

# Advanced Crisis Communications Strategies for Public Safety Communications Supervisors

For more information about this course, see <http://www.bsu.edu/acct>

## Module 2: The Media and Public Safety Crises

Print Version (does not contain Knowledge Reviews)

### Overview

Welcome to Module 2. This module describes what happens to information in a crisis, focusing particularly on the media's role in disseminating information.

After completing this module, you should be able to:

- Define what makes an occurrence newsworthy.
- Identify the dangers that unaddressed rumors can pose to public well-being and confidence in public safety institutions.
- Identify a reporter's responsibilities and deadlines in a public safety crisis.
- Identify how to help reporters meet their objectives and why that is important.
- Recognize how to effectively redirect reporters to public information officers.

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### Overview

This course is not designed to make you an expert in dealing with the media during a public safety emergency, but it will help you understand the media's role in dealing with information in a crisis, as well as your role in gathering and managing that information as it moves through the chain of command and toward the media and the public.

Understanding the media will also help you be more effective in your public education efforts, where television, radio, and newspaper coverage will help you spread the word about the appropriate use of 9-1-1.

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### Overview

Understanding the media is important to your job because they will be one of the primary segments of the public with which your agency will deal during a crisis—second only to those needing your direct help and intervention.

What they say and how they portray the incident has a huge effect on how people respond to an emergency. This, in turn, has a huge effect on your agency's credibility and reputation.

If your agency and its spokespersons are not actively controlling the flow of information during a crisis, you increase the risk of jeopardizing an investigation, violating public record and privacy laws, and increasing the potential for inaccuracy in media stories.

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## Overview

As public safety professionals you know how important it is to help the public respond appropriately.

- You know the importance of accurate, actionable information.
- You know the danger of incorrect information.
- You know the impact of rumors on public perception and behavior.
- Part of your responsibilities, written or unwritten, is to quell the public's fears and aid them in responding appropriately to public safety crises.

Further, understanding the media will allow you to interact with them in a more positive and productive manner. In many cases, this might include how to **minimally** deal with reporters while redirecting them to your agency's spokesperson—while not looking like you are dismissing their needs as journalists.

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## What Makes an Occurrence Newsworthy?

There are as many different definitions of “news” as there are people. Some are fairly complex, including such terms as prominence, conflict, proximity, shock value, etc. The bottom line is “news” is what catches the attention of the media.

You know from your own experience that almost every public safety emergency could be considered “news” under this broad definition. There's usually some element of drama, particularly in life and death situations.

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## What Makes an Occurrence Newsworthy?

And occasionally, as in Hurricane Katrina, the newsworthy conflict could be a disagreement on how to handle a situation, placing blame when mistakes are made, or public dissatisfaction with the government's response.

The point is, we should assume that **every** public safety emergency will be considered news, in some way, shape, or form. So what you need to focus on is how—and how quickly—you respond in order to protect the public.

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### **The Dangers of Unaddressed Rumors**

Virtually everyone has had some experience with rumors. From this experience, you probably realize how harmful they can be. You probably also know how quickly and broadly they can spread, especially rumors driven by fear. For example, rumors about job layoffs spread more quickly than rumors about a pay raise.

Working in 9-1-1, most of the rumors you encounter will be driven by fear—particularly when dealing with major incidents like natural disasters or terrorism. The power of fear-based rumors to impact public attitudes and actions can complicate public safety communications in times of crisis.

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### **The Dangers of Unaddressed Rumors**

Knowing a bit about rumors and their control can be a great asset in your job.

Scholars have studied rumors since the 1940's. Two Harvard psychologists, Allport and Postman, found in 1946 that the intensity of a rumor was directly proportional to ambiguity and interest.

The less information available on a subject or situation, the more intense the rumor. Likewise, the more interest there was in a subject or situation, the more intense the rumor.

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### **The Dangers of Unaddressed Rumors**

They found the relationship was multiplicative, meaning that you could reduce the intensity of the rumor by either providing information or reducing the public's interest in the subject.

For more on this topic, see Allport and Postman in the Resources section.

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### **The Dangers of Unaddressed Rumors**

Scholars have repeatedly found that in the absence of other sources of information, people turn to rumors to answer their most urgent concerns. Rumors help people make sense out of unclear situations and provide emotional and psychological comfort.

So it is very important that public safety agencies provide timely information in a crisis. And the greater the fear, the more quickly information must be provided to stop the spread of rumor and misinformation.

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### **The Dangers of Unaddressed Rumors**

In the past, the approach many organizations took to rumors was to ignore them. Recent research indicates that the best way to defeat a rumor is to address it directly, including a description of the context surrounding your response.

In most cases, this would involve directly addressing a rumor, then explaining that you are there to provide accurate information the public needs for safety and peace of mind. This additional information makes it easier for people to understand and trust in the answers you provide.

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### **The Dangers of Unaddressed Rumors**

While it's unlikely you'll be the person responding directly to the media about these rumors (unless they are about your PSAP), you can and should have a key role in providing the information that allows your spokesperson to directly rebut the rumors... and quickly.

Don't assume your spokesperson has heard the rumor. As the agency closest to the "streets," you will most likely hear about the rumor before anyone else.

Pass the rumor up the chain-of-command as quickly as possible, along with available information from field units that clarify/verify the situation. Also, provide any perspective you can offer on the context and potential sources of the rumors.

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### **The Dangers of Unaddressed Rumors**

It's also important to make sure your call takers/dispatchers have the appropriate response, as they can be useful in quelling fears and stopping rumors from spreading. As you pass rumor information up the chain of command, ask that official messages be developed quickly so that your call takers can provide accurate information to concerned callers.

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### **Voice of Experience from Robert Plummer, Public Safety Director/Fire Chief, City of Bluffton, IN**

"Dealing with rumors is an interesting issue in itself. We have our dispatchers trained to pass those rumors up the chain of command so they can sort those out and find out what is actual fact or fiction. And then, in turn, return that information back to the dispatchers so they can address rumors as they are asked questions about certain incidents or things that are going on with that crisis."

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### **Reporters' Responsibilities and How to Help Them**

Dealing with the media during a public safety emergency is inevitable, so you should prepare for it.

Admittedly, working with the media can sometimes be challenging, particularly when well-meaning reporters are aggressive or uncooperative in their tactics. In trying to get the story for their readers/viewers, they may actually interfere with emergency operations.

By better understanding reporters and editors, you can establish better working relationships with them, potentially reducing those disruptive behaviors. Establishing such cooperation with the media will ultimately help your agency get useful and accurate information to the public through the media.

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### **Reporters' Responsibilities and How to Help Them**

News publications and broadcasts are in the business of providing timely and relevant information to the public. And timing, as the saying goes, is everything.

- Traditionally, the deadline for inserting key information into morning newspapers has been late the night before. For the dwindling number of afternoon newspapers, the deadline has typically been around breakfast time.
- Traditionally, television newsrooms plan the day's story coverage just after breakfast time and again in the early afternoon.

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### **Reporters' Responsibilities and How to Help Them**

- But the Internet has changed all that. Now, both print and broadcast news outlets are publishing first on the Web. They're no longer hoarding content until the next big broadcast or print edition.
- Thus, deadlines often are as soon as a reporter can crank out a story—24 hours a day. As you might imagine, this increases the pressure for speed and increases the risk of inaccuracies. Bloggers—both independent and attached to media companies—also post whenever they feel like it.

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### **Reporters' Responsibilities and How to Help Them**

Part of the responsibility of the media in a democratic society is to provide sufficient information to allow the public to make an informed decision.

While reporters **are** concerned with the accuracy of their stories, tight deadlines and the competition for news sometimes cause them to go with the first information they receive, which can sometimes be incorrect.

### **Reporters' Responsibilities and How to Help Them**

That's why it's important for you to work with the media in a timely manner—

- Make yourself available to the media if the story deals with your PSAP directly and you are authorized to do so by both law and policy.
- Or get them connected to your agency's spokesperson right away.

If you don't provide the information the reporters want, they will seek it elsewhere, and that increases the risk of misinformation being spread to the public.

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### **Reporters' Responsibilities and How to Help Them**

Not only is it a professional courtesy to help reporters meet their deadlines, but the goodwill this fosters may help you down the road.

A good way to help reporters meet deadlines is to understand what they need for a story and arrange it in advance. This might include:

- Access to spokespersons for agencies involved in the incident (police, fire, HazMat, etc.).
  - Access to your call takers, dispatchers, and first responders as appropriate within local policies.
  - All relevant information and official statements about the incident—clarified in print handouts to ensure accurate reporting.
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### **Reporters' Responsibilities and How to Help Them**

Other things to arrange in advance include:

- Access to other key people in the story (e.g., children and their families in "kid hero" stories)
- Establishing efficient procedures for handling tape/transcript requests on 9-1-1 calls to ensure quick turnaround time

While your PIO is responsible for gathering, verifying, and disseminating information, consider which of these items you and your staff can help prepare. And recognize how the following guidelines can help you in your daily encounters with reporters—standard 9-1-1 inquiries and public education programs.

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## Reporters' Responsibilities and How to Help Them

What else are reporters looking for?

- **Good video and audio** for their stories. If you are providing interviews, make sure you have a good location available—relatively quiet, good lighting or enough room for them to set up their own, and an interesting/relevant background (PSAP, fire truck, etc.). Remember that these days, even newspapers and some radio newsrooms may be in the video business.
- **Returned calls.** Make sure you return calls promptly. If you need more time to gather information, consider making that initial callback right away, and then be sure to follow through with any promised information.

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## Reporters' Responsibilities and How to Help Them

Reporters are also looking for:

- **Accurate information.** Provide only information you know is accurate and truthful. And whenever possible, provide official messages in print to ensure accurate reporting (i.e., news releases).
- **Nothing but the truth.** Don't shade the truth. Don't overstate or understate. Don't mislead by hiding behind technicalities or splitting hairs. These tactics may initially paint your organization in a more favorable light. But before long, they will cause additional—and entirely preventable—damage to your organization's credibility and reputation.

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## Reporters' Responsibilities and How to Help Them

Finally, reporters are looking for:

- **Updated information.** You don't need to do the reporters' jobs for them, but providing updated information as it becomes available both makes you allies in the media and ensures the latest information gets to the public.
- **Exclusives.** If a single reporter developed a story, he or she might have a right to a "scoop," but in general, exclusives can be tricky business. You may make one great friend in the media this way, but you also risk alienating all the others who got shut out of a story.

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## Reporters' Responsibilities and How to Help Them

Many of these techniques can be practiced and streamlined by using them in non-crisis situations—such as when you want to promote your public education efforts or celebrate a kid hero who saved a life through 9-1-1.

Then when a public safety crisis occurs, these procedures and relationships are in place, allowing the timely distribution of accurate information to the public—a key component in effective crisis communications.

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### Dealing with Inaccurate Reporting

Sometimes the media reports inaccurate information—usually through miscommunication or because the appropriate persons were not available in time to meet a deadline. What can you and your PIO do when reporters get it wrong?

- Be professional and courteous! The goal is to provide correct information, not to criticize reporters or challenge their professionalism.
- Contact the reporter and/or the editor right away with a clarification. A correction is never guaranteed, but if you make your case promptly, you might get the correct information in the next edition of a newspaper (or its online version), or in the next television broadcast (mistake at 6:00 p.m., correction at 10:00 p.m. or 11:00 p.m.).

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### Dealing with Inaccurate Reporting

- Work out better procedures with that reporter so you can make sure the information gets delivered and reported correctly the next time.
- Thanks to computers, an editor or producer no longer needs to retype a story. He or she can simply copy and paste a script from one edition or show into a later edition or show. Sometimes the story that gets repeated still contains the wrong information.

Helpful hint: Be watching—or delegate someone to watch—to make sure the corrected version is the one that runs the next time.

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### Dealing with Inaccurate Reporting

When you discover journalists have made a mistake—or when you disagree with their interpretation of an incident—remember to keep the process as positive and professional as you can. Whatever you do, remember these warnings:

- Do **NOT** get antagonistic or defensive. Establishing an adversarial relationship with reporters only makes it harder to get your message out. And that hurts your agency and your efforts to protect the public.
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### **Dealing with Inaccurate Reporting**

Remember these warnings, as well:

- Do **NOT** ignore reporters or shut them out of your communications plans. Your agency needs them to deliver your messages to the public. You may need to talk about an incident with an editor, and maybe even request the assignment of a different reporter, but regardless, make plans to learn how to work with the one you have now.
- Whenever possible and appropriate within your command structure and policies, show the reporter the courtesy of contacting him or her first. Only if that approach doesn't work should you go over the reporter's head. Again, the goal is to make allies, not enemies.

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### **When You Cannot Answer a Question**

Based on procedures defined under NIMS, you will likely not be authorized to talk directly with reporters during a crisis; that responsibility falls to the PIO. But if reporters are used to dealing with you in non-crisis situations and you are more accessible, you still might get that phone call or visit from a reporter.

As you've learned, you shouldn't just ignore reporters. So how do you effectively and professionally redirect questions to your agency spokesperson?

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### **When You Cannot Answer a Question**

Never use the phrase "no comment." At best it seems evasive and rude, and at worst it seems like you are purposefully hiding something. You will only encourage reporters to dig deeper into the matter, usually with a suspicious or confrontational attitude.

Instead, be honest about why you cannot provide the information they are seeking. And then make sure you give them something they can use for their stories—the official messages and details you are authorized to provide.

Ultimately, you want to be positive and get your message across to the media and, through them, to the public you serve.

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### **When You Cannot Answer a Question**

If you are not authorized to talk with reporters or release information, get them connected to someone who can:

- "Sorry, but I am not authorized to talk with the media about this matter. But let me connect you to our spokesperson who can better answer your questions."
- "Our public information officer, \_\_\_\_\_, is the person who you need to talk to about that."

You can be honest about not having the authority to comment on a matter. But make sure you take the next step to help reporters get the information they need to do their jobs.

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### **When You Cannot Answer a Question**

If pressed, remain polite, but remind them of the limits of your authority. Don't disparage your policies, but stress that the policies are in place to make sure information is provided correctly and completely.

If you do not know the answer to a question, admit your lack of information and promise to get back to them with an answer (and then do):

- "I don't have that information, but if you provide me with that specific question and your contact information, I'll locate the answer and contact you as soon as possible."

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### **When You Cannot Answer a Question**

Here's another way of saying "I don't know":

- "That is actually outside my area of expertise. Let me find you someone who can give you the answers you need."

Don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." And don't be hounded into speculating. Stick to information that is correct and complete. No information is better than misinformation.

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### **When You Cannot Answer a Question**

If they ask about sensitive matters—such as ongoing investigations or proprietary information—explain briefly the reason why you cannot go into details:

- "I cannot talk about matters in an ongoing investigation. Our spokesperson will provide details as soon as he can. All we know now is...."
- "I cannot share that information with you because of privacy issues. What I can tell you is this...."

Come back to what you can say with confidence and authority. That will keep the interaction positive and give the reporters some information they can use.

If there is a question about whether information should be released, pass the question along to a public information officer or someone else authorized to make that decision.

### **When You Cannot Answer a Question**

Realize that reporters and their editors can request information through the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) and through open records laws within your individual states. Do not hide this fact or consider it a challenge to your authority. Those laws are in place to provide both the media and private citizens with information on the workings of the government agencies for which their tax dollars pay.

Be certain you understand your agency's policies related to such requests—specifically, what forms must be submitted and to whom the person requesting the information must speak. Be open about these processes and help reporters understand them. Such openness may boost your credibility and reduce any sense of antagonism or suspicion that might be building.

Freedom of Information Act (FOIA) [www.justice.gov/oip/](http://www.justice.gov/oip/)

State Freedom of Information Laws [www.nfoic.org/state-foi-laws](http://www.nfoic.org/state-foi-laws)

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### **When You Cannot Answer a Question**

Always consider your comments on the record, so don't think you can reveal partial information "off the record" as a way of wiggling out of a reporter's tough questioning. You might think a partial explanation would help the reporter understand why you cannot reveal details of a situation. But the reporter's first priority is to get the story. Don't risk providing privileged information that may then appear in a news story.

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### **More on Dealing with the Media**

For more on dealing with the media, consider reading *Public Education in 9-1-1*, by Jim Blackmore. This excellent and practical book was published by the National Emergency Number Association (NENA) in 1997, and is available through NENA.

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### **Summary and Resources**

You have completed Module 2. The next lesson describes establishing and maintaining a positive working relationship with the news media before a crisis.

Freedom of Information Act (<http://www.justice.gov/oip/>)

The State Freedom of Information Laws (<http://www.nfoic.org/state-foi-laws>).

*Public Education in 9-1-1* by Jim Blackmore.

*The Psychology of Rumor*, Gordon Allport and Leo Postman. 1947.

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### **End of Module 2**