



U.S. CENTERS FOR DISEASE
CONTROL AND PREVENTION

Essential Guide for Disaster Public Information Officers (PIOs)

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The Role of a Public Information Officer

During disasters such as wildfires, typhoons, floods, or other extreme events, multiple agencies often share responsibility for public communication. Each organization typically designates a Public Information Officer (PIO) or communications lead.

Some PIOs are seasoned communications professionals with years of experience, while others may be assigned to the role during an emergency to meet operational needs. Not every organization uses the same titles. But, regardless of background, official title, or experience level, the PIO function ensures that accurate, coordinated, and timely information reaches the response leaders, public, media, and key stakeholders.

When disasters occur, PIOs play a key role in safety by getting the right information to the right people at the right time so people in the affected areas can protect themselves and others.



Image source: CDC.gov

Primary Responsibilities

Successful PIOs during natural disasters:

- **Ensure Accuracy and Consistency** – Verify facts and align messaging within and across agencies
- **Support Life Safety** – Clearly communicate protective actions and available resources
- **Coordinate with Partners** – Speak in a unified voice with PIOs and other key stakeholders
- **Collaborate in a Response Structure** - Work within a framework like an Incident Command System (ICS) and Joint Information Center (JIC)
- **Manage Media and Public Engagement** – Respond to inquiries and monitor public sentiment
- **Maintain Trust and Credibility** – Provide clear, concise, timely, and accessible information

Coordination with Overall Response Structure

The PIO in an Emergency Response

During an emergency response, the agency or organization leading the response may stand up an Incident Command System (ICS).

The ICS provides a clear structure for roles, responsibilities, communication, and decision-making so multiple organizations can work together effectively.

This structure helps reduce confusion, improve coordination, and ensure that information and resources are managed effectively during a response.

Within ICS, the PIO usually reports directly to the Incident Commander, ensuring that communication is closely tied to operations and leadership decisions.

In multi-agency incidents, PIOs work within a Joint Information Center (JIC) to coordinate unified messaging across agencies, ensuring information is accurate, consistent, and approved before release.

Applying Incident Command System Principles

Not every emergency starts with a fully established structure. At the start of an incident, or in smaller, fast-moving events, roles may be unclear, communication channels informal, and decision-making decentralized.

Even when an ICS is not formally activated, a structured approach to communication—formal or informal—helps ensure that accurate, consistent information reaches the right people at the right time, supporting both the response effort and public safety.

PIOs can take the initiative to build relationships with incident leadership, subject matter experts, community partners and other communicators to ensure coordination and consistency.

Key response terms

Emergency Operations Center (EOC)

- A central command station where officials coordinate response and resources during emergencies, scalable in size depending on needs

Incident Command System (ICS)

- A standardized organizational structure for incident management in an emergency

Incident Commander

- Provides overall leadership for the incident response
- May serve multiple functions in smaller ICS organizations

Joint Information Center (JIC)

- A centralized information and communication hub with representatives from agencies and organizations involved in an incident or emergency response
- May be physical or virtual
- Provides coordinated message delivery from a single information source

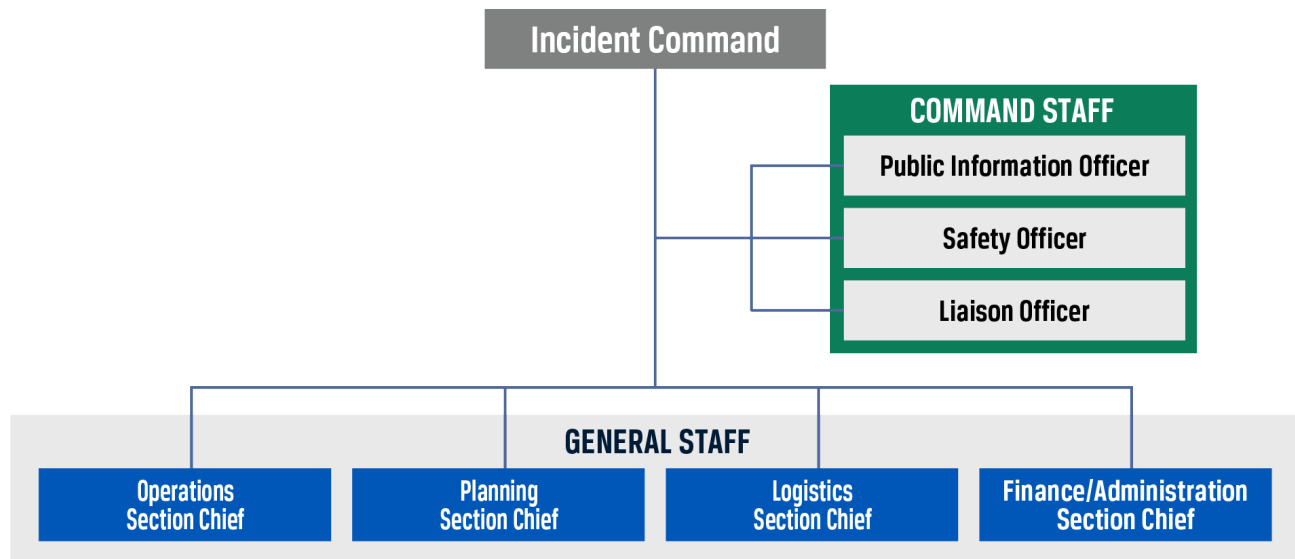
NICCL and SICCL

- The National Incident Communications Coordination Line (NICCL) and State Incident Communications Coordination Line (SICCL) are calls set up during emergencies by emergency management authorities for communications coordination across sectors

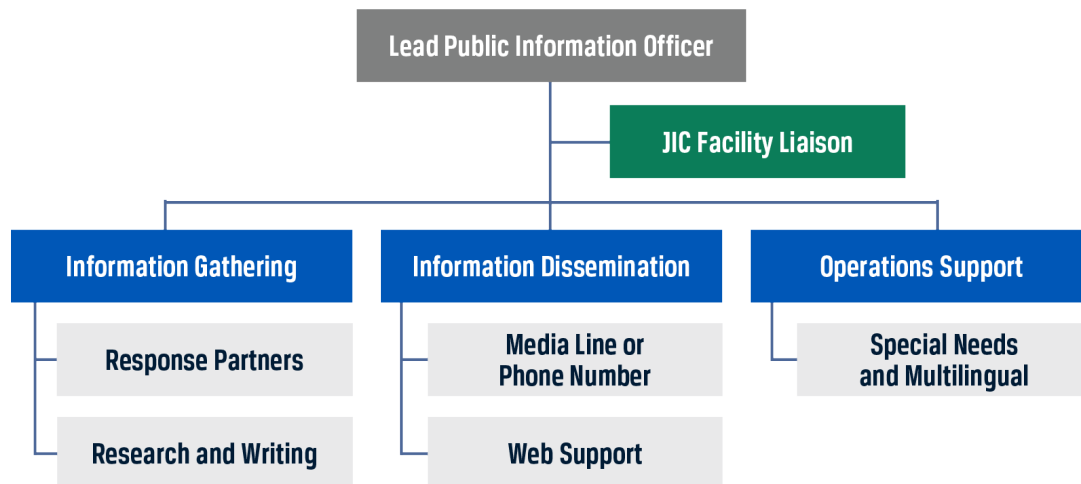
Emergency Support Function (ESF) #15

- The Federal Emergency Management Agency's support for external affairs for an emergency

This organizational chart outlines an example Incident Command System with a Public Information Officer reporting to the Incident Commander, guiding communications strategy and ensuring consistency of messaging.



Sample JIC Organizational Chart (FEMA)



Using Risk Communication Principles

PIOs can use risk communication principles such as CDC's Crisis and Emergency Risk Communications (CERC) framework to communicate effectively during emergencies.

In fast-moving and uncertain situations, people need clear, timely, and trustworthy information to understand risks and take protective action. Applying CERC helps ensure information is not only shared—but understood and acted upon—supporting both effective response efforts and public safety.

Emergency communication should be:

- Clear
- Concise
- Accurate
- Timely

Effective messages explain:

- What is happening
- What authorities are doing
- What the public should do
- Where to find reliable updates

Unfortunately, there are more questions than answers during a crisis, especially in the beginning. Acknowledge and express empathy for your audience's uncertainty and share with them the process you are using to get more information about the evolving situation.

Tell them:

- What you know
- What you don't know
- What process you are using to get answers

Successful information-sharing considers:

- Language and translation needs
- Access and functional needs
- Cultural and community factors
- Multiple information platforms and formats
- Levels of access and/or ability to use technology

The Six Principles of CERC

Throughout these chapters, six principles of effective emergency and risk communications are emphasized:



Be First:

Crises are time-sensitive. Communicating information quickly is crucial. For members of the public, the first source of information often becomes the preferred source.



Be Right:

Accuracy establishes credibility. Information can include what is known, what is not known, and what is being done to fill in the gaps.



Be Credible:

Honesty and truthfulness should not be compromised during crises.



Express Empathy:

Crises create harm, and the suffering should be acknowledged in words. Addressing what people are feeling, and the challenges they face, builds trust and rapport.



Promote Action:

Giving people meaningful things to do calms anxiety, helps restore order, and promotes some sense of control.³



Show Respect:

Respectful communication is particularly important when people feel vulnerable. Respectful communication promotes cooperation and rapport.

Fully integrating CERC helps ensure that limited resources are managed well and can do the most good at every phase of an emergency response.

Public Information Across Sectors

During an emergency, PIOs communicate from the perspective of their own agency or organization.

Talk to the other organizations. Decide in advance who will lead on each topic, or who is in charge of each “lane.” The other PIOs can help amplify the lead agency’s message, and can provide supporting messages.

For example, you may all be communicating about the same fire event. Here are some examples of what main messages may look like in each lane, and some supporting messages from the public health perspective.

Sector	Topics to lead	Main Message	Supporting public health message
Emergency Management 	Hazards/Rescue	Avoid fire & smoke areas	Protect your lungs and seek care if needed
Healthcare 	Capacity/care	Use the emergency department only if needed	Use telehealth when possible
Education 	Closures/students	Follow reunification updates	Support child well-being
Water 	Water safety	Follow boil water advisories	Use safe water for hygiene
Voluntary Organization 	Shelter/Aid	Use shelters and resources	Practice hygiene

Disaster Communication Step-By-Step Guide

Preparedness

Before a disaster, the PIO is responsible for developing and communicating preparedness messages, and ensuring release of consistent, accurate information. The PIO's responsibilities for preparedness may include the following:

Prepare key messages in advance. Use CDC's [Preparedness and Safety Messaging for Hurricanes, Flooding, and Similar Disasters](https://www.cdc.gov/hurricanes/php/preparedness-and-safety-messaging/index.html) guide (<https://www.cdc.gov/hurricanes/php/preparedness-and-safety-messaging/index.html>) to help find disaster-specific messages. Messages can be adapted for web, press releases, media talking points, social media, fact sheets, and other communications materials.

- Check with subject matter experts to make sure messages are up-to-date.
 - Share messages with leadership.
- Prepare leaders and subject matter experts for media.
 - Conduct media training, and coach on clear, concise delivery.
 - Practice anticipated difficult interview questions.
- Educate partners, the media, and the public on preparedness.
 - Coordinate with emergency broadcast and alert systems to make sure they have accurate, clear messaging.
 - Talk with partners about how you will work together in an emergency. Share key messages to check in advance for any conflicts.

Example preparedness messages:

- Make a plan with your family and be ready to evacuate or shelter in place.
- Prepare an emergency supply kit for your family and pets.
- Prepare your car and home (for example, moving outdoor items indoors, securing doors and windows, making sure the gas tank is full, storing an emergency kit in the car).

Response

The PIO's responsibilities will increase during an active response (for example, while a hurricane is occurring) and may include the following:

- Provide public safety information like evacuation notices, storm warnings, and other information, including how to safely evacuate with pets.
 - Ensure messages are clear, actionable, and audience-appropriate.
 - Use channels that work for your audiences.
 - Clear materials through leadership quickly to ensure accuracy and alignment before release.
- Monitor media and public feedback: Track news coverage and social media to identify incorrect information, questions, and emerging concerns. Identify and correct misinformation with timely, consistent messaging.

- Maintain communication channels: Update websites, manage social media accounts, and coordinate with alert and notification systems.

Example response messages:

- Listen to authorities about shelter-in-place and evacuation notices and recommendations.
- Have your emergency supplies on hand so you are prepared to be without power, water, and other utilities if you have not been ordered to evacuate.
- Know where in your home is safest to shelter during extreme weather.
- Know where your nearest open emergency shelter is located, have your emergency kit ready to go, and if you have pets be sure to find a place that will accommodate them.
- Share your location with your emergency contacts.

Recovery

Continue working with the media and communicating with the public for as long as needed after a disaster. PIO communication during the recovery phase may include the following:

- Provide information on recovery efforts and what authorities are doing to restore normalcy to the community.
- Provide information on disaster assistance and support resources for the public.
- Recognize the community's efforts, including first responders and citizens.

Example recovery messages:

- Listen to local authorities to find out what areas are safe to re-enter.
- Do not drive or walk in floodwater, and avoid downed power lines, debris, and stray animals.
- Never use portable gasoline or coal-burning equipment or camp stoves inside your home, basement, or garage. Keep the equipment outside and at least 20 feet from any window, door, or vent.
- Throw out any food that may have come into contact with floodwater or was affected by power outages.
- Take care of your emotional well-being. It is natural to feel stress after a disaster. If you feel you need help, contact the Disaster Distress Helpline: CALL or TEXT 1-800-985-5990.



Image source: CDC.gov

Phase-Based Messaging for Storms

CDC developed the practice of using phase-based messaging to anticipate and meet needs at different stages of a hurricane or storm response. Share planned phase-based messaging to help partners stay coordinated. Phase-based messaging can be adapted for specific disasters, and can also be created for other types of emergencies.

Phase-based messaging for storms	
Phase 1 Immediately preceding landfall-24 hours after	Readiness and preparation • Evacuation guidance • Flood safety • Power outage risks • Shelter safety
Phase 2 1-3 days post storm	Returning Home • Power outage/generator safety • Food and water safety • Mold prevention • Worker Safety/Preventing Injury
Phase 3 3-14 days post storm	Environmental Hazards and Physical health • Vector control • Cleaning and sanitation, chemical safety • Access to medical care
Phase 4 2-4 weeks post-storm	Short-term recovery • Coping with trauma • Mold remediation
Phase 5 More than one month post-storm	Long-term recovery and resilience • Coping with trauma • Mold • Community and economic stress • Preparedness

Tips and Tricks

Talking Points

Consider preparing daily, *event-specific* talking points as soon as relevant information becomes available to supplement your pre-prepared safety messaging. Daily event points may include the following:

- Statement of empathy (show in words that the spokesperson cares)
- Incident overview (what happened)
- Response actions (what officials are doing)
- Current Safety information (what people can do to stay safe)
- Resources and assistance (where people can get help)
- Contact information (who to call for more information)

Fielding Media Questions

During or after an emergency, a PIO will likely field questions from the media, whether it happens at a press conference, at a public event, or over the phone.

Journalists are likely to ask six questions: Who, what, where, when, why, and how? These questions ultimately relate to three broad topics:

- What happened?
- What caused it to happen?
- What does it mean?

Practice using information from your talking points to answer questions members of the media might ask. Know how you will respond if you don't know the answer to something. It's better to be honest and say you need to get more information than to say something that may be incorrect.

Focus on Decision-Support Communication

All messages should be crafted to help people make decisions. Every message should answer three questions:

- What is happening?
- What does it mean for me?
- What should I do now?



Build Trust and Credibility by Expressing:

- Empathy and caring.
- Competence and expertise.
- Honesty and openness.
- Commitment and dedication.

Top Tips:

- Consistent messages are vital.
- Don't over-reassure.
- Acknowledge uncertainty.
- Express wishes. ("I wish I had answers.")
- Explain the process in place to find answers.
- Acknowledge people's fear.
- Give people things to do.
- Ask more of people (share risk).

As a Spokesperson:

- Know your organization's policies.
- Stay within the scope of responsibilities.
- Tell the truth. Be transparent.
- Embody your agency's identity.



Prepare to Answer These Questions:

- Are my family and I safe?
- What can I do to protect myself and my family?
- Who is in charge here?
- What can we expect?
- Why did this happen?
- Were you forewarned?
- Why wasn't this prevented?
- What else can go wrong?
- When did you begin working on this?
- What does this information mean?

Stay on Message:

- "What's important is to remember..."
- "I can't answer that question, but I can tell you..."
- "Before I forget, I want to tell your viewers..."
- "Let me put that in perspective..."

Be First. Be Right. Be Credible.

Contacts and Notes

Contacts and Notes

Resources

- CDC Health Literacy and Plain Language Resources: <https://npin.cdc.gov/training/cdc-health-literacy>
- CDC Communications Trainings, Tools, & Templates <https://www.cdc.gov/health-communication/php/communication-resources/index.html>
- CDC's CERC resources: <https://www.cdc.gov/cerc/php/about/index.html>
- CDC Emergency Preparedness and Disability Inclusion Resources: <https://www.cdc.gov/disability-emergency-preparedness/index.html>
- CDC Clear Communication Index: <https://www.cdc.gov/ccindex/index.html>
- FEMA PIO Training: <https://training.fema.gov/programs/public-information-officer/basic/>

