

Media Relations and the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department

Executive Analysis of Fire Service Operations in Emergency Management

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Certification Statement

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

Signed: _____

Abstract

Media Relations with a fire organization can be crucial with the proper dissemination of accurate and timely information of breaking news albeit a local or a major national news story. The Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue Department needed to evaluate the effectiveness of the organization's methodology of communication to the mass media. This applied research project evaluated the procedures on how our organization communicated with the media regularly and the effectiveness of the dissemination of timely and accurate information. Using descriptive methodology, research identified (1) How other local fire departments communicated information to the media, (2) Determined if our organization's current policies and procedures were adequate and effective, and (3) What improvements could be implemented to develop a comprehensive and effective public information program for the Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue Department. Procedures included a literature review, personal interviews with local media, and electronic surveys sent chief officers of the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department and other fire service organizations. Results determined a need for more effective communication with the media, and interest in training as a public information officer by our own personnel. Recommendations included appointing a public information officer from our organization, an informative worksheet for release to media and a newsgroup message that would disseminate consistent, accurate, and timely information to all local news media and periodicals.

Table of Contents

Certification Statement.....2

Abstract.....3

Introduction.....5

Background and Significance.....6

Literature Review.....9

Procedures.....13

 Assumptions and Limitations.....15

 Definitions.....16

Results.....16

Discussion..... 25

Recommendations..... 29

References..... 32

Appendix A-electronic survey to fire department organizations in Broward County

Appendix B-electronic survey to fire department Chief Officers

Introduction

Media relations with a fire organization can either “make or break” your fire organization when it is in the lime light from some major event that has occurred in your community. (FDSOA Health and Safety, 1999, 10) With the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, municipalities, both large and small run the risk of being targeted for a major terrorist event that would put the community as the center of attention for the nation and the world to see. How will your organization handle the media that serves as the public voice, interaction and face to others for information, and reassurance to and for your own community during or from the aftermath of the national new story, or major catastrophic weather related event?

The problem is twofold: (1) The Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department has not evaluated the effectiveness of the way the organization communicates with the local media on a regular basis, and (2) How our organization would responds to the mass media in the event of a local incident becomes a national news story.

The purpose of this applied research project is to evaluate the procedures currently in place on how our organization communicates with the media and to determine the effectiveness of the dissemination of accurate and timely information.

Research methodology used for this applied research project is the descriptive method that identifies the following questions:

- 1.) How do other emergency organizations in Broward County communicate information to the media on a regular basis?
- 2.) Is the current procedure on how the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department disseminates information to the media effective, adequate, and timely?

- 3.) What would a comprehensive, effective public information program entail for the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department?

Background and Significance

The City of Fort Lauderdale is located in Broward County, Florida on the eastern seaboard of the lower part of the state between Palm Beach and Miami Dade counties. The population is now 189,000 residents year round, and over 200,000 during the winter months. Our community occupies 43 square miles, making the City of Fort Lauderdale the sixth largest municipality in the State of Florida.

Presently our city is depicted on the local news media television stations daily about “breaking news” regarding events related to incidences that our organization responds to such as murders, drownings, car and boat crashes, fires, and public interest stories involving Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue in relation to non-emergency community activities. On any given day local news media will contact our fire stations seeking related “news worthy” stories for their respective news stations. Our fire personnel are instructed to follow memorandum number 001-001 dated January 5, 2001, subject Public Information and Media Responsibility (memos 2001). This memorandum directs any and all public information and media inquiries to the on duty division chief for A, B, or C shifts. The memorandum outlines contact numbers to reach the on duty division chief and the basic guidelines to be followed when fielding inquiries by the media in reference to fire and medical incidences that occur on that shift. In addition, Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue Incident Command Procedures manual, Article 10 provides an outline of the position of Public Information Officer (PIO), and the responsibilities associated for the position during a “large-scale” incident (Incident Command Procedures, 2002). This position could be

assigned to any individual at the discretion of the Incident Commander in charge of the scene. The responsibilities and procedures are outlined in writing to be adhered to by the individual chosen to assume the job.

Prior to January 2001 there was no written documentation on media relations for the Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue Department. One Battalion Chief prior to January 2001 established a positive and proactive rapport with the media, and local newspapers in the year of 1992. This effort was due to knowing the importance of good media relations, and understanding the importance of having a contact person that the media can direct inquiries about newsworthy occurrences ongoing in our community. (Personal interview, Stephen R. McInerney II, April 2006). This individual was a self appointed Public Information Officer sanctioned by the Chief of Department establishing positive relations with the local news media and newspaper staff.

Currently there exists a significant communication gap between local media and the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department. The memo issued January 5, 2001 is outdated, and the contact numbers, and pagers numbers are incorrect. Media inquiries are haphazardly fielded by on duty personnel of any rank from any station. Although some fire department personnel are aware of the proper procedure, many are unaware of what to do or say to the media. This is due to the large turnover of personnel with retirements, and new hires. The Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department has become increasingly busier since the inception of an Advanced Life Support system in October of 1996. Call volume has increased dramatically, leading to more stories to be aired or written about in the local section of the Sun-Sentinel Daily News. There are numerous times that on any given shift that the on duty division chief is not available to field inquiries by the media in a timely manner.

Often times the information given by the division chief has proven to be inaccurate, because the division chief has not been apprised of the full details by the incident commander busy working the scene. The news worthy event could be a long drawn out scenario that may require a Public Information Officer to be available on the scene specifically for the purpose of disseminating timely and accurate information for release. According to Broward County Bureau Chief Kerry Weston of WPLG, Channel 10 news “Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue has gone down hill with how information is available to news media since the new procedures of Memo 001-001 as issued.” She continued to say that she felt that “nobody was looking out” for the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue as far as public interest stories to “promote our departments reputation” in operations to the public eye. (Personal interview, March 24, 2006).

This applied research project on the evaluation and exploration of media relations and the Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue Department is relevant to the course work included in the curriculum of the National Fire Academy Executive Fire Officer Program (EFOP), *Executive Analysis of Fire Service Operations in Emergency Management (EAFSOEM)*, R306 course (National Fire Academy [NFA], 2006). This researcher noted the following links: *Unit 2: Incident Command System, Unit 3: NIMS and NRP, Unit 5: Developing resources and the Emergency Operations Center, Unit 7: Emergency Operations Center Exercise*. This ARP relates to the United States Fire Administration (USFA) operational objectives: (a) to promote within communities a comprehensive, multi-hazard risk-reduction plan led by the fire service organization. This paper is being dedicated towards meeting the USFA objectives by evaluating and studying the necessity to establish or institute more effective media relations within the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department.

Literature Review

The literature review was organized around three specific questions that arose in trying to evaluate the procedures on how the Fort Lauderdale Department communicates with the media, and to determine the effectiveness of the dissemination of accurate and timely information.

(1.) How do other emergency organizations in Broward County communicate information to the media on a regular basis? (2.) Is the current procedure on how the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department disseminates information to the media effective and adequate? (3.) What would a comprehensive, effective public information program entail for the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department?

Whether we choose to admit it or not, we are in the same business as the media serving the public. We, the fire service organization, serve and protect the public, and the mass media informs the public how well we do it (Hughes, 1990, 67). What we do in the fire service is the public's business whether that organization is a career or volunteer department. The public provides the funding hence as stakeholders have a serious investment in your operation (Hughes, 67). Educating the public about what is involved in providing quality service can be a real asset in budget battles, special projects, and efforts to recruit personnel (Hughes, 70). The Fire Service has a story to tell and it should be told. Since the news media is going to get the story by any means, the information should emanate directly from the department, and a public information officer. (Schaper, 1990, 55) A Public Information Officer can perform a host of activities for the department. Not only can he or she give news media timely, accurate information, but also he or she can keep them out of the way of operations and safe from injury. (Schaper, 55) According to Chief Frank C. Shaper, of the St. Louis, Missouri Fire Department, a PIO is a necessity, and is stated in S.A.R.A. Title III, a law that mandates the use of the Incident Command System (ICS)

at all hazardous materials incidents. The ICS organizational chart lists a PIO right after the Incident Commander. (Schaper, 56)

During the Oklahoma City Bombings in 1995, former Assistant Chief, Jon Hansen was the voice and the face of how the Fire Department was responding, proceeding, and operating during this national news story. Jon Hansen was a Captain on an engine company when he was tapped to become PIO (May, 2002, 130). (Thompson, 2003, 50) believes an effective PIO should be a veteran firefighter who can translate what the incident commander says into viable and coherent sound byte or quote for the media. In addition there are also excellent civilian PIO's who may enter a department laterally, with excellent leadership, communication and marketing skills to complement a passion for the fire department and desire to be in public service (May, 132).

The PIO position for the Phoenix Fire Department was developed through the support and direction of Chief Alan Brunacini when he hired Steve Jenson from a local news station (May, 130). Whether the PIO is civilian or a line officer, any effective public information program must have a very strong, market-oriented chief (May, 131). A modern fire department depends on the support of several outside people and organizations, and that support is usually won or lost not by engine or ladder companies, but by the department's Public Information Officer. (FDSOA Health and Safety, 1999, 10)

The news media serves as a gatekeeper of all information that is disseminated to the public (Paul, 1998, 2). During times of emergency the public relies on information that the media expels, to help guide them, and keep their fear level lower. A major weather event may cut off electricity making the only source of public information and awareness emanating from a local radio station. However, timely and accurate information is vital to disseminate to media,

radio or news stations. Amani Ali, a reporter for a Colorado radio station commented during the Columbine school incident “The Fire department has to be responsive in a terrorist or crisis event. The media and news radio is interested in getting accurate information for its audience and getting it out quickly.” (Suprun, 2005, 82) Moreover, Suprun stressed the importance of being responsive as the best way to make sure that your version of the story gets out. He says effective PIO’s are ones who know how to “get their hands on accurate information fast.” An effective PIO can help reduce the fear that spreads so quickly and can get out of control before you know it (Buck, 2002, 18). During an active event, early notification of the PIO is crucial to how quickly information can be gathered and delivered to the media (Crawford, 2001, 24). Regardless of whether or not your fire organization has its own PIO, research indicates that the information to be released to news media or the daily newspaper be timely and accurate.

Although public information officers serve as the voice and face of an organization, other tools can be used to disseminate information as well. Certain times of the year also lend themselves to fire department press releases. Public service announcements (PSAs) concerning fireplaces, candles, open burn permits, fireworks, space heaters and holiday lights in the winter, and cautions about propane barbecues in warmer times and warmer climates can all serve to make the public and ally in fire prevention efforts (Thompson, 2003, 50). Not all fire organizations have a designated public information officer, however, research has indicated how important that job’s function is, and its necessity at a large-scale incidents. Smaller towns and municipalities have tighter budgets that can pay for only the most essential response elements (Henderson & McKinely, 2003, 54). (Henderson & McKinely, 55) suggested that the most cost effective and beneficial way would be to train firefighters in media relations at least once per year. The Oklahoma City Fire Department turned many of their regular functions into public

marketing opportunities when they outfitted each fire station and apparatus with a small amount of support pieces, such as brochures, flyers, handouts, and other promotional items like decals, or refrigerator magnets (Henderson & McKinley, 56). With this increased outreach, the department experienced more involvement from the media and the public. This was an innovative, low cost way to promote the goals of the fire organization, and to send out helpful messages that the public could utilize on a daily basis. Public Service Announcements have been released to the media by the St. Louis, Missouri fire department that did not require much effort in order to promote the organization, and its service to the public awareness in fire prevention efforts (Schaper, 1991, 68). Timothy Szymanski, the PIO for the Las Vegas Fire Department suggested that an important service of the media is to educate or prepare the public to issues concerning disasters or emergencies by the use of Public service announcements (Szymanski, 2000, 51). Szymanski continually works with the media by providing them with the same pager system as administration that alerts them to where a fire or emergency is occurring. He found that the reliability of the pager system has brought other human resource organizations on board such as the American Red Cross. Other fire organizations use “news group email” for rapid dissemination of information concerning fires or emergency scene information. (Stittleburg, 1999, 44) believes that media outlets are interested in public education projects primarily because they make good “human interest stories.” Moreover, if you don’t let your local newspapers, television stations, and radio stations know about them, you could miss out on publicity that could spark public interest and support. You’ll find that most reporters are not out to hang you and your agency. If you establish a relationship of mutual respect and trust, you’ll find it will pay off many times down the road (Fenichel,10).

In summary the literature review identified for this applied research project has supported that establishing good media relations and disseminating accurate and timely information is crucial to provide adequate and timely information to the media from one's respective fire organization. Media relations often times enhance the quality of information delivery from one's respective fire organization and may provide a key component in promoting and marketing the efficiency and effectiveness in the timely dissemination of information to the community we serve. A Public Information Officer has proven to be an asset for every fire department in the way that will provide a direct conduit of information from the fire service organization to the media during times of emergency operations, and as an effective public marketing campaign to promote proactive programs offered by a fire organization. The findings of this literature review influenced this author to further investigate how other fire departments in our area are communicating to the media, and if there are other methods of disseminating timely and accurate information to those resources.

Procedures

This applied research project used the descriptive method for the evaluation of how the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department communicates to the media, and currently how effective the dissemination of accurate and timely information is released. The descriptive methodology focused on studying what the present situation is and attempting to predict future events or suggest a course of action to help shape the future. The literature review was promptly started at the National Fire Academy's Learning Resource Center (LRC) in Emmitsburgh, Maryland during this author's attendance in the *EAFSOM-Class R306* course in January of 2006.

The LRC provided an enormous collection of indexed periodical resources relating directly to the topic involving this applied research project on public information, and media relations with

fire department organizations. In addition, the LRC provided other documents researched and written by previous Executive Fire Officer Program students that were read and studied to conduct this research. The “World Wide Web” is used to gather information on surrounding fire organizations, and provided email addresses, and names of fire chiefs leading their departments in Broward County. This resource enabled this researcher to send an external electronic survey to fifteen fire department organizations in Broward County Florida to answer question number one. This survey was distributed to eighteen surrounding fire organizations located in Broward County, Florida, that served the purpose to assist this author in researching how information is communicated to local media. The survey was developed by careful thought out questions to gather information that would be useful to assist this researcher and the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department. The email contacts that were used for this survey encompassed department heads of their respective organizations. This survey was developed and sent out electronically on March 25, 2006. Fifty percent of the eighteen fire organizations that were surveyed responded to this researcher for the applied research project.

An internal survey was developed to assist this author in answering question number two and three. This survey was developed based on the current way that the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department responds to the local media, and also developed to initiate future recommendations that could be useful in enhancing media relations within our organization. The members chosen to respond to this survey were at management level that consists of Battalion Chiefs, Division Chiefs and Senior Staff who would play an integral part when disseminating information to local media and newspapers. This survey size is twenty-two Chief Officers that received this electronic email on March 1, 2006. Of the twenty-two Chief Officers, twelve members

responded to the survey for the purpose of answering the research questions for this applied research project.

Interviews were conducted to answer question number two and three. This author chose to interview managers from three different news channels that cover local and breaking news in Broward and Dade counties. These managers are responsible for gathering information, and deciding what news stories will air that evening, and responsible for sending their news crews to any scene either fire or police, that is breaking news. This Author interviewed Ms. Ellie Ramos, Assistant Manager, channel 7, WSVN, on March 20, 2006. Mrs. Kerry Weston, Broward Bureau Chief, channel 10, WPLG was interviewed, March 24, 2006, and Mark Young, Broward Bureau Chief, channel 4, WTVJ on May 3, 2006. These interviews were conducted over the telephone during business hours, and their participation in the interview process answered question number three. An additional interview was warranted due to information gathered from the initial interviews with these qualified managers of television stations. This interview took place on May 3, 2006, with Mr. John Wolmer, personal business “News Busters”, that gathers information for local news media from the Florida Keys to Fort Pierce, Florida.

Assumptions and Limitations

The procedures employed during this research project were based on several fundamental assumptions. First, it is assumed that all authors referenced in the literature review performed objective and unbiased research, and that the information and data obtained was accurate.

Secondly, the information obtained on the electronically delivered surveys was in agreement with the objectives recognized by this applied research project. The respondents in one survey are assumed to be sworn Chief Officers with the City of Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue. The respondents from the other survey are assumed to be state certified, sworn Chief Officers for

their respective organization. The reliance of information furnished by all respondents is based on their knowledge, experience, and the facts related to this topic on public information and the media relations. The results of these surveys are not based on scientific sampling.

The individuals interviewed are assumed to be legitimate working managers to their respective television news stations, and the telephone interviews provided answers to questions that were fairly accurate and honest for this project.

Definitions and Terms

ARP-applied research project (FEMA 2005)

PIO-Public Information Officer (FEMA 2005)

ICS-Incident Command System (FEMA 2005)

Large Scale Event- Syzmanski,(2000)

FAPIO-Florida Association of Public Information Officers (May, 2002)

Results

The results to the questions posed in the introduction of this applied research project were obtained by the above procedures to gather information and research on how the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department communicates information with local media, and determines if information is being disseminated to the media in a timely and effective manner. The results also invite ideas that would assist The Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department in developing a more comprehensive public information program to establish better communication and relationships with local media.

Question number one:

How do other emergency organizations in Broward County communicate information to the media on a regular basis? To answer this question an external electronic survey

(Appendix-A) was sent to surrounding fire organization department heads that resulted in providing factual information on how other fire organizations communicate information to the media on a regular basis. It became apparent by survey question number one when asked: ***How is information relayed to the media on a regular basis?*** Each fire organization answered this question in relation to what type of news was being released. Four of the eight fire organizations indicated that their regularly appointed Public Information Officer would relay any and all information to the local news media while the remaining four organizations released information via telephone (for breaking news), and press releases for general announcements or information relating to the specific fire organization. However, all but one fire organization that responded indicated that they currently have a regularly appointed public information officer (survey question two) that would disseminate news worthy information to the news media. Four of the eight fire organizations used their city's public information officer, and the remaining four with the exception of one fire organization uses appointed designated fire personnel as their public information officers. The only respondent that does not have a public information officer uses the telephone or a press release to disseminate any new worthy events that occur in their city limits. The fire personnel indicated to be public information officers for their departments are Division Chiefs, with the exception of one fire organization that uses three specific Battalion Chiefs that rotate monthly to assume the responsibilities of the public information officer. Survey question four asks: ***Have you're appointed public information officers been trained?*** The seven fire organizations all indicated that their public information officers have been trained to perform the duties required in that position. Survey question number three asks: ***Do you have any written guidelines, policies or procedures that are used in reference to the topic?*** This researcher asked for a furnished copy of policies from the fire departments that were surveyed

referencing public information officer and media relations. All fire organizations that responded to this question provided policies that are written indicating procedures on how information is disseminated to the news media. They are lengthy, and indicate the perceived protocols regarding information that can be given, by whom, and when this information is disseminated. The City of Tamarac Fire Rescue included a work sheet that they use to provide the media and newspapers with consistent, organized information that is helpful to the public information officer when releasing information to the news media. Some of the information included, incident time, incident location, units responding, number of patients, and if applicable, what hospital the patients were transported to. The work sheet also included whether or not mutual aid was received, or if air rescue was provided. Survey question number five ask: ***Do you think having a regular PIO would be helpful to your organization in the event of a national news story occurring in your city?*** The eight fire departments that responded to the survey indicated that it was imperative to have a regularly, trained PIO that would handle the media in the event of a national news story. Comments included; the media could calm the public, failure to address the media's questions in a timely manner could project a negative image on how your fire organization is responding to the particular incident. Other comments referenced the necessary training needed for an effective and knowledgeable PIO that could handle the pressures from the media in the event of a national news story or event. The results from this applied research project question number one indicates that other fire organizations in Broward County have written policies in place to address the media, and that seven of the eight fire departments surveyed have specific appointed public information officers handling this function.

Question Two ask:

Is the current procedure on how the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department disseminates information to the media effective and adequate? To answer this question this researcher used the second half of an internal survey (Appendix-B) conducted and distributed to Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Chief Officers. Survey question six asked, *do you think that the manner of how our department disseminates information to the local media is sufficient?*

Eight of the Chief Officers surveyed answered “no” to this question. They did not believe that the manner in which we disseminate information is sufficient. Two Chief Officers answered yes, and two Chief Officers did not know. When asked survey question number ten on this subject, *do you feel that our organization would be prepared to deal with the media during a major national newsworthy event?*, eight Chief Officers commented yes, and specified that if the “right” person was the public information officer during that event, they believed our organization would be prepared to handle the media. Two Chief Officers said no, and the other two Chief Officers stated that the city public relations would handle the major national news worthy event. These two survey questions resulted in depicting that our organization may be prepared in dealing with the major news worthy event, however, when disseminating information to the media on a regular basis, Chief Officers surveyed indicates that we fall short.

In addition to the above survey, interviews were conducted to Bureau Chiefs of local news media stations to answer research question two. Each interviewee was asked, *do you feel that Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue is effective in disseminating information in a timely and accurate manner?*

Ellie Ramos, WSVN channel 7 stated:

“I have had difficulty gathering information from your department about breaking news.

Sometimes I feel that we are bothering personnel at the fire department when we call for information relating to the facts on the story we want to air. I know that the person I need to contact is the on duty division chief, however, I have called the telephone number that we have on file, and there are many times that I cannot reach him. I can usually get the information that I need, but sometimes it takes awhile. I would like to gather information in a more timely fashion, but I don't want to be too pushy, because I know your department is busy. I have used John Wilmer from "News busters" to gather basic facts on a breaking news story in order to send crews to that location for footage. We are very glad to work with him, because he provides us immediately with information on a breaking story."

Carrie Weston, WPLG channel 10 stated:

"Nobody is looking out for your organization. There are so many public interest stories that your fire department could use for notoriety, however we are not aware of those stories. As far as breaking news we have difficulty in determining the type of story that we have developing. We are pretty much at the mercy of the division chief on duty for information. Sometimes I get resistance from some of the on duty division chiefs when asking for pertinent information. I think they do not have the facts, and it seems to take a while before we can get the true facts about what happened on a particular scene. When we arrive on a working scene, we plead with the photographers to try and gather information. Usually they get this information from people on the scene. The interpretation of the public is so different from a professional firefighter, because they don't know how your organization operates, and if we had information coming directly from one of your firefighters, it would be so much more accurate. We pretty much rely

on residents in the street for information about what happened. Sometimes stories get dropped from lack of information.”

Mark Young, WTVJ channel 4 stated:

“We don’t get stories that come out of Fort Lauderdale in a timely manner. As far as public interest stories, we rarely know what your department is doing. I would really like to have someone contact me from your department so that I could air stories about what your department is doing. It would be great to have a public information officer dedicated to the scene of a major incident. Other cities have PIO’s that are really a big help in disseminating information on a working scene. To be honest, I think that the information is not getting out. Broward County Fire Rescue is really good at disseminating information. I can always rely on having the public information on scene, to get information, and be able to film what is going on. I cannot usually reach your on duty division chief, unless he or she is at the scene. Only then is the information accurate and timely. If we call the stations looking for information, more times then often they hang up on us. Anyhow, what is your procedure on disseminating information to the media? Do you have one?”

John Wolmer from “News-Busters” stated:

“I have great difficulty getting information from your communication center. They don’t give me the time of day. I used to be part of your administrative page system back in the day when Chief McInerny was your designated public information officer. He put your organization on the map. It is too bad that you have the current system. The other way worked better. All I want is basic information on incident location, and incident time. Your city has so much going on all the time. Your fire department is really is the best.

By the time we get information on a fire, your department already has it extinguished.

But really, it is difficult to get information about what is going on. I listen to my scanners all the time, and alert the news media of news worthy events. I would love to be part of your pager system again.”

An additional question asked that is appropriate in answering question number two states: ***How do you feel our fire department would handle a large-scale event?***

Ellie Ramos stated:

“I would try and reach Chief McInerny. I have known in the past that he was the go to guy when we needed to get information. It would be easier if we could call someone on a regular basis for information. Other than that I think information would be limited during a large-scale event associated with your department.”

Carrie Weston stated:

“There is a big problem with major events in your city. Chief McInerny is not as accessible as he used to be. I still have his cell phone number, however it is hard to reach him sometimes. I was on vacation during the last major event that occurred in Fort Lauderdale. It was the cargo plane that crashed on 56 Street. I really can’t comment on how that event went as far as the media is concerned.”

Mark Young stated:

“It was extremely difficult to obtain information during the plane crash on 56 Street. It would have been nice to be able to be at the command post, or another specific location in order to get information and good film footage at a safe distance. We didn’t have anyone there to deal with us. It used to happen with Chief McInerny, however, he was on vacation that day.”

John Wolmer stated:

“Forget it!”

Question three asks: What would a comprehensive, effective public information program entail for the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department? To answer this question, the Chief Officer’s survey (Appendix-B) was utilized, and also questions posed conducted over the telephone to the representatives of the local news media stations. Ideas were used from neighboring municipalities, and how they conduct their business with the media. Survey question three asked: *Would you like to be trained as a Public Information Officer?* Six of the twelve respondents from the Chief Officer’s survey answered “yes” to this question. The other six answered “no.” When asked: *Have you ever been trained as a public information officer?* Five of the twelve Chief Officers that responded have been trained, and the other seven had not had any training on public information dissemination. Question number four and five resulted the same statistics when asked: *Would you consider being appointed as a public information officer as a tertiary job function? and, Would you consider being an alternate as a PIO in the absence of another PIO for our organization?* Four of the Chief Officers answered “yes”, and the remaining eight answered “no.” There was an answer of “maybe” for question five by one Chief Officer. Question number eleven asked: *Do you think it would be beneficial to have a specific person disseminate information to the media?* All twelve Chief Officers responded with a “yes” when asked this question. One Chief Officer commented that the specific person should be a full-time staffed position in our organization.

In addition to the survey questions to answer research question three, interviews were used from the local news media Bureau Chiefs when asked: *Do you have any suggestions on how*

the Fort Lauderdale to can disseminate information to your news media, that would assist your organization in obtaining critical information for news worthy events?

Ellie Ramos stated:

“I would like to be able to speak with a specific individual when gathering information about news-worthy events. I know that may not be possible at all times, but very helpful in the event of a major news story, and regular local news.”

Carrie Weston stated:

“I think it would be helpful if your department could start a news group email, and send out information on what is happening in Fort Lauderdale during an emergency. If the email is short and sweet, that is fine; our news crews will promptly show up on the scene. After the fact, it would be great to have other information relating to the incident faxed to our office on the specific details about the incident. A worksheet would accomplish this. I understand you are looking for a new Fire Chief? Lets hope that this individual appoints a public information officer.”

Mark Young stated:

“I would really like to see the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue appoint a public information that we could communicate to regularly. Just like back in the day when Chief McInerny was doing it. It is very reassuring to be able to pick up the phone, and reach the same person when gathering information. I would also like to be able to reach that PIO on a live incident.”

John Wolmer stated:

“I just want to be able to be put back on your administrative page system. That was very helpful to me. Your department needs to do something proactive to fix this problem.”

Surveys conducted and used for this applied research project can be found in Appendix-A and B.

Discussion

“We live in a media-oriented society.” “Our lives revolve around what we learn from newspapers, magazines, radio, and television.” (Hughes, 1990, 67). When responding to emergencies it is certain any or all-local news stations will be arriving on scene and the media will require immediate facts. A Public Information Officer is the optimal solution for an organization to create a positive working relationship with the media, and to provide the “news seekers” with the facts (Schaper, 1991, 68).

The results obtained by the external survey (Appendix-A), indicated that most fire departments in Broward County, Florida currently use a Public Information Officer to disseminate information to the local media on a daily basis, and would be represented in the event of a major, national news story. The survey indicated that half the cities use their public information office to supply information to the local news media on a regular basis, and the other half use fire department personnel. (Schaper, 1990, 54) suggested that a public information officer should come from out of the ranks, or fire department members. He also suggested that depending on the size of the department a PIO could be assigned the position full time, or in most cases, as an assigned secondary role to their respective primary functions. Those cities surveyed that utilized fire department personnel as their public information resource chose battalion chiefs on a rotating basis, and a division chief to disseminate the necessary information. The Broward Sheriffs Office is the largest public safety organization in Broward County that oversees both police and fire/EMS services. That organization has its own public education

bureau that will handle any and all media relations as well as proactive marketing objectives to educate the community concerning their respective services.

Currently Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue does not have a public information officer. This organization provides many community service programs not to mention a wide range of news worthy emergency responses. It would be of great benefit, if Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue incorporated a dedicated chief officer, albeit administrative or operations, is appointed the duty of a PIO as a secondary assigned role or, staff a full time civilian to perform PIO and marketing objectives to better inform our community on what Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue provides as an emergency management, special operations and fire prevention service. This concept could be of invaluable benefit by appointing more than one Public Information Officer to disseminate information to the local news media on a regular basis, thus creating a trust, and respective working relationships with those organizations.

(Schaper, 55) asserted a point in stating that for little or no money, a department could have a public information officer. He believes that certain people can handle the assignment if they have an interest, and they are already members of the fire department. By examining the internal survey (Appendix-B) conducted with our chief officers this research has determined that there exists an interest for an appointment of a public information officer assignment. Half of those officers that had responded, expressed an interest in being trained as a public information officer, however, only four of those officers would consider taking this task on as tertiary job function, or as an alternate PIO.

Currently chief officers of the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue are assigned other related “extra assignments” and “special projects” in addition to their primary job functions. The responsibility of being a Public Information Officer for the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue would

require a great deal of dedication and training, and would require that individual to be available at a moment's notice 24/7 unless more than one is appointed. (May, 2002, 132) suggested any effective public information program must have a "very strong, market oriented chief."

Currently the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue is seeking to hire a new fire chief. One of the qualities the City of Fort Lauderdale will look for is how the organization will be marketed to the community with respect to the distribution of information on a continual basis.

While examining the results from the responses delivered by the chief officers of the Fort Lauderdale Fire Department this researcher was interested in why the managers surveyed differed on the effectiveness of information being disseminated to the local media on a regular basis, as opposed to a large-scale event. The responses indicated that the Chief Officers believed our organization would be prepared in dealing with the news media during a large-scale national news story, however, when dealing with the news media on a regular basis, they believed we fall short. It is interesting that these responses were so opposite with regards to the dissemination of information regularly or during a national news story. It is suggested from this information that those chief officers believed that our incident command system would fall in place, and a public information officer would be assigned for the sole purpose of supplying the media with the facts, or supplying the city's public information officer with the information, who in turn would represent our community. However, it would be imperative to be prepared.

The Florida Fire Chiefs Association has a division section known as The Florida Association of Public Information Officers (FAPIO). This team consists of trained public information officers assigned in 7 regions in the State of Florida where public information services are needed only on a large-scale event when a PIO needs resource support (May, 2002, 130). This group would be useful to our organization in the event of a major incident such as

hurricane, plane crash, major high rise fire, or mass casualty incident which would provide additional resources to assist our appointed public information officer assigned by the incident commander during such and operation. Such a concept will provide a joint information command (JIC) group independent of the incident operations that will handle information management for dissemination to the commission, city management, news media and community.

The results are a true indication that the City of Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue Department needs to revisit policies and procedures on how the department disseminates information on a regular basis to the local media. It is apparent in the survey conducted with the local media news bureau chiefs that the dissemination of information is not very timely or accurate. Furthermore, these media chiefs need to correspond with a dedicated member of our organization appointed to provide accurate and timely information regarding news worthy items they need to broadcast.

This applied research provided an important insight with regard to how other organizations in Broward County are communicating with the local media. The project has provided a wealth of knowledge on how the local media views the Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue Department's effectiveness in the dissemination of "news-worthy" regarding fire department emergency responses as it relates to the respective community. Such information and new knowledge may provide a solid foundation in establishing proactive policies that will instill positive changes within the City of Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue. Such a policy will set the tone to improve quality communication and marketing objectives to our community regarding the department's procedures, program initiatives, and to create a more positive working relationship with the mass media.

Recommendations

This study has demonstrated the importance that the Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue Department prepares an evaluative with regards to how we, as a department, establish and create policies to provide a direct conduit of information to the mass media. It is vital that such policies are revisited and implemented to provide newsworthy items albeit emergencies or public service announcements (PSA's) on a daily as it directly or perhaps indirectly affects the communities we proudly serve.

Based on the literature review, telephone interviews, and information received from the internal and external surveys, the following recommendations are being noted that may assist our organization with better and more efficient communication to our local media albeit television news, newspaper, and/or radio stations. The recommendations are as follows:

- Evaluate and edit current policies regarding the duties of the public information to the mass media. Ensure that the on duty division chief or designated battalion chief officer responds to the emergency scene for the purpose of acting as a Public Information Officer.
- Create a worksheet that will provide the news media, periodicals, and radio stations with accurate and organized information. This worksheet shall be placed in all command vehicles, and prepared on scene as part of the primary report. This information will be of great benefit since the information will be current, concise, and as accurate possible for live or recorded "byte" interviews with the media. In some cases such as large-scale events involving the National Incident Management System or NIMS, operations division officer on site for transmittal prepares the information to the Joint Operations Center (JIC).

- If a public information officer position cannot be added to the organizational budget, solicit chief officers for a secondary role for Public Information Officer. This position should be offered to an individual that is dedicated, effectively trained or an experienced “people person” and understands the importance of this job function until such time that a position is established.
- When the assigned public information officer (PIO) is on leave or not available, it is important to consider an additional individual as an alternate PIO.
- Establish a news group message system to alert the local media of an incident or newsworthy public service programs that occur in the City of Fort Lauderdale.
- It is paramount to set aside time to invite the local media to a one-day workshop.

The objective of a “media work shop” will:

- Develop a positive rapport between the City of Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue Department and local media
- Provide effective networking strategies of what is expected, needed, and any gaps that need to be bridged to provide a direct conduit of information.
- The expectations from the mass media will assist in the formulation of policies that provide the most current information available for release to the public.
- Create an overall understanding to the local media representatives of the proactive programs and services that the Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue Department provides and services that impact our community in a positive manner.

- Evaluate the effectiveness of the relationship between the department and local media on a quarterly basis or after a major event. Update policies when necessary and provide additional workshops or brainstorming sessions to maintain a positive working relationship with the local media representatives.

These recommendations will assist the Fort Lauderdale Fire-Rescue Department in creating a better relationship with the local news media and other public sources. These news sources would play a very important role in representing our organization's response in times of a major event albeit human inflicted or natural, or programs that have a community impact regarding risk prevention initiatives.

These recommendations may benefit other organizations in establishing good media relations. Future research that could be studied may include additional surveys to local radio stations, and daily newspapers for the area in question. Interviews may include other municipality public information officers, including governmental community leaders.

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Appendix A

Electronic Survey distributed to Fire Organizations in Broward County, Florida

This survey is being distributed to you as part of a research paper that I am writing for the third class in the Executive Fire Officer Program. Please provide answers to the following questions. If you prefer, I will gladly call you and we can conduct this survey over the telephone. Your input is valuable to the contents of this applied research project.

Thank you,

Lieutenant Sherry P. Richter

Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue

1821 NW 32 Ct.

Oakland Park, Florida 33309

954 486 5829

Please email or send responses to srichter@fortlauderdale.gov

- 1.) How is information relayed to the local media on a regular basis? Please explain
- 2.) Do you have a regularly appointed Public Information Officer? If so, name, telephone number, and rank.
- 3.) Do you have any written guidelines, memos, policies or procedures that are utilized by your organization in reference to the topic? Please attach a copy
- 4.) Has your appointed Public Information Officer received any formal training?
- 5.) Do you feel the media can be a good tool in projecting a positive image to your organization? Why or why not.
- 6.) Do you think having a regular appointed PIO would be helpful to your organization in the event of a national news story emanating from your city?

Please feel free to comment on this subject

Appendix B

Electronic Survey to Chief Officers of the Fort Lauderdale Fire Rescue Department

This survey is being conducted for the research on the topic of Public Information and Media Relations and our organization. At this time we utilize the memorandum 001-001, Public Information and Media Responsibility, dated January 2001 as a means of transferring information to the media on a daily basis.

Please answer all question thoroughly, and reply back to me electronically or hard copy interoffice by March 10, 2006. This research is being conducted as part of the Executive Fire Officer Program at the National Fire Academy.

Thank you for your time and cooperation
Lieutenant Sherry P. Richter
C Shift Operations

- 1.) Are you aware of the current policy that our organization follows when disseminating information to the media?
- 2.) Have you ever been trained in any aspects of public information dissemination?
- 3.) Would you like to be trained as a Public Information Officer?
- 4.) Would you consider being appointed as a tertiary job function as a PIO?
- 5.) Would you consider being an alternate as a PIO in the absence of another PIO for our organization?
- 6.) Do you think that the manner of how our organization disseminates information to the local media is sufficient?
- 7.) Have you ever had to conduct an interview with the local media? Please explain when and where.
- 8.) If so, were you prepared while conducting the interview?
- 9.) Are you uncomfortable conducting a live interview with the media? Why or why not?
- 10.) Do you feel that our organization would be prepared to deal with the media effectively during a major newsworthy event?
- 11.) Do you think it would be effective to have a specific individual disseminate information to the media on a regular basis? Why or why not?