

RISK COMMUNIQUÉ

Dealing with the Media

The media performs many functions that may have an impact on an emergency service organization (ESO). It can educate the general public and surrounding community about an organization and its mission. It might also publicize successes and provide positive press. Unfortunately, however, the media is also quickly at a doorstep when things don't go quite right. Picture the following possible headlines: "Volunteer firefighter responding in his personal vehicle strikes a pedestrian ... pedestrian in critical condition," or "Volunteer at local non-profit siphons off thousands of dollars for personal use."

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Taking a proactive approach to risk management within an emergency service organization is important in helping avoid situations that might give rise to headlines such as those above. Consider developing a tailored policy and procedure for handling the media both in day-to-day and crisis situations. Laying that foundation may help prepare for future interactions. The following are suggestions on how to work with the media and what to do should a crisis occur within an ESO.

Develop a media policy for the organization – A written policy and procedure detailing the process for handling media inquiries could prove to be a valuable tool for members when questions arise. Information on the policy and process can be included in new member orientation. Some organizations even develop press kits, which include background information and fact sheets about the ESO.

Designate a media relations person within the organization – Identify someone within the organization who can fill this role. It is important that this individual be trained how to respond to media inquiries, particularly in a crisis situation. Once a designated official spokesperson is identified, provide them with up-to-date information on the emergency service organization and any evolving issues or situations on a regular basis. When utilizing more than one spokesperson it is important that they “speak with one voice.” Consistency and accuracy are important when dealing with the media.

Develop a positive relationship with local media contacts – Identify local media contacts and educate them about the organization and the services provided. Consider developing a list of reporters who would be likely to cover stories on the ESO. Developing a good working relationship with the local community can often begin with positive press.

Return calls from the media in a timely manner – It is true that you can't be sure the media will get the facts right, but not returning phone calls or a consistent “no comment” is not recommended. Journalists may want *instant* answers, but it is more important to provide *accurate* answers. Efforts to get accurate information and then providing it on a deadline will help build respect and trust with media contacts.

Handling misinformation – Some misinformation is unintentional. Perhaps a media representative misunderstood information that was provided. It is advisable to correct this as soon as possible. If additional information comes along after an interview or there was a misinterpretation of information, call in or email the correct information immediately.

This is a sample guideline furnished to you by VFIS. Your organization should review this guideline and make the necessary modifications to meet your organization's needs. The intent of this guideline is to assist you in reducing exposure to the risk of injury, harm, or damage to personnel, property, and the general public. For additional information on this topic, contact your VFIS Risk Control Representative at (800) 233-1957.

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When a Crisis Occurs

Act quickly to alert administration and corporate (if applicable) – The media can broadcast a story across the state or country within seconds. It is important that administration, including board members, are made aware of a situation that might attract press attention so that they can respond appropriately to questions from outside the organization.

Contact the insurance company and/or attorney – The situation may not end up as a claim but often the insurance company and attorney may offer advice on an approach with media representatives. They may also be able to offer loss control approaches to help mitigate damage or bad will that can often result in litigation.

Get the facts – Interview involved staff to clarify exactly what occurred. Find out as many details as possible. In most cases, the media spokesperson provides general statements to the press, but the details may be helpful in crafting those general statements.

Communicate with families – Before talking to the media, or as soon as possible afterwards, set up a system to communicate with members or those associated with the ESO. It is important these individuals learn about potential problems that might bring negative press from the organization, as these stakeholders may sometimes be the biggest allies and supporters.

Counsel members regarding confidentiality – Don't forget HIPAA and the need to protect private health information! Remind members about client confidentiality, privacy rules and release of information. Advise members of the organization's media policy, the steps to take when contacted by the press and to refer calls from media or others outside the organization to the designated spokesperson.

Damage control – If members are not kept informed, they may feed misinformation to the media. To help minimize gossip and speculation, schedule a member meeting for the involved location or department to review what happened and emphasize the facts that have been discovered up to that point. Supervisors may also need to evaluate whether counseling services are advisable for members, based on the circumstances of the crisis.

Summary

Proper preparation and planning can go a long way toward improving an ESO's image in the media. Consider performing an organization wide media audit to identify risks, liabilities and exposures from the media's point of view.

Ask the following:

- Is there a written policy for handling the media?
- Is there a designated media relations representative/spokesperson?
- Has this individual been trained specifically on how to deal with the media?
- Is there a mechanism in place to assure that the designated spokesperson is kept up-to-date with changes within the ESO and is readily accessible in the event of a crisis situation?
- Do members within the ESO know who was identified as the designated spokesperson?
- Has a proactive approach been taken in regards to media relations and are the key message(s) defined that the organization wants communicated?

Developing good media relationships up front may help in crisis situations that attract public scrutiny. Being the primary source of information may also help guide what information is written. Being prepared and having a formal policy in place may help in managing the media.

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