

# **Media Relations and the Role of the Public Information Officer: What Every DMAT Member Should Know**

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## **What about disasters interests the media?**

Disasters are a significant source of news: 25% of all news stories involve natural disasters, technological hazards, and civil disturbance (1). Disasters capture the attention not only of Americans, but of populations worldwide. The media spotlight disaster because they are unusual, unique, spectacular, and at times horrific. They make a problem highly visible to those most immediately affected by the disaster as well as the American population.

Over time, the media have linked each disaster with its own unforgettable image: the forest fire's devastation, the swath of destruction left by the hurricane, the toppled buildings after an earthquake. In many ways, the media are the first to define the events as an official disaster. They inform the public about it and thus heighten awareness. This resulting awareness often determines the level of attention that relief agencies pay to the particular disaster and influences public opinion about how the disaster is being managed (2).

## **Why is it so important to establish a good working relationship with the media?**

Being a proactive, accommodating, and media-savvy EMS administrator can help your DMAT and NDMS by shaping public opinion, which is directly linked to political support. In other words, the media play an integral and vital role in all aspects of disaster management, including funding. Why not develop a good relationship and comfort level with the media? Your team has nothing to lose and much to gain. DMATs and the NDMS have stories to tell, and if you have an established relationship with the media, it is more likely that your story will be told in the light most favorable for you.

It is clear that the public is interested in what we are doing. Why shouldn't we be the ones to tell it? A 1987 study noted that almost twice as many American readers are interested in disaster stories as they are in political information (3). DMATs are a source of good copy for human interest, and their members provide expertise in disaster response. I will speak briefly from experience about my team's experience with the local media.

The Ohio-1 Disaster Medical Assistance Team has been fortunate to have developed a good working relationship with the local media, its history dating back to the team's inception. This relationship has been mutually beneficial. Media coverage has lent credibility to us during peacetime (non-disaster events) as well as deployments. The coverage that we have enjoyed has served as a reminder to our families, employers, and our community that our team is a unique response element at the local, state, and federal levels. In return, we serve as "experts" to educate and inform our community about current disasters and how they are managed. We also use these

spots to provide our community with thoughts about how we would manage a similar disaster on our homefront.

We make every attempt to be flexible with the media when granting interviews about disasters. These interviews set us apart from other responding agencies, because of our field experience and our recognized expertise. Similarly, when we have the occasion to seek out the media for coverage of our team's non-deployment activities, the media are very receptive to us. It is important for team morale that drills and other-related activities receive coverage by the local media. This coverage validates the importance of your team's activities during non-deployment times and maintains community interest.

Interest increases appreciably during the period surrounding a deployment, both from the media and from individuals who want to join the team. DMATs provide the local media and their viewing audience with good "human interest" stories about our teams deploying to high impact events. These stories are also a wonderful recruitment tool. The "hometown heroes" aspect of our deployments provides reporters with many spin-off stories. Keep in mind what spin-off stories may be of interest for them and promptly make suggestions: what it takes to get ready for a deployment, type of gear a team members take with them, leaving the family and friends to deploy, the possibilities are endless. In addition, the spin-offs may include public service announcements (PSAs) about disaster preparedness for your community or requests for volunteers and supplies. Take this opportunity to lead the media to stories that profile your team.

It should be understood by all team members that the media in general can take a "friend" or "foe" posture when covering disasters. Maintaining a cautious and professional demeanor at all times and keeping a few basic rules in mind are essential. Television reporters, radio disc jockeys, and newsprint reporters all have a job to do and have to meet a deadline. If they are not given answers to the questions that they ask, chances are they may find their answers elsewhere. The answers found elsewhere may not shed the most positive light on your team and, in fact, may not accurately portray the event unfolding. For all these reasons and many more, the Public Information Officer (PIO) is a role of extreme importance for your team.

### **The role of the Public Information Officer (PIO): Who are they? What do they do?**

Every team member, irrespective of the role they play on your team should have a grassroots understanding of who the PIO is and what his or her role entails. Team members should also take the time to review your team's standard operating procedures and protocols to familiarize themselves with the appropriate actions to take when approached by the media.

Operating within the Incident Command System (Incident Management System) framework, the PIO answers to the Incident Commander. All requests by the media are made directly to the PIO or referred to the PIO. While at home station, each unit's PIO is responsible for working with the media. The PIO at home station should contact the Management Support Team (MST) or Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to gather information about the teams deployed, information about specific duties assigned to teams, the sites to which the teams are deployed and so on. During federal activation, the PIO must clear all interactions with the media through

the Management Support Team (MST), formally known as the Management Support Unit (MSU).

The PIO bears the responsibility of expediting effective and accurate communications and disseminating this information appropriately (4). This is neither a role that should not be taken lightly, and it is a role that not just anyone can fill. The PIO's role is multifaceted and evolves with every interaction with the media and as technology advances. Some of the PIO's tasks are listed below:

- Scheduling interviews
- Developing and maintaining a media contact list
- Selecting appropriate team members for interviews
- Preparing selected team members for interactions with the media
- Escorting media representatives and VIPs throughout the operational area
- Issuing press releases
- Gathering and verifying information

In addition, the PIO must possess a knowledge base about disaster management, the Federal Response Plan, and the history and capability of his or her team. The person selected to serve as your PIO must have the ability to communicate in an effective and professional demeanor and have strong verbal skills. He or she must have the ability to work well under pressure and think quickly in the moment. This is the spokesperson for your team, so put your best foot forward and make the best first impression possible. You may get only one chance.

Any requests that come from the media should be directed to your PIO. When approached by a reporter, politely direct that person to your team's PIO. Courteously inform the reporter that the best person suited to work with the media is the PIO. It is important to not convey the impression of giving a cold shoulder. Make sure that reporters are aware of the value your team places on media relations and that the PIO role exists to link them with the one person on your team most qualified to meet their needs.

### **The positive role that the media can play in disasters**

Disasters have all the ingredients to make them newsworthy: human suffering, dramatic devastation, trying conditions, and what seem to be insurmountable challenges. Yes, disasters are headline news, and many viewers tune to CNN and other agencies to watch disasters unfold. In this day of advanced technology, people have come to expect instantaneous information—the media serve as providers of disaster-related information and are considered to be trusted sources especially at the local level, where the news media have a “vested interest” in the home town.

Dissemination of information about public safety, public health, disaster assistance, and credible facts by the media has never been more evident than during the various phases of Hurricane Andrew. The local news media in Miami did an outstanding job of preparing the surrounding area for the hurricane's landfall in 1992. A local meteorologist, Brian Norcross, was on the cutting edge with his predictions about where the hurricane would make landfall and preparing the viewers for it. He was credited with saving many lives through the network's continuous, factual coverage. His pleas for people in low-lying areas to evacuate did not fall on deaf ears; neither did his common sense approach to surviving the hurricane as it was making landfall. His voice and reassurance were the calm that the residents of the Miami area turned to while they were ravaged by the storm.

As technology improves, so does the ability to more accurately predict the path of storms and provide timely information and education about unfolding events. The media remain invaluable assets in times of disaster. Well after Hurricane Andrew made landfall, the media continued to disseminate information about public safety, giving details about impassable roadways and downed utility lines. Public health concerns were addressed by issuing water safety advisories and providing information about sites where medical care was available. FEMA used the media to identify the locations of disaster assistance centers (DACs). Many times since Hurricane Andrew, the media has fulfilled such roles during the phases of a disaster.

In the absence of telephones and other mechanisms for communicating with the world outside an affected area, the news media provide the affected population with much needed information and the outside world with a glimpse of what that affected community is dealing with. Your PIO will work with the media to make sure the story being told about the DMAT's involvement with the affected community is a fair and accurate glimpse.

### **The negative role the media can play in disasters**

The presence of media representatives during disasters is a fact of life. They bring with them the good and the bad. By developing an awareness of both the positive and negative aspects of disaster coverage, you can be better prepared to view the news media in a more realistic manner. The media can tend to exaggerate some elements of disasters. In fact, many myths about disasters are perpetuated by the media.

The mass media's inaccurate portrayal of human behavior before, during, and after disasters can compose a very dramatic, but only partially truthful story. For instance, it is not uncommon to see footage of people looting after a disaster on all networks, but most viewers do not realize that all the networks were covering the same store being looted. In actuality, looting is not a common occurrence during natural disasters. This is not to say that looting does not happen; rather, the slant toward looting being prevalent during a disaster is unfair.

Film crews may also document horrific devastation on a street, but what you do not see is that on the opposite side of the street all the houses are intact, having sustained only minor damage. Coverage of the non-affected areas is every bit as important as coverage of the hardest hit areas, but the unaffected areas don't produce the same emotional charge. Couple this with the fact that the media often influence public opinion and the amount and extent of resources sent into an

affected area. Is it any wonder that unnecessary and inappropriate resources are often sent by the “well intentioned” to affected communities?

Another myth perpetuated by the media is the portrayal of the affected population as helpless victims. This too gives an inaccurate and unfair image. In the aftermath of disasters, neighborhoods and communities come together to support each other and do so in an orderly fashion. In actuality, it is members of the affected population who serve as the first responders, organizing search and rescue parties and providing first aid. Panic and chaos in the aftermath of most disasters are not common, they usually are a creation of the media. (4)

News is entertainment, and airing a story about long lines at gas stations, bottlenecks at toll booths, and eruption of tempers in bumper-to-bumper traffic can lead the viewer to believe that panic ensues during evacuations. It is true that these issues can arise during evacuations, but the less glamorous side of the story is the one that describes the person who refuses to evacuate in spite of exhaustive pleas from local officials. Yes, many people do evacuate and related problems do arise, but what about the problems caused by those who refuse to evacuate? They endanger the lives of police officers, firefighters, and EMS providers who are called upon to respond in highly vulnerable areas.

These examples are not attempts to discredit the media, but merely an opportunity to point out the fact that news sells, and dramatic news sells well. After a short time, the viewing audience grows tired with the facts and figures of the disaster and looks for more human-interest types of stories; hence, the demand for drama. Dramatic footage captured while flying over the scene of a disaster is an added bonus for the viewers and an added problem for responders.

Media representatives often converge on a high-profile event or a disaster by means of helicopter. So great is this influx that it can crowd airspace over the affected area, creating the potential for overflights. The downdraft of choppers has also been known to degrade the integrity of damaged buildings and other structures, compromising search and rescue operations in addition to jeopardizing rescuer safety. On occasion, news choppers have made unauthorized landings at hospital landing pads, hampering the provision of care needed by the critically ill and injured.

*Helicopters must comply with Federal Aviation Administration regulations. In cases of disasters, additional regulations may be enforced. Please review the module on “Helicopters and Disasters” for more information.*

The “convergence phenomenon” of media personnel is an issue inherent to all disasters. The movement of mass media into an affected area brings all sorts of problems. Crews arriving from around the globe need housing, food, and transportation into an area where these resources may be very limited. In addition, reporters and cameras are magnets for politicians. The government’s ability to respond to disasters reveals quite a bit about public policy during stressful events. It also provides a snapshot of the perceptions and expectations of that government. What politician would miss an opportunity like this?

Further resources are necessary to meet the needs of the politicians and their entourage as they find their way to the action. This influx of individuals with needs into an already burdened area is overwhelming. Convergence occurs after all disasters. A plan for dealing with this phenomenon must be part of every disaster plan and every team's protocols and standard operating procedures. It should be kept in mind that the PIO is tasked with providing VIPs with tours and that all VIP inquiries must be directed immediately to your team's PIO.

### **Preparing for an interview**

Because no one person can have expertise in all of the operational aspects of your DMAT, the PIO may call upon you to discuss with media representatives your role on the team and how it relates to the overall mission. Before you begin to panic, keep in mind that it is the PIO's responsibility to coach you and prepare you for an interview. It is important, however, to keep an open mind and consider answering a few practice questions before making your final decision. Your PIO would not have called upon you if he or she did not feel that you could handle the interview.

Never lose sight of the fact that everyone has a story, and your story may be just what sets your team apart from other responders. You may not feel prepared for this interview; but with time and practice, your interviewing skills will improve. The first interview is the most difficult; your PIO may want to practice with you during a team meeting or drill. Practice in the car when you are driving; listen to radio talk shows and get ideas about how to and how not to respond to questions.

Some pearls to keep in mind when dealing with the media are listed below:

- Most questions can be anticipated, and most of the time you can ask the interviewer what he or she will be asking you during the interview.
- Local media will want to know more specific information if the disaster has occurred in their viewing area. They will ask for statistics.
- Do not feel pressured into giving statistics that have not been verified. It is easier to provide accurate information at a later time than to give inaccurate information and then need to rebuild your credibility.
- National media will be looking for a broader scope of information beyond the local area.
- Pause and think about your answers; don't feel rushed. All dead space will be edited out of the interview on television.
- Be prepared to talk about the team, the NDMS/Office of Emergency Preparedness, the type of disaster that has occurred, and the type of injuries that you have seen.
- Do not give out the names of patients you are caring for; describe the people in general instead.

- Avoid answering “what if” questions. You may want to say, “Let’s talk about what is.”
- Avoid “off the record statements,” they do not exist.
- Do not use highly technical terminology—the audience is John Q. Public and is put off using medical terminology and disaster acronyms.
- Make every attempt to relate to the audience. How would you answer the questions if your family or friends were asking them?
- Don’t comment on something that you have not seen or heard. If you don’t know the answer, you can contact someone who does.
- Be assertive and take control if the interviewer attempts to lead you down a path that you do not want to travel down.
- Never promise what you cannot deliver.
- The First Amendment does not guarantee the media special access to information not available to the public, nor does it grant the press a constitutional right to access to a disaster when the public is excluded.

### **Managing the pitfalls of interviews**

Below you will find many questions and answers to assist you with identifying pitfalls common in interviews. They are predictable and can be managed effectively with a little forethought and preparation.

- *Question: What types of injuries and destruction can you expect to find once you arrive? Exactly where will your team be located?*

Answer: Immediately after a disaster such as a hurricane, it is common to see traumatic injuries related to the storm itself as well as injuries related to the clean-up activities. For instance, we will probably see lacerations, foot injuries from people stepping on debris, and eye injuries from the dust and debris. Within several days after the disaster, people with chronic conditions like diabetes, heart problems, and respiratory illnesses will begin having problems associated with being without their medications, living in stressful conditions, and the dust and debris. Their chronic conditions will exacerbate or become worse. We expect to see a wide variety of illnesses and injuries. At this time we have not received our mission assignment, but we would be glad to update you when we receive it and know the location where we will be practicing.

**Be honest—if you do not know the answer, let them know that you will have that answer for them as soon as possible. If you make a mistake, a preemptive admission of that error will put you in a more positive light in the long run.**

- *Question: How many people have been killed or injured as a result of this disaster?*

Answer: At this time, we have received reports similar to what the media are reporting. Please keep in mind that because of communication issues and the difficulty in confirming injuries and deaths, it may take awhile to verify those numbers.

**Manage ambiguity; avoid speculation. You can always find out and report back later. A smoothly running system does not sound as interesting as a story detailing the problems occurring with communication. Communication is always an issue in disasters. Minimize the focus on the need for immediate figures, and refocus the interview on the importance of receiving verified and accurate figures.**

- *Question: The citizens of the affected community seem to feel that help is slow in coming and that all that could be done is not being done. What do you think? Have the responders been slow to assist?*

Answer: It is unfair to make comments about this, without knowing all the facts. It is very easy to be an “arm chair” responder without actually being there and knowing all the details. What I think is important to mention is that this disaster has overwhelmed the community, and outside assistance is required because of the magnitude of this event. Hundreds of agencies are participating in a coordinated response effort.

**Relate to the audience. They will not be able to follow the various governmental acronyms or highly technical information. Explain yourself as you would to your family members or co-workers.**

- *Question: We understand that FEMA, DOD, and other agencies are coordinating the response efforts and that it seems to be an alphabet soup of responders. Isn't this confusing?*

Answer: The United States has a federal disaster plan, called the Stafford Act. In the Stafford Act, all the agencies that you mentioned plus many, many more are involved in responding. Each agency has its own role in the plan, and the plan has various levels or echelons, depending on the type and amount of assistance needed. All these agencies work together with other agencies to get the job done.

**You are the expert; take the lead if necessary. Challenge inaccuracies and misinformation in a non-threatening way.**

- *Question: It seems as if everyone is being asked to evacuate the area where the hurricane is supposed to hit. Is this being done to avoid traffic jams?*

Answer: Areas that are disaster prone, especially hurricane prone, are near the coast, which is the area usually hit the hardest when the hurricane makes landfall. By asking the residents

to secure their property and to evacuate the area in a timely and orderly fashion dramatically reduces the chances of those residents being injured by the storm or drowned as a result of the storm surge that accompanies a hurricane. During the evacuation process, there will be traffic jams as residents leave their homes. But with the warning period and the increased ability of meteorologists to predict where the hurricane will make landfall, the evacuation process can be orderly and potentially save lives.

**Use the team approach and have team experts available to answer questions that you direct to them.**

- *Question: What types of communication devices will you be using, knowing that communications will be an issue in the affected area? What kind of supplies will be necessary for your team to take?*

Answer: Those are great questions. Our communication officer will be glad to give you more specific and technical information about our communications capabilities. Our supply officer would gladly fill you in on the logistical and supply issues that we anticipate.

**Keep in mind that there is no “off the record” status. Everything you say can and may be used. Choose your words carefully and thoughtfully. Never try to be glib or inject humor, as it may be viewed out of context and considered inappropriate.**

- *Question: In your opinion, how is the federal government doing in its management of this event? You can tell me the truth; we won’t roll the camera.*

Answer: The federal response plan, our country’s disaster plan, is a very complex framework that assigns specific jobs and responsibilities to many, many agencies. It would not be fair for me to offer my opinion without knowing what you are asking specifically, and without finding out more details.

**Be prepared to deliver a succinct 20- to 30- second message and do it well. Your interview may last several minutes, and you will probably get a sound bite lasting a few seconds.**

- *Question: What is OH-1 and how does it fit into the overall response efforts?*

Answer: OH-1 is one of about 70 disaster teams across the country that are part of the National Disaster Medical System/Office of Emergency Preparedness. NDMS and its umbrella agencies including the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Department of Defense, and Department of Health and Human Services, all work together to provide coordinated medical care to victims of disasters in communities where the emergency medical services and hospitals have been overwhelmed.

**Be relaxed and be professional. You represent our team and the National Disaster Medical System/Office of Emergency Preparedness. You do not want to appear to be too eager to go or to “enjoy” a disaster that has caused sufferings to others.**

- *Question: You must really enjoy what you do. Can you tell me about it?*

Answer: All of us in the field of emergency medicine and response are drawn to difficult situations and challenges. We have skills that can benefit others, especially in times of disaster. It is an honor and a privilege to be able to be part of such a large-scale operation and coordinated response. It is gratifying to see such a wide variety of agencies amassed for the purpose of helping others. The intrinsic rewards of this type of a deployment cannot be matched. It is also comforting to know that if our own community should ever experience a disaster, there are teams like ours ready to respond and assist.

**When giving phone interviews, please find out the number where you can reach the interviewer if you need to update him or her at a later time. Predetermine when and how the information that you provide will be used. This will avoid having statements that you make being used out of context.**

- *Question: Do you have concerns for your safety when you travel to disasters?*

Answer: Can you explain what your story is about and how my response will factor into the story? I want to provide an answer that is congruent with your question.

**It may also be necessary to spell out words not familiar to the interviewer. Clarification is essential. It is much easier to be misquoted or taken out of context when giving phone interviews or doing interviews for the print media. Be cautious and use good judgment.**

- *Question: You and your team are local heroes responding to those in need. How do you feel about being a hero?*

Answer: Being able to offer assistance to a community hurt by a disaster is a huge undertaking that would not be possible without extensive community effort. Various community businesses such as Foodtown and Home Depot assist us by donating supplies. Our families, friends, co-workers, and employers take on additional responsibilities so that we can leave with very little notice and be gone for several days at a time. Without all these agencies and individuals supporting us, it would not be possible for our team to board the plane today.

If you would like to portray anyone as a hero, think about the police officers, firefighters, EMS personnel, and hospital workers in the affected community. They have suffered losses yet still continue to help others. Their efforts are heroic—many of them are victims of the

disaster as well and may not have homes to go to. They have suffered great hardships, but still they continue to work.

**The local media has always attempted to portray our team and its members as heroes. Make every attempt to divert this type of portrayal by mentioning the fact that you have CHOSEN or VOLUNTEERED to become involved or be deployed. Direct your comments to the support that you have received from your family, employer, and co-workers to make it possible for you to participate. Not only does this publicly serve as a thank you to those you leave behind, but also it sheds positive light on local employers. You may want to add that the “real heroes” are the folks who are coping with this disaster.**

### **Helpful hints for your interview**

There are a few nuances or subtleties about interviews intended for television, radio, and print. Please review the following relevant sections when preparing for your interview:

#### **Television:**

- Make sure that the background activity is professional and related to what you are being interviewed about.
- Select places that you feel comfortable in, keeping in mind noise levels and background lighting.
- Your appearance, the quality of your voice, and your mannerisms give a first impression of you.
- Have a prepared and rehearsed 20-to 30- second sound bite or statement that you will deliver, summarizing your interview.
- Remember that a several-minute interview may be edited down to maybe just a few seconds. When aired, the story will be summarized by the news anchor.
- If you make a mistake, stop and rephrase, even if it is a live interview.

#### **Radio:**

- Be brief and concise, speaking in a normal conversational tone.
- Take a moment or two to choose your words carefully, when necessary.
- Obtain a phone number where you can call in additional information or updates.

**Print:**

- Obtain the phone number where you can supply the interviewer with updates.
- Before the interview discuss with the reporter how the interview material will be used to avoid the “out of context” issues.
- Spell names and words most likely to be misspelled.
- If the interview is conducted by phone, do it in a quiet location.
- Be prepared to be misquoted.

**Help, a reporter wants to talk to me!**

By now, you should be more comfortable with media relations and the interview process. If you keep in mind that the PIO is the media relation’s conduit for your team, and that all questions from the media are to be directed toward that person, you will do just fine. If you are selected to be interviewed, or have an interest in being interviewed, let the PIO know.

At the very least, you and everyone on your team should be able to step up to a camera and state the following:

“The \_\_\_\_\_DMAT responds at the request of the U.S. Public Health System, to provide emergency medical assistance to local and state governments when a disaster overwhelms an area’s local emergency resources. We are part of the National Disaster Medical System of United States Public Health Service. Our members are doctors, nurses, paramedics, EMTs, and support personnel, who have volunteered to be on our team.”

**How can I avoid trouble when dealing with the media?**

- First and foremost, you can review your team’s protocols and standard operating procedures regarding the media.
- Simply direct the media to your team’s PIO.
- In addition, you can review the Code of Conduct established for DMATs, which states, “Discussion with any media source during activation is prohibited unless authorized by the Management Support Team Commander.”
- Familiarize yourself with the NDMS guidelines for dealing with the media.
- Never be rude or unprofessional in the presence of representatives of the media.

## **Summary**

In review, I would like to state that the role of PIO deserves the respect and support of everyone on your team. It is that person's job to make sure the story your team has to tell is the one that is told. Be cooperative, respectful, and professional when you work with a PIO.

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