

**DEVELOPING AND IMPLEMENTING A PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER  
POLICY AND PROCEDURE FOR THE LAS CRUCES FIRE DEPARTMENT**

EXECUTIVE ANALYSIS OF FIRE SERVICE OPERATIONS IN  
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

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## ABSTRACT

The Las Cruces Fire Department (LCFD) recognized the need and benefits of having a Public Information Officer (PIO). The problem was, how were we going to staff the position, develop and implement a policy and procedure, define what the roles were going to be, and find candidates to fill the position? In the past, a PIO was only activated when we had a major scene and was usually done haphazardly and after the fact. If we had inquires or public information media requests, the Battalion Chief or Lieutenant on duty was randomly and half-heartedly tasked with the responsibility.

The purpose of this research paper was to develop and implement a PIO policy and procedure for the LCFD. It needed to clarify the roles of the PIO, identify potential candidates for the position based on qualities and qualifications, and recommend staffing and notification criteria for the position. A comparative evaluation on the positive impact the program had was also completed.

The primary procedure was action research methodology, but some descriptive techniques were used to explore the following questions:

1. What would be the primary roles of the PIO?
2. How did the PIO Policy and Procedure get developed and implemented?
3. What qualifications and qualities should a PIO possess?

The procedures used in the research and development of the position included personal interviews with print, television and radio media personnel from the Las Cruces area and interviews with PIOs from other departments. Other research included data collection from LCFD and City of Las Cruces archives as well as literary reviews of journals and periodical articles.

The result of this undertaking was the development and implementation of a PIO policy and procedure that included input from local media, other departments, and ultimately fit the needs and abilities of our department. A comparative evaluation of the number of media stories showed a dramatic increase in media exposure, coverage, and articles since the program was implemented.

Recommendations based on this research include a proposal for a full-time PIO and Public Education officer and additional equipment such as a laptop computer, printer, radio, and vehicle for the PIO. Other recommendations include additional PIO specific training and the development of a policy and procedure for a large scale, multi-agency disaster to include a joint information center.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The Las Cruces Fire Department (LCFD) recognized the need and benefits of having a Public Information Officer (PIO). The problem was, how were we going to staff the position, develop and implement a policy and procedure, define what the roles were going to be, and find candidates to fill the position? In the past, a PIO was only activated when we had a major scene and was usually done haphazardly and after the fact. If we had inquires or public information media requests, the Battalion Chief or Lieutenant on duty was randomly and half-heartedly tasked with the responsibility.

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## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

The City of Las Cruces is located in Southern New Mexico approximately 20 miles from the Texas and Mexico borders. The Las Cruces Fire Department covers over 50 square miles of land, including a population of nearly 80,000 citizens. There are seven fire stations with 15 apparatus and 106 uniformed personnel that responded to over 10,000 calls in 2002. The

organizational chart is relatively flat with one Fire Chief, five Battalion Chiefs, twenty-three Lieutenants, and the remaining personnel Drivers and Fire Fighters. The cultural diversity of Las Cruces is nearly 50 percent Anglo and 50 percent Hispanic, with many having immediate family in Mexico. Spanish is the primary language in the Hispanic population and much of the total population is bilingual to some degree (Udell Vigil, City of Las Cruces PIO, personal communication, 2003).

“There is no department, large or small, that could not benefit from the appointment of a department PIO” (Leonard, 73). The PIO position was historically delegated to a Battalion Chief only when a major incident occurred. No press releases were ever generated and media interaction was limited to occasionally answering reporter’s questions on the phone. This created inconsistencies in information distribution as well as limited the amount of positive publicity for the department. One Battalion Chief was notorious for talking too much and consistently released inaccurate, incomplete, or inappropriate information. This would create problems for our investigators as well as generate complaints to the Chief (Travis Brown, LCFD Fire Marshal, personal communication, 2003). The new Fire Chief, Adolf Zubia, recognized the need for a PIO and selected personnel to become PIOs and to develop and establish a PIO policy. The objectives and expectations included establishing guidelines for activating a PIO, identifying notification procedures, and clarifying media interaction and information dissemination (A. Zubia, personal communication, 2003).

This paper is being written to give some insight and information on how we developed established a PIO for our department. “Every fire department needs a designated public information officer. Whether you’re a small volunteer department or a large metro department, someone should be trained and prepared to carry out the duties of the PIO” (Szymanski, 50).

The benefits of establishing a PIO are well documented and it is recommended that all departments designate and institute a PIO to some degree. This project is intended to provide an outline of what works for us and give some assistance for other departments looking to start a PIO.

The *Executive Analysis of Fire Service Operations in Emergency Management* class provided an opportunity to role-play in the position of PIO at a major incident. The class stressed the importance of establishing contact with the media, providing and controlling the flow of information, and using the media to help disseminate emergency information and instructions (McLaughlin and Thompson, EAFSOEM class, 2003). Unit 7 in the student manual is dedicated to Media Relations and provides information on dealing with the media on an incident scene, methods for conveying information, and guidelines for media interviews (NFA, EAFSOEM manual, SM7.1-15). A positive relationship and cooperation with the media can help build the credibility and effectiveness of a fire department's public perception. This in turn can assist with budget requests, alternative-funding packages, and may assist with securing additional personnel and training. In the time of emergency, the media is a valuable asset and resource to distribute and disseminate safety information and instructions to keep the public informed and safe. This will lead to increased safety and reduce the possibility of additional casualties of both firefighters and citizens and directly related to the United States Fire Administration (USFA) operational objective.

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

There were several articles and books written on Public Information Officers and Media Relations. Many of the articles stressed the importance of establishing a PIO and outlined the benefits and justifications for creating a full-time PIO position. Roles, expectations, and

priorities were discussed and most of the articles echoed many of the same recommendations: Establish good relationships with the media, distribute information in an accurate and timely manner, and establish written guidelines for the PIO.

“The mission of a fire department’s public information office is to protect the public interest while promoting the department’s organizational agenda. This is accomplished by releasing information regarding the department’s various operations, achievements and successes, while simultaneously promoting its mission and vision to all available media outlets: print, television, and radio” (Crawford, 24). Information released usually falls into one of two main areas: 1) emergency incidents and information and 2) self-promotion and public education information. The LCFD PIO policy addressed emergency or significant incidents only. The Public Education Officer is responsible for generating any public education programs or media interaction.

“An effective public information officer makes the job of any chief much easier. The PIO should be the first point of contact for any media outlet that wants information about a major incident within the chief’s command. The idea is to get accurate information out as quickly as possible” (Thompson, 50). Several articles stress the importance of information distribution and other on-scene functions. “An important PIO function is to coordinate media activities at the scene of an emergency, ensuring the safety of all media personnel and providing information for the incident. By providing the media personnel with information about the incident, and explaining what the firefighters are doing, the PIO can help reporters give more concise and accurate accounts of the incident” (Szymanski, 54). Another important aspect of the PIO is answering questions without having complete knowledge of the events. “A delicate balance must be achieved between refusing to answer questions and giving hasty or ill-conceived

responses” (Allison, 39). There can be sensitive information that the media would like to know, but should not be released from an investigation point of view. Achieving this balance takes practice and established trust between the PIO and the media personnel.

Several articles stress the importance of being accessible. “Due to the nature of our profession, the media will require 24 hours access to you. This will require a pager, cellular phone, and an answering machine. You will need to set policy and procedures into action with your dispatch center. They will inform you of major incidents and newsworthy events (Stephenson, 19). Other departments were asked how they handle on-call personnel page-outs as well as compensation issues. Most of the department’s PIO carried a cellular phone, a pager, and a radio. Compensation issues ranged from zero for exempt employees to overtime and stand-by pay for on-call personnel (G. Sawyer, Mark Nunelly, LCPD, S. Pena, M. Duerr, personal communication, 2003).

Robinson provided a fairly comprehensive list of qualities preferred when selecting a spokesperson. These characteristics include: Trained or experienced in media relations, credibility, someone who can think on their feet, appearance, personable, good speaker, suitable characteristics to represent your department, and ability to present technical information in easy to understand terms (146). Numerous sources provided similar lists of qualities for a PIO and most mirrored these characteristics.

Hughes believes that being proactive is the key to making the media part of your camp. The key to the media relationship is honesty and sincerity. You must establish trust and credibility and this will make it easier for them to present a positive image for your department (68). Patterson answer the question “What does the media want? In order of relative importance: a newsworthy event, quick on-scene access for TV or newspaper cameras, accurate,

quickly released information from someone who can, with words, evoke a picture of the scene; deadlines met; and good lighting and sound for electronic media” (35). Learn how the media operates. If you identify their needs and are aware of their priorities, you will be able to help the media achieve their goals and build a cooperative relationship.

“A written media relations policy can help mitigate confusion about who has the authority to speak on what subjects” (ICMA, 9). Identify who your PIO is and let the media know that he or she will release all information. This prevents confusion and will help assure that accurate and appropriate information is disseminated (Stittleburg, 25). “The news media will get the story they need one way or another” (Aurnhammer, 2). “The story will probably be printed with or without your participation. Don’t pass up the opportunity to delivery the facts” (Stittleburg, 44). It is imperative that strong relationships are established with the media and ever effort is made to release information in an expeditious and accurate manner.

Contact was made with eight other fire departments in the Southwest that already had PIO programs in place. The departments and contacts were:

Martin McCoy, Albuquerque Fire Department, New Mexico

Manny Gomez, Hobbs Fire Department, New Mexico

B.C Finn, Los Alamos Fire Department, New Mexico

Sam Pena, El Paso Fire Department, Texas

Phoenix Fire Department, Arizona (SOG, Policy Only)

R. L. Martin, Contra Costa County Fire Protection District, California

Gene Sawyer, Santa Clara Fire Department, California

Mark Duerr, Stockton Fire Department, California

Contact was made with the PIO or a member familiar with the PIO program. Questions included policy and procedure specifics such as notification process, compensation issues, media interaction, press release issues, and personnel qualifications. Copies of their policies were obtained if available. These sources were valuable because they provided a framework and reference for developing our policy and identified key components that needed to be addressed. Their information and policies permitted critical evaluation and exposed patterns, similarities, and standards consistent across several departments. They also possessed experience in large scale incidents and provided suggestions and insights for avoiding many of the early mistakes their departments made while developing a PIO program.

### **PROCEDURES**

The procedures used for developing a PIO policy for the Las Cruces Fire Department included personal interviews were conducted with personnel from the LCFD including the Fire Chief, Fire Marshal, Battalion Chiefs, Public Educators, and other selected individuals with knowledge or experience in this area. This provided insight to what the priorities of the department were and identified constraints and limitations for program. They provided input, feedback, and recommendations for the policy and procedures. The Fire Chief and the Battalion Chiefs would ultimately approve the policy and procedure, so their input was vital. The PIO from the City of Las Cruces was also interviewed in order to identify the needs and expectations of his department.

Literature was gathered, evaluated, and reviewed from a variety of periodicals. Articles specific to PIO, media relations, and public relations were searched. These yielded numerous articles from fire and emergency service magazines and periodicals. These were useful for recommendations and justifications for developing and implementing a new PIO program.

Personal interviews were set-up and conducted with local media personnel. Representatives from the newspapers, television stations, and radio stations questioned to identify and establish what each medium's specific needs were such as deadlines, preferred correspondence method, current phone numbers, fax numbers, and contacts. This was extremely valuable in identifying timelines, deadlines, and preferred notification methods. This also initiated dialogue with the various media and helped establish working relationships with each entity.

Personal interviews were conducted with several departments that already had PIO programs in place. These included departments in New Mexico (Albuquerque FD, Hobbs FD, Los Alamos FD), Texas (El Paso FD), Arizona (Phoenix FD), and California (Contra Costa County FD, Santa Clara FD, Stockton FD). Contact was made with the PIO or a member familiar with the PIO program. Questions included policy and procedure specifics such as notification process, compensation issues, media interaction, press release issues, and personnel qualifications. Copies of their policies were obtained if available. These sources were valuable because they provided a framework and reference for developing our policy and identified key components that needed to be addressed. Their information and policies permitted critical evaluation and exposed patterns, similarities, and standards consistent across several departments. They also possessed experience in large scale incidents and provided suggestions and insights for avoiding many of the early mistakes their departments made while developing a PIO program.

Several drafts of a proposed PIO policy and procedures were generated and distributed to the Fire Chief, Battalion Chiefs, and perspective PIOs for feedback and recommendations. A PIO handbook was compiled, an on-scene PIO information sheet was created, a contact list was

generated, a press release template and log chart were established, and a notification schedule was developed. Several versions of the policy and supplemental forms were generated, revised, and edited. Finally, a final version was approved and signed by the Fire Chief and the policy was adopted and implemented (Appendix A).

### *Limitations*

Several limitations were identified. This policy concentrated specifically on emergency incidents and does not address public education components. There is a Public Education Officer designated for the department, but he currently does not participate as a PIO. This has created some confusion and conflicts when dealing with public education issues and getting media exposure. Only eight other departments were contacted in reference to their PIO policy and program. While they provided valuable insight and suggestions, this is still a very limited number of contacts. All but one of the departments was larger than LCFD and in turn have significantly more resources available. This policy and procedure was developed specifically for the Las Cruces Fire Department and while it is effective for our needs, it has limited application as a standard procedure for any other department.

## **RESULTS**

### *What would be the primary roles of the PIO?*

“Probably the most important function of the PIO is to work with the media” (Szymanski, 50). The primary role of the PIO would be to communicate with the media about incidents that were identified as significant. These include but are not limited to fires, hazardous material release, aircraft crashes, and other interesting responses. The PIO would be activated by Command (Battalion Chief) and would report directly to the Incident Commander as part of command staff. The PIO would field any questions from the media as well as insure their safety

while at the incident. The PIO would then be responsible for generating any press releases and disseminating this information to the local media entities.

The policy created outlines these roles and establishes other expectations and responsibilities as follows:

The purpose of this policy is to facilitate the dissemination of accurate and timely information to the media and the public. It is the policy of this department to maintain a positive working relationship with the media. This policy applies to all members of the Las Cruces Fire Department. During day to day operations, departmental public information officers (PIO) will fall under the supervision of the battalion chief as designated by the fire chief. During emergency incidents, the assigned PIO will report to the incident commander as part of the incident command staff.

#### *Responsibilities of the PIO*

The PIO is responsible for gathering and coordinating the release of information to the media including, but not limited to, press releases, press conferences, and interviews.

The PIO is responsible for providing media representatives with complete and accurate information within the City of Las Cruces' established city, departmental, legal, and investigative parameters.

The assigned PIO for a particular incident will remain the media's point of contact for any future inquiries for that particular incident.

The assigned PIO is responsible for keeping the city's PIO informed of all activities involving media contact and for maintaining a professional relationship with media representatives.

All written information (press releases, fact sheets, etc.) shall be composed on the official press release form, proof read by at least one other person and shall be grammatically correct prior to dissemination. All written released information will be logged in the press release log and filed for permanent record keeping. Articles that appear in any publications shall be collected by PIOs and filed with the press releases.

All press releases dealing with items other than typical emergency incidents shall be reviewed by the fire chief and/or the fire marshal or administrative chief, prior to release to the media.

The assigned PIO will be available to Central Dispatch via a home phone number, pager or cell phone number. A pager and a cell phone will be provided by the fire department to be used by the assigned PIO.

The PIO will be dressed appropriately for all contact with the media including TV interviews.

#### *Responsibilities of the on-duty Battalion Chief or Incident Commander*

It is the responsibility of the on-duty battalion chief/incident commander to determine whether a PIO is needed and to notify the assigned PIO via a request to Central Dispatch.

The on-duty battalion chief/incident commander may request the assigned off-duty PIO via Central Dispatch to cover an incident or to address incoming media inquiries. The on-duty battalion chief/incident commander is responsible for ensuring that a PIO is notified of

newsworthy emergency incidents and media requests in a timely manner so that the PIO can comply with media deadlines and that any media coverage is well-timed. In the event that an off-duty PIO cannot be notified, an on-duty PIO may be used.

At the request of the on-duty battalion chief/incident commander, the assigned PIO will respond to any incident that the incident commander feels may be newsworthy or of interest to the public. Notification of a PIO may be considered when:

- An incident generates media or public attention;
- An incident may generate public interest or where public concerns may arise;
- The fire department seeks public assistance in solving a crime or further information regarding an incident;
- The fire department wants to publicize an upcoming department event or occurrence; and
- The fire department hosts a recognition or award ceremony for personnel, department programs, or receipt of grant awards.

Upon the assigned PIO reporting to the scene of an incident, the Incident Commander will confer with him or her regarding the location of the media sector, the information to be released, and if, when and how media will have access to the scene.

If media contact is requested or required after mitigation of an incident is complete, or for any other media inquiry, the battalion chief will fill out a "PIO Information Sheet" to be given to the PIO upon reporting for duty.

Senior staff may contact any PIO to cover non-emergency matters.

#### *Responsibilities of Fire Department Personnel*

Fire department personnel will notify their battalion chief if they feel a newsworthy event has occurred. The battalion chief will then determine whether a PIO should be contacted.

Fire department personnel other than assigned PIOs and senior staff shall not engage in any interviews or other official conversations with any media representative regarding incidents or other newsworthy events.

All fire department personnel should be aware of open microphones and hot cameras when working near media personnel. There is no such thing as "off the record." (LCFD Policy)

#### *How did the PIO Policy and Procedure get developed and implemented?*

Once the need for a PIO was recognized, the process of developing and implementing an effect policy and procedure needed to take place. A group of six individuals were selected by the Fire Chief to work on this process. The six included two lieutenants, an inspector, the public educator, a driver/operator, and a firefighter. All had at least five years of experience in the department and each had experience and skill in interacting with the public on a regular basis.

Three were bilingual and two had Bachelor degrees in Marketing and Journalism. The initial phase was contacting other departments and inquiring about their current PIO programs. This included the Las Cruces Police Department, and eight other departments from Southwestern States (Texas, New Mexico, Arizona, and California). We collected other's policies and guidelines and talked about similarities and standards present in all or most of the policies. The roles of the PIO were identified and modified to fit our department and resources.

Robinson recommended that "before building a plan, it is a good idea to learn how the media operates and what they want from you in order to do their jobs. Invite the media into the planning process. No one knows the media better than themselves" (145). The PIO committee met with local media personnel in order to identify their specific needs, contacts, deadlines, and preferences. Television, radio, and newspaper representatives assisted in developing a template for press releases and compiled a list of media contacts and numbers. The group then started to develop a PIO Handbook that included the contacts and notification lists, instructions, press release template, an incident information sheet, and a tracking log.

A preliminary PIO policy was drafted and distributed to the Fire Chief and the Battalion Chiefs for feedback and recommendations. There was discussion on compensation, notification procedures, and qualifying events. Once a consensus was reached, a final draft was approved and implemented. It took several incidents before many of the Battalion Chiefs were comfortable and familiar with the policy. The department personnel were educated and trained on the expectations and were explained the policy and how they fit into the process.

A rotation schedule for an on-call PIO was established. The on-call PIO was issued a phone and a pager in order to be informed and alerted to emergency incidents. We established protocols and procedures with our dispatch center and notified them of the on-call personnel and

contact numbers. The on-call PIO was not compensated for ‘stand-by’ pay, but if activated, the PIO would receive overtime pay.

A tracking log was created and a folder is used to file any press release generated. The press release is numbered and documented in the logbook. This has proved to be a valuable resource and tracking mechanism. “Media organizations contact departments on a regular basis for information regarding past events. These requests are often nonspecific and can leave the PIO guessing exactly what they are looking for” (Crawford, 26). This logbook has proved valuable in assisting with inquiries as well as providing a history of significant events in the department.

The PIOs conducted several in-house training meetings to discuss and practice how to handle media interaction. Topics of discussion included: what information to include in a press release, what information should or should not be released, and how to handle questions from the media.

*What qualifications and qualities should a PIO possess?*

Chief Zubia recognized and identified the importance of having the right personnel in this position. Szmanski says “choosing the right person to do the job is the key to a successful PIO program (54). He identifies several qualities a PIO should possess. These include:

- Be proud of the fire service and project a positive image
- Have an interest in the role of PIO
- Be accessible and return calls as soon as possible. Carrying a pager, phone, etc
- Be good-natured, not opinionated, and not afraid to work in front of cameras.
- Be a well-trained member of the department and is able to explain the procedures the department uses (54)

Thompson echoes some of these qualities and identifies several other key components a PIO should have:

They should be veteran firefighters who can translate what the incident commander says into a media sound bite or quote.

They should have writing and experience and be able to generate appropriate press releases.

They should balance sensitivity and confidence.

They should be polished, well versed in the fire service, present a good image and is a good representative of the department (50).

It is imperative that a PIO have an understanding of what information should and should not be distributed. Because of the demographics of our community, it was necessary to have bilingual Spanish speakers who could interact with our local Spanish television and radio stations. The Fire Chief did not want his Battalion Chiefs to be the primary PIO on a scene. He wanted an additional level on the chain of command that would allow the PIO to answer questions honestly when there was potential sensitive information. This would allow the PIO to release some specific details, but if asked a question that may hinder an investigation or may identify potential culpability, the PIO would have the ability to honestly say, "I do not know." The PIO would then confer with the Battalion Chief on the appropriate way to disseminate the sensitive information.

The PIO should possess: the ability to speak and think well on his feet, a nice appearance, one projecting an image of the quality and standards of the department, and a pleasant personality, good writing skills, the ability to gather information quickly and prepare for interviews while at an emergency scene (Schaper, 55).

The Fire Chief Zubia personally interviewed each PIO candidate and clarified his expectations and confirmed the loyalty to the department. He tried to avoid any conflict of interest or competing agendas from the collective bargaining unit members. Several of the PIO candidates held Union board positions, and the Chief wanted to make clear the priorities and expectations of the department and the position.

## DISCUSSION

Thompson claims that the most important thing about having a PIO is that the correct information gets out to the public you serve (50). The general consensus of the departments contacted that have PIO programs seem to agree that having a dedicated or at least designated PIO is an effective way to disseminate this information. Based on their experiences and recommendations, LCFD implemented a PIO policy and procedure. A primary focus was to build a relationship with the local media. This would help build a foundation during emergency events as well as help facilitate any public education messages as needed.

Defining the roles of the PIO was part of the initial process of writing the policy. The goal was to create general guidelines and identify specific events that would warrant a PIO being activated. The policy addressed emergency incidents only and not public education aspects. The policy attempts to introduce the PIO into the department and system on an as needed, voluntary basis. Once it has established credibility, the roles may be expanded and better defined. Most of the departments contacted as well as most of the literature reviewed gave examples of incidents where a PIO on scene would be beneficial.

Developing and designing the policy and procedures was a difficult task. The guidelines needed to be general enough to allow flexibility, but specific enough to stipulate the goals and priorities on a PIO. Several auxiliary forms needed to be developed in order to track and disseminate information quickly and accurately. The process included input from local media, which was both enlightening and challenging. The other departments contacted were extremely helpful supplying information and copies of their policies. While every department had their PIO report through a different chain of command, each recognized the need for unity of command.

Identifying qualities and characteristics of a PIO and then actually finding them in willing participants has become a challenge. It is easy to like desired traits, but being able to balance the needs of the media and the cooperative efforts of investigators and law enforcement agencies can be difficult. We have experienced some problems with releasing too much information or information that may divulge culpability of citizens. Trying to balance public information and public education opportunities with confidentiality and public respect issues has raised some questions. Fire Chief Zubia has the final decision of what is released and ultimately who will represent the department as a PIO.

Overall, the program has been very successful. We have developed excellent relationships with the local media personnel and have tried to create exposure opportunities for the department. “The media can be an invaluable friend or a very formidable foe. For the most part it is up to us to make this choice and shape the relationship into one that will help both the department and the community” (Hughes, 70). An example of how successful we have been with these relationships occurred at a residential structure fire a few months back. The house of a judge burned down. While the fire was going, the scene became politically charged: it was a magistrate judge’s house; a police officer lived across the street; and a city councilman lived in the area and was at the scene as well. During the fireground operations, the fire spread to the attic and was unable to be contained. The house was a complete loss. On scene, the citizens and politicians were questioning the fire department’s abilities and operational decisions. The media was contacted and the PIO was activated. The PIO was able to explain fireground tactics and strategies when the media questioned our operations. The next three mornings generated front-page stories about the fire and all were favorable towards the fire department. All negative publicity was avoided. Without the prior relationship and trust established, this might not have

occurred. The PIO initiated a town hall meeting in that councilman's district to discuss fire department responses and operation decisions. When presented this information in an open forum, most citizens gained a new appreciation and knowledge of fireground operations.

“It should be the goal of every fire department to make an attempt to get the department in the eye of the public everyday” (Szymanski, 53). Another means of measuring the effectiveness of our PIO program was conducted by researching the number of stories and amount of publicity the fire department has received since the program started compared to historical data from years past. With assistance from the Las Cruces City Clerk and the archives, the total number of newspaper stories, pictures, and other publicity was tallied. The PIO program was activated in 2003 and in less than one year, we generated 47 press releases, of which 44 yielded stories or publicity. Compare this to the previous 24 months in 2001 and 2002, where only 14 stories or articles were published. While we were not able to be in the public eye every single day, we did generate nearly a story a week about the fire department! “The bottom line is this: A PIO working with the media in a timely fashion can only serve to keep the fire department's good name at the forefront of the public's mind” (Henderson, 53).

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

“If you've already established an office of public information, you're one step ahead of the game” (Thompson, 50). The Las Cruces Fire Department has established a policy and procedure for the PIO position. There are still areas that need improvement, evaluation, and revision. Several recommendations can be identified. Progress towards establishing a full-time PIO and Public Education Officer needs to be documented. Budget requests must be submitted and justifications made. The program has been quite successful based on the number of stories and media coverage generated, but there is still more that can be accomplished. A full-time,

dedicated position would help achieve our goals and educate the public on the benefits of positive aspects of the fire service.

Some immediate needs and recommendations include purchasing a laptop computer and printer for the PIO to use on scene and in the station to facilitate generating press releases and other media information. The on-call PIO should be issued a radio so they can better communicate with the Incident Commander and receive more information sooner about critical incidents. Cowardin recommends that the PIO carry a camera and take pictures of the scene to be distributed with the press release (37). A digital camera would be beneficial to produce electronic pictures of incidents. These would not only be available to the media, but would be used for incident critiques and training opportunities. A vehicle for the PIO would also be beneficial and allow the PIO to carry necessary equipment to an incident and make response times quicker.

A glaring shortcoming of this policy and procedure is the emphasis on small-scale incidents only. “Every fire department, regardless of size, needs to develop a media crisis action plan ... and should consist of four phases: mitigation, preparedness, response, and recovery” (Szymanski, 54). Birr echoes this sentiment saying “it’s important that every department have a disaster plan and to make public information a part of that plan” (98). Currently, LCFD does have an action plan and access to an Emergency Operations Center (EOC), but has not made any preparations for PIO operations in a catastrophic event. It would benefit the community if a joint information center was established or at least discussed as part of the emergency preparedness plan. A policy, procedure, and a joint powers agreement should be developed for a multi-agency, multi-jurisdictional emergency event.

Finally, continued training and recruiting is necessary. It is imperative that new members are encouraged to participate in PIO activities. “Use small, straightforward incidents as ‘practice’ for those in your agency who might have to serve as PIO at larger incidents” (Jones, 10). Practice and training will better prepare the department and the media for larger incidents. There are several national training seminars available to attend and joining the National Information Officers Association would provide a network of experienced contacts to assist the position as it grows and changes (Thompson, 52).

The Las Cruces Fire Department has taken the first step in developing long-term relationships with the media. This was accomplished with the recognition that a PIO was needed and beneficial and then when a policy was adopted and implemented. As with any relationship, it takes effort to maintain a healthy, honest, and mutually beneficial relationship.

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## Appendix A

**LAS CRUCES FIRE DEPARTMENT  
ADMINISTRATIVE POLICY MANUAL**

Policy #216 – Public Information Officer

**PURPOSE**

The purpose of this policy is to facilitate the dissemination of accurate and timely information to the media and the public.

**POLICY**

It is the policy of this department to maintain a positive working relationship with the media. This policy applies to all members of the Las Cruces Fire Department.

**PROCEDURE****Command Structure**

During day to day operations, departmental public information officers (PIO) will fall under the supervision of the battalion chief as designated by the fire chief. During emergency incidents, the assigned PIO will report to the incident commander as part of the incident command staff.

**Responsibilities of the PIO**

The PIO is responsible for gathering and coordinating the release of information to the media including, but not limited to, press releases, press conferences, and interviews.

The PIO is responsible for providing media representatives with complete and accurate information within the City of Las Cruces' established city, departmental, legal, and investigative parameters.

The assigned PIO for a particular incident will remain the media's point of contact for any future inquiries for that particular incident.

The assigned PIO is responsible for keeping the city's PIO informed of all activities involving media contact and for maintaining a professional relationship with media representatives.

All written information (press releases, fact sheets, etc.) shall be composed on the official press release form, proof read by at least one other person and shall be grammatically correct prior to dissemination. All written released information will be logged in the press release log and filed for permanent record keeping. Articles that appear in any publications shall be collected by PIOs and filed with the press releases.

All press releases dealing with items other than typical emergency incidents shall be reviewed by the fire chief and/or the fire marshal or administrative chief, prior to release to the media.

The assigned PIO will be available to Central Dispatch via a home phone number, pager or cell phone number. A pager and a cell phone will be provided by the fire department to be used by the assigned PIO.

The PIO will be dressed appropriately for all contact with the media including TV interviews.

#### Responsibilities of the on-duty Battalion Chief or Incident Commander

It is the responsibility of the on-duty battalion chief/incident commander to determine whether a PIO is needed and to notify the assigned PIO via a request to Central Dispatch.

The on-duty battalion chief/incident commander may request the assigned off-duty PIO via Central Dispatch to cover an incident or to address incoming media inquiries. The on-duty battalion chief/incident commander is responsible for ensuring that a PIO is notified of newsworthy emergency incidents and media requests in a timely manner so that the PIO can comply with media deadlines and that any media coverage is well-timed. In the event that an off-duty PIO cannot be notified, an on-duty PIO may be used.

At the request of the on-duty battalion chief/incident commander, the assigned PIO will respond to any incident that the incident commander feels may be newsworthy or of interest to the public. Notification of a PIO may be considered when:

- An incident generates media or public attention;
- An incident may generate public interest or where public concerns may arise;
- The fire department seeks public assistance in solving a crime or further information regarding an incident;
- The fire department wants to publicize an upcoming department event or occurrence; and
- The fire department hosts a recognition or award ceremony for personnel, department programs, or receipt of grant awards.

Upon the assigned PIO reporting to the scene of an incident, the Incident Commander will confer with him or her regarding the location of the media sector, the information to be released, and if, when and how media will have access to the scene.

If media contact is requested or required after mitigation of an incident is complete, or for any other media inquiry, the battalion chief will fill out a "PIO Information Sheet" (Attachment A) to be given to the PIO upon reporting for duty.

Senior staff may contact any PIO to cover non-emergency matters.

#### Responsibilities of Fire Department Personnel

Fire department personnel will notify their battalion chief if they feel a newsworthy event has occurred. The battalion chief will then determine whether a PIO should be contacted.

Fire department personnel other than assigned PIOs and senior staff shall not engage in any interviews or other official conversations with any media representative regarding incidents or other newsworthy events.

All fire department personnel should be aware of open microphones and hot cameras when working near media personnel. There is no such thing as "off the record."

\_\_\_\_\_  
Adolf Zubia, Fire Chief

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

**Las Cruces Fire Department  
Battalion Chief PIO Form**

**Time:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Location:** \_\_\_\_\_

**BC:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Emergency Situation** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Day:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Time of Incident:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Condition on arrival:**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Bench Mark times:**

Primary Search \_\_\_\_\_

Fire under control \_\_\_\_\_

Secondary Search \_\_\_\_\_

**Current Situation:**

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Number of Confirmed Injured or Dead**

Dead \_\_\_\_\_

Injured \_\_\_\_\_

Transported by AMR \_\_\_\_\_

Transported by other \_\_\_\_\_

**Fire Department Response:**

Bat.1 \_\_\_\_\_ E-1 \_\_\_\_\_ E-2 \_\_\_\_\_ E-3 \_\_\_\_\_ E-4 \_\_\_\_\_

L-4 \_\_\_\_\_ E-5 \_\_\_\_\_ E-6 \_\_\_\_\_

HMRT \_\_\_\_\_ TRT \_\_\_\_\_ ARFF \_\_\_\_\_

Chief \_\_\_\_\_ Insp. \_\_\_\_\_ EMS Cord. \_\_\_\_\_ **Total**

\_\_\_\_\_

**Other Agencies:**

LCPD \_\_\_\_\_ DASO \_\_\_\_\_ Military \_\_\_\_\_ EMS \_\_\_\_\_ Other \_\_\_\_\_

**Estimated Loss:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Additional**

**Information:** \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

## PIO INFORMATION SHEET

TO BE FILLED OUT BY BATTALION CHIEFS/INCIDENT COMMANDERS FOR  
AFTER ACTION MEDIA REQUESTS

Please fill out all applicable information

**TODAY'S DATE:** \_\_\_\_\_ **CFS#** \_\_\_\_\_ **TIME OF INCIDENT:** \_\_\_\_\_

**INCIDENT LOCATION:** \_\_\_\_\_

**BATTALION CHIEF/INCIDENT COMMANDER:** \_\_\_\_\_ **SHIFT** \_\_\_\_\_

**INCIDENT:**

STRUCTURE FIRE

RESIDENTIAL

COMMERCIAL

OCCUPIED

VACANT

FIREFIGHTER INJURY

HAZMAT

TRT

ARFF  MEDICAL

MVA

OTHER: PLEASE DESCRIBE: \_\_\_\_\_

**DETAILS:** \_\_\_\_\_

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**FD PERSONNEL/APPARATUS THAT RESPONDED:**

BATTALION 1

LADDER 4

EMS/REHAB \_\_\_\_\_

ENGINE 1

ENGINE 5

SAFETY OFFICER \_\_\_\_\_

ENGINE 2

TANKER 5

INVESTIGATORS \_\_\_\_\_

ENGINE 3

ENGINE 6

ENGINE 4

RESCUE 6

**TOTAL LCFD PERSONNEL WHO RESPONDED:** \_\_\_\_\_

OTHER PERSONNEL \_\_\_\_\_

MUTUAL AID/OTHERS \_\_\_\_\_

**MEDIA THAT CONTACTED THE FD, IF APPLICABLE:**

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

NAME: \_\_\_\_\_

TIME CONTACTED: \_\_\_\_\_

TIME CONTACTED: \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

PHONE NUMBER: \_\_\_\_\_

SUN NEWS

SUN NEWS

TV STATION \_\_\_\_\_

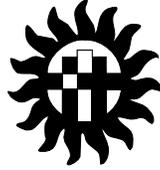
TV STATION \_\_\_\_\_

RADIO \_\_\_\_\_

RADIO \_\_\_\_\_

OTHER \_\_\_\_\_

OTHER \_\_\_\_\_



**City of Las Cruces**  
**LAS CRUCES FIRE DEPARTMENT**

**PRESS RELEASE**

***FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE***

(DATE)

FILE No. 03-0001

**CONTACT:**

**(NAME)**

**PIO, LAS CRUCES FIRE DEPARTMENT**

**(CELL NUMBER)**

**(PAGER NUMBER)**

**(HOME NUMBER?)**

**(SLUG)**

(TEXT)

FOR TWO PAGE RELEASES, TYPE "CONTINUED" AT THE BOTTOM OF PAGE ONE AND REPEAT THE SLUG, OR PART OF THE SLUG, AT THE TOP OF THE SECOND PAGE.

###

PIO PRESS RELEASE LOG

Appendix B

FILE #	DATE	GFS #	INCIDENT LOCATION or OCCASION	DESIGNATED PIO	PRESS RELEASE	OTHER NOTES
					yes no	
03-0001						
03-0002						
03-0003						
03-0004						
03-0005						
03-0006						
03-0007						
03-0008						
03-0009						
03-0010						
03-0011						
03-0012						
03-0013						
03-0014						
03-0015						
03-0016						
03-0017						
03-0018						
03-0019						
03-0020						
03-0021						
03-0022						
03-0023						

# PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER HANDBOOK

Checklist for Incident

Notification list

    Phone numbers, e-mail, fax numbers

Fax machine usage and numbers

Information Release

Fax Coversheet

Press Release Template

Tracking System

Media Contacts

Media Guide

## FAX NUMBERS

KRWG	646-2160
101 GOLD	527-1100
KSNM/KXDA	525-9419
SUN NEWS	541-5498
CLC PIO	541-2028

### INSTRUCTIONS FOR MULTIPLE FAXES

Place document face down on fax machine  
Dial "9" + Number  
Press the "Enter/Save" key  
Press "1" for Yes for next number  
Enter next number ( 9 + Number)  
Repeat steps 3,4,5 for multiple numbers  
Press Send key when completed

## CONTACT NUMBERS

Title	Phone	Cell	Pager	Fax
Jack Gardiner				
Kristen Blaschke				
Bruce Brinkerhoff				
Critt Coburn				
Eric Enriquez				
Wally Monsivaiz				

Adolf Zubia	Fire Chief
Bill Baker	Police Chief

County Fire Marshal  
State Police

### Media

TV

Radio

Print