Public Information in Disasters

Joan Heller
Public Affairs Coordinator (retired)
Brevard County, Florida
Office of Emergency Management
The Importance of Public Information

- Tells the members of your community what’s happened and what you’re doing about it
- Heads off rumors
- Helps reduce fear
- Tells residents what they can do to help themselves
- Directs the efforts of those who want to help
- Strengthens sense of community
- Offers reassurance that help is on the way
- Increases the public’s confidence in its leaders
PIO Tasks

- Attends staff briefings
- Writes news releases
- Answers telephone inquiries
- Organizes news conferences & media briefings
- Briefs officials for interviews
- Locates background information
- Escorts reporters in restricted areas
May provide resources to out-of-town reporters:
- local maps
- hotel list

Sets up Media Staging
- shelter (tents)
- portable toilets
- water
- food
- May coordinate Rumor Control
- Provides web address where all news releases can be retrieved
EOC Website Hits

Normal Hits Per Day: 275

95,863 Hits Four Days Before Landfall

Hurricane Frances landfall

August 28 – September 20, 2004
Before the emergency

- Identify the PIOs you’ll call for help
- Maintain up-to-date media contact information
- Set up distribution system
Ensure PIOs have adequate work space and equipment

Talk about protective measures

Talk about possible evacuation, shelter alternatives
During the emergency

- Media should have a work area near the action *(not in the middle of it)*
- The reporters need to know the ground rules up front
- Reporters should be allowed at least periodic access to main EOC room
  - regular briefings
  - interviews
Help the public understand the process, how decisions are being made.

Explain your priorities.

Set realistic expectations.
Understand that the reporter isn't out to get you.

Look forward to the interview as an opportunity, not a threat.
Speak to the reporter, not the camera.

Never, ever say, "No comment."

Don't hedge. If you don't know, say so.

It's okay to say, "I don't know."

Be honest, even when it's embarrassing.
YOU set the pace.
Consider each question individually.
Take your time.
When you finish your answer, STOP.
- Assume every microphone is on.
- Speak in short sentences.
- Speak conversationally, avoiding jargon and technical terms.
News Conference

- Establish “talking points” – no more than 3.
- Include subject matter experts.
- Rehearse.
- Identify yourself, your position.
- Limit questions.
- Plan for an “escape route.”
Joint Information Center

Location where all public information officers involved in disaster recovery can co-locate to more closely coordinate information
Getting the Word Out

- government access television
- billboards
- water/utility bills
- school/company newsletters
- mobile public address systems
- postings at community gathering spots
- flyers
- shelter briefings
- information booth
- hotline
- town meetings
- “reverse 911”
The Aftermath

- What types of hazards might still exist
- How to avoid those hazards
- Where help is available
- What type of help is available
- What to expect from local officials
Be specific about what’s being done to help residents.

Be sympathetic to those who are frustrated.
“Nobody’s doing anything to help us.”
Psychological Phases of Disaster

Phases of Disaster

PREDISASTER

Threat

Warning

Impact

Inventory

--1 TO 3 DAYS--

Time

---1 TO 3 YEARS---

HEROIC

HONEYMOON (COMMUNITY COHESION)

DISILLUSIONMENT

RECONSTRUCTION

A NEW BEGINNING

COMING TO TERMS

WORKING THROUGH GRIEF

Trigger Events and Anniversary Reactions
Joan Heller

(321) 264-1679

jrheller@earthlink.net