement for the district spokesperson. The PIO shall make arrangements for the site, obtain required equipment, arrange for availability of the news release, identify photo locations and provide escorts, as necessary. The conference may include a moderator or the PIO, who should make introductory remarks and introductions, assist with any question-and-answer period that may follow and conclude the conference.

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Specific information should not be released prior to the conference. The PIO should notify appropriate district personnel of the date, time and location of all news conferences. District members attending the news conference should wear their dress uniform as specified in the Uniform Regulations Policy. Attendance requirements will be determined by the Fire Chief.