

Orchard Farm Fire Protection District Standard Operating Procedure

Division: 100 Administration
Section: 107 Public Relations
Subject: 107.01 Public Information



Supersedes: N/A

Approved By: 

Date: 03/18/2013

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PURPOSE:

To establish guidelines for the release of Fire District information (Emergency and non-emergency information) and guide District members in determining what information to release, and how and when to release that information

RESPONSIBILITY:

All District Personnel

PROCEDURES:

1. It shall be the policy of the Orchard Farm Fire Protection District to seek a professional and courteous relationship with the press and the public at all times.
2. All members shall exhibit an attitude of helpfulness and concern towards persons requesting information regarding Fire District activities and incidents.
3. All members who receive inquires involving Fire District activities or incidents shall direct those inquires to the Fire Chief or his/her designated PIO.
4. During emergency operations, the Incident Commander (IC) shall appoint a Public Information Officer as needed. The IC may serve as the PIO only when the duties of the PIO will NOT interfere with the safe operations of the incident – usually when the incident is small, not complex or is in the late stages.
5. When a PIO has been assigned, all information relating to an incident will be released through the PIO. If a PIO has not been assigned, the Fire Chief, his/her designee, or ranking fire personnel shall serve as the PIO and shall furnish the requested information. Other members at the scene of an incident SHALL direct inquiries to the PIO.
6. The PIO shall use the Media Release Information Form (form 88-107.01-01) to gather appropriate information; however, this form is not to be released to the media. This form is only to be used to prepare for an oral interview or an official press release (form 88-107.01-02).

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7. The PIO shall release only factual information concerning the incident. Personal opinion about the incident shall not be part of the official comments.
8. The PIO will be proactive in releasing information to the media and thus to the public. On extended incidents, regular updates should be provided. The briefings should be at a minimum, provided on an hourly basis. Updates should be provided sooner as information becomes available or any time there are changes in the incident.
9. Information that should be released:
 - A. Type of Incident
 - B. Type of Occupancy
 - C. Address of Incident
 - D. Time of Incident, time of arrival, benchmark times
 - E. Cause:
 - i. Known: Information must be approved by the IC or the Fire Investigator
 - ii. Unknown: Inform the media that the “Incident is under investigation” and that “Information will be released as it becomes available.”
 - F. Damage Amount – An estimate from the IC or the Fire Investigator. Estimate can be a dollar amount or “light”, “moderate” or “heavy damage”
 - G. Number and type of Fire District vehicles on scene
 - H. Number of Fire District members involved in the incident
 - I. Injuries reported (Names are **NOT** released unless approved by the IC*)
 - i. Fire District Personnel
 - ii. Civilian
 - J. Deaths Reported (Names are **NOT** released unless approved by the IC*)

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* As a general rule, names should **NOT** be released. Only the approximate age and gender of the fatality should be released to the media on scene. Names should **NEVER** be used over the radio or released if notification of the victim's next of kin has not taken place, if there is an on-going police investigation, if the patient is a minor, or in the case of injury, if a patient denies permission to release his/her name to the media. Show concern and empathy when talking about sensitive issues such as the loss of life, property, and injuries

K. Mutual aid departments and other agencies requested to assist with the incident

10. Information that **SHOULD NOT** be released by any member of the District to the news media or general public shall include the following:

- A. Prior criminal record, character or reputation of any accused person of a crime.
- B. The existence of any confession, admission of guilt or innocence of any accused.
- C. The opinion of District personnel regarding the guilt or innocence of any accused.
- D. The identity, testimony or credibility of a prospective witness.
- E. Any opinion of District personnel regarding the merits of any incident or case or quality of services rendered.
- F. In no case shall information be released that would hamper or disrupt the investigation of any incident.
- G. Any information concerning the identity of individual under the age of 18 years.
- H. Residence or personal phone numbers of personnel who are not listed in the current commercially available phone directory.

11. A copy of all press releases issued by a Fire District PIO shall be approved by a Chief Officer.

12. All Chief Officers shall be informed of any scheduled press conferences.

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13. The PIO is not permitted to give permission to the media to gain access to private property. If the media wishes to film or photograph damage inside a structure after Fire District operations are completed, they will have to get permission directly from the property owner. If they are able to obtain permission during the incident, they may enter the private property under escort of the PIO, with approval of the Incident Commander.

14. PIO Duties/Responsibilities

- A. Provide a contact for the media and general public to receive information during and after an incident.
 - i. Prepare a media release worksheet. Be sure to refer to the worksheet so that the facts of the incident are communicated without mistake. This form is not given to the media.
 - ii. Set-up a control point for the media and the general public to receive assistance during and after the incident. Keep them safe and as informed as possible. The media shall be provided with a special area that maintains their safety and maintains a distance between rehab and the Command Post so that normal conversations cannot be overheard. Inform the IC of the assigned location of the Media Sector.
- B. Assist families and/or victims with various notifications
- C. Assist with all public relations issues.
- D. Assist with other fire ground operations as needed (rehab, accountability, air supply replacement, etc.) **The PIO may assist the Safety Officer but SHALL NOT serve as the PIO and the Safety Officer simultaneously)**

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INTERVIEW GUIDELINES: (Guidelines taken from IFSTA *Fire District Company Officer*, Third Edition, and IFSTA *Public Information Officer*, First Edition.

- **Members of the media are the eyes and ears of the public and the conduits of information to the public.**
- **Members of the media are our allies – not our enemies.**
- **Members of the media are customers with needs to be met. Treat the media with the same high level of customer service we provide to all of our customers. Be friendly and NICE!**
- There is no such thing as “off the record.” Don’t be misled by friendly reporters who say, “Just between us....” Say ONLY what you want to see printed or broadcast.
- Beware when asked leading questions. Sometime reporters will use this tactic to get the answer they want. Listen to the question carefully and thoughtfully answer “yes” or “that’s correct” only if the facts in the question are 100 percent accurate and no inaccurate conclusions have been drawn.
- Avoid getting into disagreements or becoming defensive with reporters. Defensiveness may suggest that information is being withheld, even if it is not.
- Do not be led into answering questions beyond your area of expertise. Refer such questions to those who have the necessary information, or offer to find the answer – and always follow through.
- Avoid using obscure fire service terminology. If a technical term must be used, explain the meaning at the time it is used. Use language everyone understands.
- Honesty is the best policy. Be as frank and open as possible without divulging confidential information about victims’ identities, possible fire cause, etc.
- Do not answer “What if...” questions. Do not answer hypothetical questions, explaining that you are not prepared to speculate.
- Listen for false or misleading information in reporters’ questions. If a question contains false information, politely discount the misinformation and provide accurate information.

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- Beware of the forced-choice question. If either way of answering the question would be inaccurate, then answer with a separate, factual response. Be tactful, but refute the false information.
- Do not volunteer information, especially if it is speculative. For example, to prematurely suggest to the media that a fire is possibly of electrical origin could have an adverse effect if an arson case is later developed from that fire.
- Be prepared. Rehearse your interview technique, and try to improve delivery.
- Avoid saying “No comment.” It invites speculation. It is okay to respond “I don’t know.” Follow up with information as it becomes available.
- Assign no blame and avoid criticism and second guessing.
- Give credit where credit is due when discussing an issue. Make sure to recognize all parties that have been involved. (mutual aid departments, law enforcement, Red Cross, public works, etc.)
- Seize opportunities for teachable moments. Promote fire and life safety behaviors and attitudes. (Reminding viewers/readers/listeners to check their smoke detector batteries after a fire where smoke detectors alerted the residents or failed to alert, etc.)
- Make every effort to provide access (when safe) to an incident for the media to obtain pictures and or video.
- It is essential that during an interview, members portray a professional image:
 - Use appropriate verbal and nonverbal communications.
 - Remove sunglasses when conducting interviews.
 - Do not chew gum, smoke, use smokeless tobacco or eat or have any food, drink, cigarettes/cigars, smokeless tobacco or candy in your hands, mouth or anywhere where they can be seen.
 - Act confident – Don’t act arrogant. Remember, there are no “stupid” questions, only “stupid” answers. Answer every question with respect and a professional attitude towards the reporter.
 - Look the reporter in the eyes (don’t look at the camera.)

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- Maintain a positive attitude.
- When possible, members acting as the PIO should be wearing District attire, Turnout gear or uniform.
- Look and act professional at all times.
- Use non-gender specific terms i.e., “firefighter” (not fireman) and “staffing” (not manning).
- Project an image of credibility that will reflect well on our District!
- Have at least one other person read all news releases before sending to the media.
- 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.
- Medical records. This information is protected by law and can only be released to the media or any other requesting party with the patient’s permission. When addressing EMS incidents, the PIO must provide only general information about the types of injuries and the action taken by the District. Persons (including insurance agents, police officers, etc.) can only obtain a copy of a medical report when they have a signed release form from the patient or patient’s guardian or when they present a subpoena. Request for copies of fire reports and medical records shall be directed to the Fire Chief’s office.
- The PIO should complete a media release form on all major incidents.
- Avoid saying just “yes” or “no” to answer questions. Speak in complete sentences.
- NEVER lie! It will come back to haunt you and the District. Re-direct a question if it is unfair or makes the District look bad.
- Be prepared. It is okay to ask a reporter what questions will be asked during the interview before the interview.