

Developing a Public Information Officer Standard Operating Guideline for the Raleigh Fire

Department

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Tony H.", written over a horizontal line.

Abstract

The problem was that the Raleigh Fire Department did not have a public information officer standard operating guideline. The purpose of this research was to develop a public information officer standard operating guideline to qualify and give direction to the public information officer in performing his basic duties. Action research methodology was used to answer three research questions: 1) what are the primary responsibilities of the public information officer? 2) What qualifications and training should the public information officer possess? 3) What are the desirable characteristics of the public information officer? The methods used to complete this research were a literature review, personal interviews and a survey of departments similar in size to the Raleigh Fire Department. The research results were sufficient to produce a standard operating guideline for the public information officer that addresses the three research questions. Recommendations included developing a committee to review the new guideline to recommend any addendums beneficial to the public information officer position not addressed by the new guideline, seeking an individual to fill the public information officer position that meets the qualifications and characteristics set forth in the new guideline, the establishment or updating and regular monitoring of the department's social media sites, the allotment of monies in the next budget year for training and certification classes and requiring the public information officer attend quarterly meetings with the city and other departmental public information officers to ensure a common city message.

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Developing a Public Information Officer Standard Operating Guideline for the Raleigh Fire
Department

The City of Raleigh Fire Department provides an array of services to the citizens and visitors of Raleigh. These services include fire suppression, first responder emergency medical technician defibrillation, urban search and rescue (USAR), hazardous materials response (HAZMAT) and staffing one of North Carolina's regional response teams (RRT) for county and state wide hazardous materials response (City of Raleigh, 2015). None of these services are more important than providing informative and sometimes vital information to the department's citizens and visitors, as well as the media, through their public information officer. Recently, a study indicated that access to a public information officer was the number one factor in establishing a positive image for an agency relative to the media (Davis, 2010). The Raleigh Fire Department is no different and must be vigilant in promoting the best image possible while providing solid informational services to its customers.

The problem is that the Raleigh Fire Department does not have a standard operating guideline to address the responsibilities, qualifications and training and characteristics required of the public information officer. The purpose of this research is to develop a standard operating guideline to address the responsibilities, qualifications and training and characteristics required of the public information officer. The findings from this research will enable the Raleigh Fire Department to become much more effective and efficient with the delivery of information to its customers while continuing to establish a strong positive relationship with the media.

Action research methodology will be used in this project to answer three research questions: 1) what are the primary responsibilities of the public information officer? 2) What qualifications and training should the public information officer possess? 3) What are the desirable characteristics of the public information officer?

Background and Significance

Raleigh North Carolina has grown significantly over the past 10 years and is considered a metropolitan city. Raleigh has served as the capital city of North Carolina since it was moved from New Bern, North Carolina in 1794 (NC History, n.d.). With a population of over 439,000 people, the city covers more than 144 square miles (Raleigh for You website, 2016). The city is comprised of numerous high and low rise buildings as well as a variety of businesses and single and multi-family residences. The City of Raleigh Fire Department currently has over 600 personnel serving the citizens of Raleigh out of 28 fire stations on a three platoon system.

The Raleigh Fire Department rotates its four assistant chiefs every few years between the operations, training, inspections/fire marshal and services divisions. This rotation is done at the discretion of the fire chief and serves to cross train the assistant chiefs in the various divisions of the department. Currently the assistant chief of inspections, or the fire marshal, also serves as the public information officer (PIO). He serves in his PIO role secondarily to that of the fire marshal position and will eventually be rotated to another division within 3-4 years. Unfortunately, this has resulted in inconsistency relative to developing a rapport with the media and the citizens of Raleigh. His shared responsibilities have also resulted in very little effort being placed on his role as the fire department's PIO due to the amount of time required to effectively and efficiently lead the inspections department. However, the biggest dilemma is that he serves with no clear definition of his responsibilities as the department's PIO, is not chosen

for his qualifications or training as a PIO and is not necessarily appointed because he possesses those characteristics deemed desirable of a PIO. Having no clear direction for the department's PIO has existed since the department's inception and still exists today.

This is of great significance for the Raleigh Fire department because it has resulted in the department becoming complacent over time relative to the benefits a fully functioning public information officer can provide. Not to mention the service a PIO can deliver to the community when it comes to furnishing public safety announcements, direction during disasters and just good departmental public relations information.

The absence of a standard operating guideline to define the PIO position, and not educating and informing the media and citizens of Raleigh through this position, has manifested in many forms. One example is that many citizens do not realize the City of Raleigh Fire Department is a separate entity unto itself with its own jurisdictional borders distinct from surrounding departments. Some citizens simply know there is a fire department but don't realize their tax dollars fund their city fire department. Reporters from some local media outlets are also confused by this concept, and as a result, have contacted surrounding jurisdictions to request information on an incident occurring within the City of Raleigh believing we are all the same department or somehow interrelated.

A second example the lack of a standard operating guideline has resulted in is no formal PIO contact information being provided to any of the local media. The media has no idea whom to contact or how to contact them when they are seeking information about the Raleigh Fire Department. Thus, local media outlets have at times called around to various Raleigh Fire Department stations trying to gather information. Often when personnel are reached at a fire station they are unaware of the incident because it occurred in the middle of the night while they

were sleeping or they are aware but provide inaccurate or unnecessary information. Perhaps even worse, many times the media is simply turned away and viewed as a nuisance.

Emergency scenes are another excellent opportunity to share with the public, through the media, what the department does and how well they do it. Unfortunately, the Raleigh Fire Department continually misses out on these opportunities as well. Media staging areas are not typically established or the media briefed. The PIO is seldom to never on scene and his duties, therefore, delegated to the highest ranking chief on scene who deals with the media as he sees fit. No prior rapport has been developed by the chief on scene and he has no formal training or guideline to fall back on. An established guideline and solid foundational relationships with the media would enable the Raleigh Fire Department to promote itself in a positive light thru their PIO.

The Raleigh Fire Department's mission statement declares that its goal is to provide "unselfish dedicated service" (City of Raleigh, 2015). The lack of a standard operating guideline for the PIO negatively impacts the Raleigh Fire Department's ability to meet its mission statement by diminishing the level of service it provides. Service is diminished because information that could and should be available to the public and media isn't shared with them. This is a big problem because it ignores an efficient, readily available outlet for timely and accurate information disbursement regarding disaster warnings or updates, public safety information or warnings and general information regarding incidents and resulting city service disruptions or street closures.

The amount of general misinformation the public has amassed about the Raleigh Fire Department is another resultant problem. No attempt has been made, past or present, by the departmental PIO to educate the public on their misconceptions. It is not uncommon for Raleigh

Fire Department to receive inquiries from the public about volunteering as a firefighter despite the fact the department has been a fully paid career department since the early 1900's. Fire department crews out shopping for their meals have been confronted by citizens about what they are purchasing because the citizens believe the city, and their tax dollars, are paying for the firefighters meals.

The future impact of this research and the resultant standard operational guideline for the Raleigh Fire Department's PIO is colossal for the Raleigh Fire Department. The Raleigh Fire Department is growing and evolving rapidly and it is vital to educate and inform the public and the media so they have an exceptional understanding of their fire department, the services they provide and their future vision in order for the citizens to willingly provide support and hard earned tax dollars. However, for this to take place the guideline must provide a baseline reference of responsibilities, qualifications and training and desirable characteristics of the PIO. This will empower the PIO to establish a rapport and open lines of communication with the media, take advantage of social media outlets such as Twitter, Facebook and Snap Chat, keep the customer aware of the everyday happenings of the fire department such as job openings and promotions and provide timely and accurate public information announcements.

This applied research project will collect and analyze data in order to develop a standard operating guideline for the Raleigh Fire Department's Public Information Officer. This research project relates directly to the Executive Analysis of Fire Service Operations in Emergency Management course, Unit Five: The Planning Process, Objective 1.D.1.c, "Public Information Officer (PIO)" (United States Department of homeland Security, 2015, p. SM 5-6). Also, this project relates directly to Goal Four of the United States Fire Administration Operational Objective 4.1. Goal four states "Advance the professional development of fire service personnel

and of other people engaged in fire prevention and control activities.” Objective 4.1 states “Promote efforts to standardize professional development and higher education at the state and local levels” (“USFA Strategic Plan,” 2014-2018, p. 13).

Literature Review

In recent history the fire service has done a better job of engaging the public and media on emergency scenes. This has been driven by the need for the public to have real time information for their own safety, on evacuations and street closures or to avoid areas affected by an incident. It has also been driven by the fire services’ realization that the public information officer role is imperative to cultivating and bettering the fire department’s image (Charlesworth, n.d.). Unfortunately, the Raleigh Fire Department has fallen short of answering the call when it comes to providing information and education to their customers through the PIO. Developing a standard operating guideline for the PIO position will be a tremendous departmental advancement toward providing this vital service.

The public information officer can, at times, be delegated a number of different responsibilities. Often, as in the case of the Raleigh Fire department, they carry more than one title. However, the primary responsibilities of the fire service PIO entail providing information to the public, relating to the public and educating the public (Charlesworth, n.d.). The public information aspect includes reporting on emergency incidents or other important departmental affairs. Public relations involve building a positive departmental image and lastly, educating the public involves influencing the public in a way that positively changes their attitude in an effort to reduce preventable fires and injuries (Charlesworth, n.d.).

Similarly, a public information officer in the private sector also takes care of an institutions publicity matters related to the public (Truity website, 2016). Typical day to day

primary responsibilities include preparing information for release to the press, responding to appeals for information from the media, assisting clients with competently communicating to the public and preserving their company's appearance and integrity (Truity website, 2016).

Additional primary responsibilities include preparing speeches and making certain the various forms of advertising are in line with the company's predetermined vision for itself (Truity website, 2016).

The soul of any company is tied to its public relations campaign regardless of whether it is public or private (Sardisco, 2016). The role or primary responsibilities of a public relations manager are four fold according to Sardisco. Sardisco states the role of a public relations manager includes being an advocate, communicator, problem solver and opinion maestro (Sardisco, 2016). As the advocate he must ensure the company is held in the highest esteem and seen as a valuable corporate neighbor (Sardisco, 2016). The communicator prepares announcements and press releases on behalf of the organization (Sardisco, 2016). As a problem solver he must have the ability to make light of the worst corporate occurrences to preserve reputation and lastly, the opinion maestro is charged with providing the best information to the executives during their efforts at reaching out to the public (Sardisco, 2016).

Public information officers serve as emissaries for a number of organizations such as hospitals, universities, public institutions, municipal departments and government agencies (Bean-Mellinger, 2016). Bean-Mellinger also lists four primary responsibilities of the public information officer which include delivering information, preparing materials, developing procedures and maintaining relationships (Bean-Mellinger, 2016). Delivering information comes in many forms but is essentially providing crucial, as well as, routine information to the media or public (Bean-Mellinger, 2016). The preparation of materials includes the

aforementioned press releases, as well as, pamphlets, orations and relevant corporate statistical materials (Bean-Mellinger, 2016). Bean-Mellinger goes on to discuss the development of procedures as it relates to the release of crucial information and maintaining relationships with the various media outlets by providing requested information and answering inquiries in a timely fashion (Bean-Mellinger, 2016).

The National Park Service (NPS) provides a description of what their organization deems the primary responsibilities of a PIO within the Incident Command Structure. They state the PIO is subject to providing information in reference to an incident to requesting news sources, as well as, the nearby residents, responders active on the incident scene, the incident management team and the individual in charge ("NPS," 2016).

The qualifications and training desired by an organization of their PIO candidates are varied depending on the organization itself. PIO candidates generally will need a bachelor's degree in communications, public relations, English, journalism or business (Truity website, 2016). Halder somewhat contradicts Truity when he asserts that to become a public information officer there are no firmly entrenched requirements, however, he then goes on to admit the majority of candidates do have a relevant degree or other type of formal qualification (Halder, 2014). Locsin agrees with Truity that most potential employers prefer their PIO's have a bachelor's degree but adds that the majority of PIO professionals have also received on the job training by way of a PIO mentor or a formal training curriculum (Locsin, 2016).

The National Park Service takes a somewhat different perspective on the qualifications and training needed to become a public information officer possibly due to their ties to emergency response and the National Incident Management System. They state that PIO's who work on emergency scenes are first qualified by fulfilling provisions found in the NIMS

Wildland Fire Qualification System Guide ("NPS," 2016). The requirements are quite formidable and include four differing areas of completion which include training courses, position taskbooks, job aids and agency certification ("NPS," 2016). The National Park Service also stipulates a physical fitness aspect if the PIO will be traveling to the fireline, in which case, they must complete a one mile walk in 16 minutes or less ("NPS," 2016).

Academic Invest stipulates it is a plus to have a related bachelor's degree, however, they also acknowledge that earning the APR (Accredited in Public Relations) accreditation demonstrates a higher level of commitment to the profession while also opening additional career doors ("Academic Invest," 2016).

NFPA 1035, Chapter 7, Standard on Public Information Officer, provides some insight on requisite knowledge and skills that the PIO "shall meet" (National Fire Protection Association [NFPA], 2015, p. 1035-12). The standard, while providing a number of required skills and abilities, such as communicating and writing, does not stipulate a college degree of any kind, nor does it mention any particular certification that should be obtained by the PIO (NFPA, 2015).

Lastly, the Bureau of Labor Statistics agrees a bachelor's degree is very beneficial but also acknowledges that internships and previous communications experience with a school newspaper or other media outlet is invaluable ("BLS," 2015).

The desirable characteristics of a public information officer can be innumerable and quite varied; however, there are those common characteristics that appeared at the top of most experts list. The International Fire Service Training Association lists several characteristics as invaluable to a PIO's success. Honesty is essential to maintaining one's credibility and accuracy is important not just for legalities but it also affects credibility (Charlesworth, n.d.). A professional image is a must as the PIO is the representative of the organization and accessibility

is crucial because the PIO must be available to the public and media when they want or need information (Charlesworth, n.d.). Following up and then effectively communicating are important because not only does the media want to know the PIO is trustworthy and will get back to them but they must be able to understand the PIO's message (Charlesworth, n.d.). Organizational skills assist the PIO when following up with reporters on previously discussed information and a developed level of expertise about the operation of his organization is essential to providing accurate information (Charlesworth, n.d.).

Pilbeam discusses that there are numerous PIO's that make a claim to fame, however, he feels only the true pros exhibit his list of nine desirable characteristics (Pilbeam, 2011). Pilbeam goes on to say these characteristics must include always being ready such as with note pad, cell phone and other tools of the trade (Pilbeam, 2011). The PIO must have an investigative spirit to choose the right story, as well as, have great storytelling capabilities to hold an audience's attention (Pilbeam, 2011). Having a persuasive prowess is a key characteristic as it enables the public relations pro to sell his story but he must also be a connection cultivator which ensures he goes to the proper media outlet to tell his story and thus does not waste valuable time (Pilbeam, 2011). The PIO must be punctual due to the extensive deadlines faced in the public relations field, have a willingness to learn in order to keep up with the fast paced evolution of the media world and an attention to detail because accuracy is a must (Pilbeam, 2011). Finally, an adventurous attitude helps the public relations pro stay ahead of the curve and think beyond the traditional role of the PIO (Pilbeam, 2011).

Truity offers advice in reference to those characteristics deemed desirable of the PIO. Interpersonal skills ensure a friendly demeanor and approachability when dealing with the media and public while organizational skills provide the PIO the ability to handle several tasks or

affairs at one time (Truity website, 2016). Problem-solving abilities assist the PIO in formulating appropriate communications relative to sensitive organizational issues, speaking and writing skills are separate but related for the PIO as they ensure a clear, concise and accurate message (Truity website, 2016).

In summary, this literature review has exposed the researcher to a variety of expert opinions in the public and private sector, as well as, across the world relative to the three research questions. The literature provides evidence that the primary responsibilities, qualifications and training, and characteristics deemed necessary of an effective public information officer are as varied as the experiences of the experts offering their opinions. The literature review also provided evidence that there are many commonalities between the experts. The literature review showed the various job specifications of a public information officer also vary with the type of organization or industry seeking this professional. However, most importantly, the literature review has offered invaluable information essential in assisting the Raleigh Fire Department in strategically developing and implementing a standard operating guideline that will fit its organizational mission statement.

Procedures

This research project began by developing a research problem, research purpose and three research questions while attending the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland in November 2015. The literature review was started at the Learning Resource Center at the National Emergency Training Center in Emmitsburg, Maryland and continued at the North Carolina State University Library in Raleigh, North Carolina and the Wake County Public Library in Apex, North Carolina. Research was also conducted using the internet and various search engines like HotBot, Google and Yahoo. Some of the keywords used in the search were:

primary responsibilities of a public information officer, qualifications of a public information officer, and desirable characteristics of a public information officer. The literature review also included books and journals.

The purpose of the literature review was to answer the three research questions: 1) What are the primary responsibilities of the public information officer? 2) What qualification and training should the public information officer possess? 3) What are the desirable characteristics of the public information officer?

On February 4, 2016 the second part of the research was emailed out in the form of a cover letter and questionnaire in order to gather additional data in answering the three research questions. The researcher's goal was to survey fifteen departments with a minimum of fourteen needing to respond back for a 95% confidence level (Applied Research Self-Study, 2013). Thus the researcher would need to send surveys to eighteen departments, with an expected return rate of 80%, resulting in the fourteen needed surveys being returned (Applied Research Self-Study, 2013). To allow for an additional margin of unreturned surveys the researcher rounded the number to twenty departments being sent surveys instead of eighteen. The survey was developed by using the research questions to guide the survey questions. The survey sample consisted of departments chosen due to their proximity in population to the City of Raleigh. Ten of the departments were sequentially larger than the City of Raleigh in population while the other ten were sequentially smaller (NYCdata website, 2014). The survey sample size of twenty departments was also chosen because those twenty departments were within a twenty percent margin, larger or smaller, of the city of Raleigh and would be representative. The survey respondents were determined by the researcher contacting each department and inquiring as to whom this particular survey should be emailed. A cover letter (Appendix A) was emailed along

with the survey questions (Appendix B). On February 19, 2016, approximately two weeks after the initial questionnaire was sent, a follow up letter (Appendix C) was sent as a reminder to those departments that had not yet returned the survey. Of the twenty departments sent surveys 14 responded meeting the 95% confidence level discussed above.

Lastly, interviews were also completed to obtain information from local experts to answer the three research questions. The researcher fully explained to the interviewees the informal nature of the interviews, that they were completely voluntary and the purpose of this applied research project in the hope that this would give them better direction in answering the questions.

On March 15, 2016 an interview was conducted with a local National Broadcasting Company (NBC) television news reporter in Raleigh, North Carolina. Questions and answers from this interview can be found in Appendix D. This person was selected due to her extensive knowledge and experience in working with, and questioning, public information officials on a routine basis. She was also chosen for her vast background as a television news reporter which will offer a different viewpoint of the PIO's needed skillset from one of the PIO's primary customers. The questions were specifically related to obtaining this information and the interview lasted approximately fifteen minutes.

On March 21, 2016 an interview was conducted with the public information officer for a local major metropolitan police department. Questions and answers from this interview can be found in Appendix E. This person was chosen for the interview due to his extensive experience as a public information officer. He was also chosen due to his experience in emergency response and in depth knowledge of the various aspects required to be a successful PIO. The questions

were specifically related to obtaining this information and the interview lasted approximately twenty minutes.

Limitations

A limitation encountered was the narrow amount of literature available referencing fire service PIO's as it related to the three research questions. However, this was easily overcome by the amount of literature available on private sector PIO's.

Results

Using action research, sufficient data was collected to answer the three research questions. Action research and data collection and analysis also enabled the development of a standard operating guideline (Appendix H) which will address the responsibilities, qualifications and training and characteristics of the Raleigh Fire Department's public information officer position.

Research question one asked what are the primary responsibilities of the public information officer. To answer this research question a literature review was conducted and the data analyzed. The literature review showed that the number one primary responsibility of the public information officer in both the public and private sector was to provide information to the public, media and other groups as requested. The only exception was Sardisco who felt being a spokesperson first and foremost for the organization was the primary duty of the PIO (Sardisco, 2016). The literature review showed the majority of experts felt the second most important responsibility of the PIO was relating to the public. This was expressed using different terminology but relating to the public, either thru press releases, announcements or just getting back to the public or media was considered invaluable. Lastly, the third most important responsibility discovered thru the literature review varied widely depending on the expert questioned. Charlesworth felt educating the public was next (Charlesworth, n.d.). The National

Park Service (NPS) listed communicating with responders on an incident as next important and also included a fourth responsibility of providing information to the incident command post and incident management team ("NPS," 2016). Truity discussed assisting clients when they must effectively communicate with the public as next in line of primary responsibilities. They also included a fourth responsibility of preserving the reputation and integrity of the organization (Truity website, 2016). Sardisco felt being a problem solver, in reference to putting a positive spin on negative situations, was next important; with a fourth responsibility to include providing well thought out information to company executives to be shared with the public (Sardisco, 2016). Lastly, Bean-Mellinger felt the development of procedures relative to the releasing of information to the public or media was the next important duty of the PIO with maintaining good relationships with the public and media coming fourth (Bean-Mellinger, 2016).

Research question two asked which qualifications and training should public information officers possess. The literature review showed overwhelmingly that a bachelor's degree is needed, or at a minimum, very beneficial for anyone desiring to become a PIO. The review also showed that formal and informal training related to becoming a PIO was advantageous. The APR (Accredited in Public Relations) accreditation is very beneficial because it is representative of a professional and highly engaged individual in the public relations field ("Academic Invest," 2016). The literature review also showed that of equal value were internships and previous experience in communications. Lastly, basic writing and communication skills were listed as necessary qualifications.

Research question three asked about the most desirable characteristics of the public information officer. The literature review showed the most agreed upon desirable characteristic is being an effective communicator; also described as a good story teller or having good

speaking skills. There was also agreement on the need to have good organizational skills. Aside from these two areas of commonality the desirable characteristics of a PIO vary widely. In addition to being an effective communicator and organized Charlesworth listed honesty, accuracy, professional image, accessibility, following up with customers and expertise relative to your organization as desirable characteristics (Charlesworth, n.d.). Always being ready, an investigative spirit, persuasive, a connection cultivator, punctual, a willingness to learn, attention to detail and an adventurous attitude were also considered desirable characteristics (Pilbeam, 2011). Lastly, Truity added interpersonal skills, being a problem solver and writing skills as most desirable (Truity website, 2016).

A survey was also conducted of fire departments across the country similar in size to The City of Raleigh Fire Department. Of the 15 surveys the researcher hoped would be returned the actual number returned was 14 surveys. Three questions were asked of the departments in order to gather information to assist in developing the public Information officer standard operating guideline.

Question one asked what are the top three primary responsibilities of your PIO. The responses included six different primary responsibilities mentioned by the 14 departments. The survey results showed all 14 departments (100%) were in agreement that the primary responsibility of the PIO is to provide public information. The next closest response was the PIO's responsibility to develop public relations at 86%. Three responses were ranked evenly in the third position with 36% of the departments including them. Those responsibilities were public education, social media oversight and responsibility for inter/intra departmental communications. Keeping public dignitaries informed received one mention (7%). Table 1 below displays the six different responses, the number of times the response was mentioned and

the percentage of departments that included that particular response in their top three primary responsibilities.

Table 1

Primary Responsibilities of the Public Information Officer

Response	Number of Mentions	Percentage
Public Information	14	100%
Public Relations	12	86%
Public Education	5	36%
Social Media Oversight	5	36%
Inter/Intra Dept. Comm.	5	36%
Pub. Dignitaries Informed	1	7%

Note. Percentages rounded to the nearest whole.

Question number two asked what minimum qualifications and training, if any, are required of your PIO. There were a wide range of qualifications and training given that included 10 different responses. The number one response was no qualifications or training required with six departments answering this way for 21% of all responses given. The second most named response was rank as a qualification where five departments chose this answer equating to 18% of all responses. The third most often named response was PIO classes which were chosen by 4 departments for 14% of all responses. In fourth position, with an equal number of responses, was on the job training and previous experience in the field each being listed three times for 11% of all responses. The fifth most common response was also a tie and included two responses each for public speaking experience and a bachelor's degree. These two responses accounted for 7% of all responses. Lastly, there was again a tie between time with department, writing skills and video production experience with each receiving one response for 4% of all given responses.

Appendix F shows the responses given, the number of departments that mentioned the response and that particular responses percentage of total responses.

Question number three asked that several characteristics of a PIO be ranked in order of importance with one being most important and seven being least important. Those characteristics were accessibility, honesty, accuracy, and expertise in their field, organizational skills, effective communicator and professional image (Charlesworth, n.d.). The rankings attributed to each characteristic (1-7), by the departments surveyed, were totaled up and divided by the number of responses (14) which resulted in an average ranking. The results, in order of ranking/importance, are as follows: honesty 2.4, effective communicator 2.5, accuracy 2.7, accessibility 4.2, professional image 4.8, organizational skills 5.6 and expertise in field 5.8. Appendix G displays the characteristic, ranking from most to least important and average total ranking.

Lastly, interviews were conducted with two local public information professionals/officers one each in the public and private sector. These professionals were asked specific questions to assist in gathering information to answer the three research questions.

The first interview was with a local National Broadcasting Company television news reporter. Questions and answers from this interview can be found in Appendix D. Question one asked what are the top three primary responsibilities of the public information officer. The local television news reporter stated sharing information with the public/media, or public information, was the first responsibility. Second was the PIO's responsibility to uphold the positive image of the organization and lastly, was to do these things in an open and honest way.

Question two asked what minimum qualifications and training, if any, are required of a PIO candidate. The reporter stated a college degree was most important followed by related work experience.

Question three asked the interviewee to rank, in order of importance from one to seven, a group of several desirable PIO characteristics. The interviewee's ranking, in order of most to least important, was: honesty, accuracy, effective communicator, expertise in field, accessibility, professional image and organizational skills.

The second interview was with the PIO for a local major metropolitan police department. Questions and answers from this interview can be found in Appendix E. Question one again asked what are the top three primary responsibilities of a public information officer. The law enforcement PIO stated communicating information to the public, or public information, was the first responsibility of the PIO. Second was educating the public, followed in third place by writing and communicating documents internally for their agency. The interviewee also mentioned a fourth responsibility which was public relations, for example, being able to work with and assist the public when inquiries are made.

Question two asked what minimum qualifications and training, if any, are required of a PIO candidate. The interviewee stated the PIO candidate should have a degree in journalism or a related field. He would then seek someone with at least two years of related experience. Lastly, he stated the individual must be able to communicate clearly and concisely.

Question three asked the interviewee to rank, in order of importance from one to seven, a group of several desirable PIO characteristics. The interviewee's ranking, in order of most to

least important, was: honesty, accessibility, accuracy, effective communicator, professional image, expertise in field, and organizational skills.

Discussion

This research project was designed to develop a public information officer standard operating guideline for The Raleigh Fire Department in an effort to address the primary responsibilities, qualifications and training and characteristics required of a public information officer. Having a standard operating guideline in place that first addresses these important issues will be a first step in further developing the public information officer position within The Raleigh Fire department and thus better serving its customers.

As shown in the literature review, the majority of sources reviewed list the primary responsibility of the PIO as providing information to the public. Charlesworth agrees when he states it is crucial for the PIO to be proficient when it comes to the subject matter of public information (Charlesworth, n.d.). Truity confirms that it is the job of the PIO to keep the public up to date relative to the actions of its government officials and various agencies (Truity website, 2016). The National Park Service states the PIO is committed to putting together information about a particular incident to be shared with the public, media and personnel working the incident ("NPS," 2016). The survey questionnaire results were in complete agreement with the literature review. The survey showed 100% of the respondents agreed and listed the first primary responsibility of the PIO as providing information to the public. The interviews conducted also substantiated the literature review findings 100% and named providing information to the public as the primary responsibility of the PIO.

While there was some dissention, the majority of the literature reviewed showed relating to the public was the second most consistently named primary responsibility of the PIO. Truity agrees that handling inquiries from the media for information is important (Truity website, 2016). Truity goes on to state that relating to the public thru releases may involve numerous issues such as the environment, public health or perhaps energy issues (Truity website, 2016). Sardisco says it best when he states “public relations is the lifeblood of any company” (Sardisco, 2016, para. 1). The survey conducted again substantiates the literature review. The survey showed 86% of the respondents listed public relations as the next important responsibility of the PIO. The interviews conducted varied in their responses as to the next responsibility of the PIO and contradicted the literature review and survey. The first interviewee felt upholding the image of the organization was second most important. The second interviewee felt educating the public was the second most important responsibility of the PIO. The researcher believes the variance may be explained by the different areas of service in which the interviewees are employed. The first interviewee works in the private sector where corporate image is of utmost importance. While a public sector agency highly values its image, serving and educating the public is one of its primary missions.

Relative to the primary responsibilities of the PIO, the literature review begins to vary widely also. Depending on the expert questioned, several responsibilities were discussed in the next position. Charlesworth felt educating the public was next in importance (Charlesworth, n.d.). Bean-Mellinger discussed the development of various procedures at they relate to releasing information to the public and media as the PIO’s next responsibility (Bean-Mellinger, 2016). Sardisco discusses being a problem solver, and as such, feels it is of great importance to be able to shine a positive light on a bad organizational situation (Sardisco, 2016). The survey

also begins to show a variance in opinion at this point. Three responses each receive 36% of the departments mentioning them in the third position. Those responsibilities included public education, social media oversight and being responsible for inter/intra departmental communications. The interviewee's responses also begin to vary relative to the literature review and survey. The first interviewee felt openness and honesty were next in importance while the second interviewee discussed the importance of preparing and communicating documents internally for their respective agency. The researcher is confident opinions begin to vary due to the vast experience and different industries in which these experts are employed. However, that in no way takes away from the importance of each of these PIO duties regardless of their position on a list.

The literature review also showed that having a bachelor's degree would be most beneficial for the PIO candidate when it comes to qualifications and training. The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics states that the public relations specialist or PIO should have a bachelor's degree preferably in a related field ("BLS," 2015). In agreement with The Bureau of Labor Statistics, Academic Invest states that a bachelor's degree is normally required to become a PIO ("Academic Invest," 2016). However, The Bureau of Labor Statistics also states that internships and previous workplace experience in communications is also helpful ("BLS," 2015). Locsin concurs that a bachelor's degree is helpful but he also acknowledges that on the job training, either formal or informal, also serves the candidate well (Locsin, 2016). Halder separated himself somewhat by stating there are no predetermined qualifications to becoming a PIO however, he then goes on to state that a bachelor's degree is helpful (Halder, 2014). The survey provided many of the same minimum qualifications for a PIO as the literature review but with a differing order of importance. The number one survey response for minimum qualifications was

none, which received 21% of all responses. This is completely contradictory to the literature review. The researcher believes this response is weighted heavily in the fact that the fire service has traditionally not required education beyond a high school diploma, however, that is changing rapidly. Secondly, the researcher interprets this as indicating the value of loyalty, longevity and rank held within the fire service. This interpretation is supported by the next important qualification response in the survey which was rank. Rank within the department received 18% of the responses as being an important qualification. PIO classes were third with on the job training and previous experience in the field tying for fourth position. The interviews were more congruent with the literature review than with the survey results. Both interviewees ranked a bachelor's degree as the top qualification for a PIO candidate. This is not surprising as both individuals started their careers in the private sector which historically has placed a higher degree of importance on a college education than the fire service. They were also both in agreement that work related experience was the PIO candidate's second most important qualification. Lastly the second interviewee discussed the ability to clearly and concisely communicate as an important qualification.

The literature review revealed a number of different desirable characteristics for the PIO, with some agreement. The most agreed upon desirable characteristic was being an effective communicator. However, being an effective communicator wasn't necessarily at the top of the list of characteristics but rather, was simply mentioned more frequently on the various lists of characteristics. Truity explains that a PIO or public relations specialist must precisely and effectively be able to describe their company's stance on an issue (Truity website, 2016). Charlesworth agrees when he states that the PIO must be an excellent communicator if the public and media are to get the information they desire. He goes on to say the message must also be

effortlessly understood (Charlesworth, n.d.). The next most common desirable characteristic is being a good story teller or possessing superior speaking skills. Being a good storyteller allows one to grab an audience's attention and make the story interesting, according to Pilbeam, causing the information shared to stick with the audience for some time afterwards (Pilbeam, 2011). The literature review also revealed some agreement on good organizational skills as a necessary characteristic; however, it varied a great degree from here depending on the expert. The survey revealed some of the same characteristics as being important as did the literature review. The departments surveyed were given several desirable characteristics of a PIO and asked to rank them from one to seven based on their perceived importance. The most important characteristic revealed by the survey was honesty, being an effective communicator was second and providing accurate information followed closely behind in third. Thus both the literature review and survey are in agreement that being an effective communicator is quite important. The PIO having good organizational skills, as mentioned in the literature review, was considered the sixth most important characteristic by those surveyed. Fourth and fifth most important according to those surveyed were the PIO's accessibility and their professional image. An analysis of the interviewee's responses to question three showed some agreement with a similar ranking on two of the characteristics. Both the television news reporter and the police department PIO agreed the most important characteristic was honesty and the least important was organizational skills. Professional image ranked near the bottom for both in sixth and fifth position respectively. Rankings two thru four were very similar with the television news reporter listing accuracy, effective communicator and expertise in field in those positions. The police department PIO had accessibility, accuracy and effective communicator in positions two thru four. Most surprising to the researcher was the lack of importance given to a professional image. However, further

analysis puts this response into perspective in that the interviewees do not regard a professional image as unimportant but rather regard the other characteristics as more important. The analysis also revealed the survey responses are in close agreement with the interviewee's responses, putting lesser importance on a professional image as well, with professional image in fifth position.

There are several organizational implications as a result of this study. For example, having a public information officer standard operating guideline will provide the PIO with clear direction when it comes to his primary responsibilities as they relate to the organization. With this direction he can begin developing a direct line of communication/rapport with the media and public. This will impact the organization in a positive way by providing one clear, consistent and accurate source of information on everything from public education to departmental information. This will in turn eliminate a great deal of the misinformation that had been provided in the past due to it being gathered from multiple sources.

The guideline will also impact the organization by providing a set of qualifications and characteristics to look for in its future PIO's. This direction will surely result in a better more highly qualified individual filling the position going forward.

Providing a PIO standard operating guideline will also assist the organization with recruiting within its own neighborhoods which has historically been a problem. With the social media cultivation provided by the PIO as a result of the guideline, the department will be able to reach out to a wider range of young individuals when recruiting. This will positively impact the organization by better diversifying the department and providing better representation of the diverse communities it protects.

Yet another implication of this study is freeing up time for the current fire marshal/PIO to completely dedicate his time to the fire prevention division, which is a vital part of the organization due to the number of fire inspections and public education events it coordinates. Taking this duty off his plate and handing it off to a qualified and dedicated PIO will have a highly positive impact on fire prevention and the organization.

Lastly, it is believed that providing the Raleigh Fire Department with a standard operating guideline for the public information officer will institute a cultural change in the department. For as long as this researcher can recall the PIO position has been viewed as a necessary evil with little to no resources or time devoted to it as evidenced by the lack of a standard operating guideline. It is hoped that by bringing light to this highly visible and important position the organization will experience a shift in its culture to that of emphasizing the importance of this position and the affect it can have on the organizations image.

In summary, the literature review and research provided a vast amount of information more than sufficient enough to develop a standard operating guideline for the Raleigh Fire Department's public information officer. With this guideline in place the department will be able to better inform and educate its public, better meet requests for information from the media, shed a positive light on the department and its operations, and perhaps most importantly, deliver the highest level of service possible when it comes to accurate, consistent and timely information for its citizens.

Recommendations

Based on the literature review and original research the results of the findings can help the Raleigh Fire Department better provide information to the public and media. This higher

level of service will not only enhance the organizations image but better educate and protect its community.

The following short and long-term recommendations are made:

- Request the current policy review committee immediately review the newly developed PIO standard operating guideline to offer addendums to the guideline, not addressed in the applied research project, that it deems beneficial to the public information officer position.
- Develop a selection committee and based on the qualifications and characteristics recommended in the PIO standard operating guideline, immediately begin seeking a dedicated individual to be appointed as the department's full time PIO.
- Immediately begin establishing social media sites where none have been in use and regularly updating and monitoring all Raleigh Fire Department social media sights currently in use.
- Allot monies in future budgets for training and certifications classes for the PIO.
- Require the policy committee to meet annually the first three years to review and update the newly implemented PIO standard operating guideline based on new information and lessons learned.
- Require the PIO to attend quarterly meetings with the city and other departmental PIO's to ensure the Raleigh Fire Department's message is in line with the city's message.

- Require all Raleigh Fire Department personnel review the new guideline for compliance and ensure the PIO's contact information is readily available when inquiries are made.

Appendix A

Cover Letter for Survey Questionnaire to Fire Departments

February 4, 2016

Dear Chief or Designee:

My name is Jeff Harrison and I am Battalion Chief with the City of Raleigh Fire Department. I am in the Executive Fire Officer Program at The National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, MD and am currently a student in the Executive Analysis of Fire Service Operations in Emergency Management class. I am in the process of completing an applied research project and am conducting research on the development of a standard operating guideline for our departmental public information officer position. I am writing to request your assistance by asking you to answer the questionnaire below and return it to me via email by February 18, 2016. (For simplicity just reply to this email, answer the questions and hit send.) The answers you provide to the questions will be kept completely confidential and anonymous and should take no more than ten to fifteen minutes to complete. If you have any questions, please contact me at (919) 594-8354.

Thank you for taking the time to complete this questionnaire, the information you provide will be very helpful in completing my applied research project.

Sincerely,

Jeff Harrison

Battalion Chief

Raleigh Fire Department

Telephone: (919) 594-8354

Email: jeff.harrison@raleighnc.gov

Appendix B

Survey Questionnaire to Fire Departments

Questionnaire

1. What are the top three primary responsibilities of your PIO?
2. What minimum qualifications and training, if any, are required of your PIO?
3. In order of importance, using 1-7, which of the following does your department consider as the most desirable characteristics of a PIO candidate?

Accessibility

Honesty

Accuracy

Expertise in Field

Organizational Skills

Effective Communicator

Professional Image

Appendix C

Follow Up Letter for Survey Questionnaire to Fire Departments

February 19, 2016

Dear Chief or Designee:

Good afternoon, this is Jeff Harrison, Battalion Chief with the City of Raleigh Fire Department. I am following up with you in reference to the survey I emailed you back on February 4 for the Executive Fire Officer Program at The National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, MD in which I am a student. I am in the process of completing my applied research project for this class. The end result of my research will be the development of a standard operating guideline for our departmental public information officer position. I have not received your response to the survey and wanted to again ask for your assistance by completing the survey for my research. The information you share is essential and invaluable to the completion of my research project. If you could complete the survey below and return it to me via email by March 4, 2016 it would be greatly appreciated. (For simplicity just reply to this email, answer the questions and hit send.) The answers you provide to the questions will be kept completely confidential and anonymous and should take no more than ten to fifteen minutes to complete. If you have any questions, please contact me at (919) 594-8354.

Sincerely,

Jeff Harrison

Battalion Chief

Raleigh Fire Department

Telephone: (919) 594-8354

Email: jeff.harrison@raleighnc.gov

Appendix D

Interview with local National Broadcasting Company Television News Reporter-March 15, 2016

1. In your opinion, what are the top three primary responsibilities of a public information officer?
 - To share up to date information, be transparent with the public/media and to help maintain the credibility and positive perception of the organization as open and honest.
2. What minimum qualifications and training, if any, are required of a PIO candidate?
 - A college degree and work experience in various arenas, for example, the public and private sector as PIO's or as members of the media.
3. In order of importance how do you rank the following characteristics of a PIO:
accessibility, honesty, accuracy, expertise in field, organizational skills, effective communicator and professional image?
 - Honesty
 - Accuracy
 - Effective Communicator
 - Expertise in Field
 - Accessibility
 - Professional Image
 - Organizational Skills

Appendix E

Interview with the PIO for a Local Major Metropolitan Police Department-March 21, 1996

1. In your opinion, what are the top three primary responsibilities of a public information officer?
 - To communicate information to the public through the media. Also, using this opportunity to springboard into educating the public based on the line of questioning from the media. It's important to communicate very well both orally and in writing. Not only do PIO's communicate with the media but they also produce and write internal documents for their agency. Being able to work with and assist the public is also important. This may be in the form of general inquiries or possibly records requests.
2. What minimum qualifications and training, if any, are required of a PIO candidate?
 - I would say an agency should look for candidates with a degree in journalism or a related field. I would also seek someone with at least two years of related experience. Either way the person must be able to communicate clearly and concisely.
3. In order of importance how do you rank the following characteristics of a PIO: accessibility, honesty, accuracy, expertise in field, organizational skills, effective communicator and professional image?
 - This was difficult as they are all important but in order of importance they are:
 - Honesty
 - Accessibility
 - Accuracy
 - Effective Communicator
 - Professional Image

- Expertise in Field
- Organizational Skills

Appendix F

Minimum Qualifications/Training Required of the Public Information Officer

Response Given	Number of Mentions	Percentage of Total Responses
No Qualifications/Training	6	21%
Rank	5	18%
PIO Classes/Training	4	14%
On the Job Training	3	11%
Previous PIO Experience	3	11%
Public Speaking Experience	2	7%
Bachelor's Degree	2	7%
Time with Department	1	4%
Writing Skills	1	4%
Video Production Skills	1	4%

Note. Percentages rounded to the nearest whole number.

Appendix G

Most Desirable Characteristics of a Public Information Officer

Characteristic	Most to Least Important	Average Total Ranking
Honesty	1	2.4
Effective Communicator	2	2.5
Accuracy	3	2.7
Accessibility	4	4.2
Professional Image	5	4.8
Organizational Skills	6	5.6
Expertise in Field	7	5.8

Note. All average rankings are rounded to the nearest tenth.

Appendix H

City of Raleigh Fire Department-Standard Operating Guideline

Public Information Officer No. 1020.2.6

1.0 Policy

It is the purpose of this policy to establish the primary responsibilities, qualifications and training and desirable characteristics of the Raleigh Fire Department's public information officer.

2.0 Responsibility

It is the responsibility of all members of the Raleigh Fire Department to be familiar with and adhere to this policy.

3.0 References

Executive fire officer applied research project "Developing a Public Information Officer Standard Operating Guideline for the Raleigh Fire Department".

4.0 Definitions

Department public information officer (PIO) - The individual selected by committee and approved by the Office of the Fire Chief for the purpose of developing and releasing any and all departmental information to the public and/or media.

PIO Selection Committee – Members of the Raleigh Fire Department appointed by the operations chief to recommend the most qualified and capable individual from a pool of applicants to be approved and appointed by the fire chief as the department PIO.

5.0 Procedures

5.1 Public information officer responsibilities. The department's PIO shall, at a minimum, execute the following primary responsibilities:

- 5.1.1 Provide public information by making every effort to keep the media, public and department personnel informed of the daily operations of the Raleigh Fire Department to include emergency and non-emergency operations that he feels may be of interest.
- 5.1.2 Develop public relations through social media sites, press releases and news conferences in an effort to develop a network of trust with these groups that relies on honest, accurate and current information.
- 5.1.3 Educate the public and media through social media sites, press releases and news conferences by providing informative safety messages, emergency operations updates, the various services offered by the department, information on recruitment, hiring and graduation of new firefighters, promotional ceremonies and any other events deemed of interest.
- 5.1.4 Represent the city, department and its personnel in a positive light at all times.
- 5.1.5 Oversee all social media sites.
- 5.2 Public information officer qualifications and training. It is preferred that the department's PIO possesses the following qualifications and training:
 - 5.2.1 A bachelor's degree from an accredited institution preferably in a communications or media relations field.
 - 5.2.2 Have obtained the rank of lieutenant or higher.
 - 5.2.3 Formal PIO training classes such as those offered by the National Fire Academy or the APR (Accredited in Public Relations) accreditation.

- 5.2.4 Previous experience in a related field or internship.
- 5.2.5 Excellent communication and writing skills.
- 5.3 Public information officer characteristics. The following have been deemed as highly desirable and sought after characteristics of the department's PIO:
 - 5.3.1 Honesty.
 - 5.3.2 The ability to effectively communicate.
 - 5.3.3 Complete accuracy when providing information to the media and public.
 - 5.3.4 The ability to be accessible to the media and public at all times.
 - 5.3.5 Must display a professional image at all times.
 - 5.3.6 Must possess organizational skills.
 - 5.3.7 Must have a high level organizational expertise and knowledge.

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