

## **EMERGENCY SUPPORT FUNCTION 15**

### **EXTERNAL AFFAIRS**

#### **EMERGENCY PUBLIC INFORMATION OPERATIONS**

### **I. INTRODUCTION**

During a disaster or emergency, efficient clear communications will be critical to effectively help the county through the incident. Effective public information and communication can help ensure the public trust and credibility of the Island County Emergency Public Information (EPI) Plan. Education and communication can assist county response and recovery efforts by limiting the impact and effects of the disaster. Utilization of the EPI Plan involves all types of media (TV/radio), websites, info-lines, conference calls and phone trees, as well as local communication equipment for first responder and governmental agencies.

#### **A. Purpose**

The purpose of accurate public information during a disaster or emergency event is to provide a rapid and efficient means of communicating with the public. Emergency Public Information will enhance public confidence in local governmental officials. It will provide the public with information to make the best possible decisions for their families and communities. The first forty-eight hours of the event are most important in establishing public credibility for the remainder of the event. The Island County *Emergency Public Information Plan will:*

- Provide accurate, consistent, complete information.
- Provide the public with the facts of the emergency.
- Address rumors, inaccuracies and misperceptions.
- Serve as a resource for emergency responders.
- Through education, minimize hostility and public misconceptions.

#### **B. Scope**

This plan details suggested Emergency Public Information policies and procedures to be used by the Island County staff during an emergency or disaster.

### **II. POLICY**

#### **A. Island County will endeavor to release timely and accurate emergency information to the public concerning emergency preparedness, response and recovery. This will, when possible, be coordinated with the cities and towns and the U.S. Navy.**

- B.** Island County and its incorporated cities and towns are entitled to release information concerning their emergency actions. Any releases prepared by the County EOC, city, town, or the Naval Air Station Whidbey Island (NASWI) EOC which quote or mention another jurisdiction should be coordinated with the respective jurisdiction before being released.
- C.** This plan supports the Incident Command System (ICS) Public Information Officer function and the Joint Information System (JIS).

### **III. SITUATIONS AND ASSUMPTIONS**

- A.** Island County DEM and EOC will have access to media outlets.
- B.** A disaster or emergency may necessitate an Emergency Public Information (EPI) operation and possibly the need for a Joint Information Center (JIC).
- C.** Emergency Public Information will be effective in warning the public and mitigating the impact of a disaster or emergency.
- D.** The public has a right to know what the emergency is and to be provided this information quickly and accurately.
- E.** A local disaster or emergency will generate intense, immediate and sustained media attention.

### **IV. CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS**

#### **A. GENERAL**

- 1. Emergency Public Information (EPI) efforts will focus on specific event-related information. This information will generally be of an instructional nature focusing on such things as warning, evacuation, and shelter. It is also important to keep the public informed of the general progress of events. A special effort will be made to report positive information regarding emergency response to reassure the community that the situation is under control. Rumor control will be a major aspect of the informational program. Along with this will be the use of public feedback as a measure of the programs' effectiveness. Education efforts will be directed toward increasing public awareness about potential hazards and how people can deal with them. All information and education efforts will rely heavily on the cooperation of commercial media organizations.
- 2. The Director, Department of Emergency Management (DEM) is responsible for emergency management coordination for the

county. The county will appoint a Public Information Officer (PIO) to direct all emergency information activities and to be the official point of contact for the media during an emergency. Public Information Officers from other departments or jurisdictions may be called upon to assist.

## **B. PRE-INCIDENT PREPARATION**

During the pre-incident stage, public information and communications activities will include the following:

1. Emergency Public Information and Risk Communication Activities for the Public.

Prior to an incident, the Director, DEM and appropriate county department staffs will conduct regular activities to educate the public about local hazards, prevention and protection, family preparedness, and response-level activities. This will be accomplished through a number of channels, including large-scale education campaigns, press releases, flyers, workshops, task forces and health and safety fairs.

2. Designation and Training of Public Information Officers and Other Staff.

The Board of Island County Commissioners (BOICC) will appoint or designate a county public information officer (PIO). Additional spokespersons and other PIO staff will be designated prior to an incident. The PIO and staff will participate in ongoing training related to emergency public information and risk communication (verbal and written), knowledge of local hazards, prevention and protection, family preparedness, public assistance and response-level activities.

3. Plans for Evaluating, Testing and Updating the EPI Plan.

The EPI plan will be reviewed and evaluated by subject matter experts as well as by county department directors and staff. The plan will be updated each year in preparation for winter response activities and the Emergency Operations Plan review. Updates should be based on the after-action exercise/activation reports (AAR) from the previous year. The Standard Operating Guidelines (e.g. templates, fact sheets, educational brochures, website, contact information and forms) will be updated as new technical information becomes available from other agencies and information sources.

#### 4. Review and Updating of Community Contact Lists.

Community contact lists will be reviewed and updated annually or as required. Basic information that will be kept with contact lists includes phone numbers (office, home, cell and pager), email addresses, fax numbers, physical addresses, and web sites. Contact lists should include both names of organizations and names of important persons within the organization (e.g. executive director, public relations staff). Suggested agencies and groups for maintaining contact with are:

- County staff
- Surrounding First Responders (e.g. Police, Fire and Rescue, Emergency Management).
- Naval Air Station Whidbey Island leadership and staff contacts.
- Media (e.g. newspapers, radio, TV).
- American Red Cross Chapters
- City and town elected and appointed leadership and staffs
- Island County School Districts (District Offices, Principals, district staff).
- Nursing Homes and Assisted Living Facilities.
- Senior Centers
- Food Banks.
- Community Health Centers.
- Major businesses and employers.
- Island Transit
- Federal agencies/organizations.
- Church organizations.
- Civic organizations (Kiwanis, Rotary, United Way).
- Senior service organizations.
- Volunteers of America
- Mental health resources.
- United States Postal Service.
- Social Service organizations.
- Libraries.
- Utilities.

### C. ACTIVATION OF EPI PLAN

1. If it is determined that an incident has or is going to occur and the Island County Emergency Operations Center Emergency (EOC) will be activated, the EPI operation during activation will have three functional levels:

a. Level 1: Incident level operation that quickly informs the public using existing on-scene information and immediate

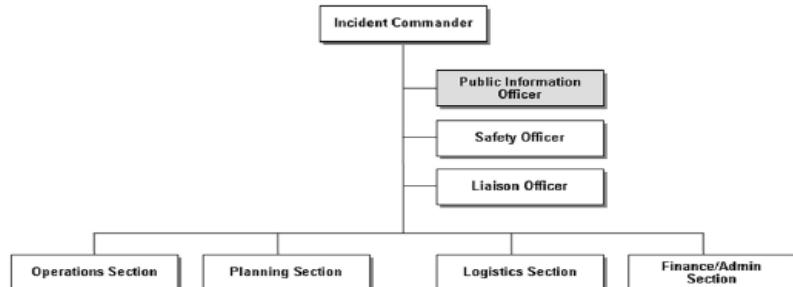
access to media.

- b. Level 2: EOC level (EOC staff including the county PIO) that conveys and coordinates public information issues with the EOCs or other jurisdictions.
- c. Level 3: Joint Information Center (JIC) an expanded or expanding incident that requires a more formal PIO structure and capability. The JIC will serve as the central point for the coordination and dissemination of public information to the media with multiple agencies participating (Joint Information System – JIS) when activated. The Island County EOC and PIO will require external resources and support to establish and sustain a full JIC operation.

2. Many actions that take place at the JIC level interrelate and overlap with actions at the EOC level, therefore if activated the EOC EPI staff if maintained will need to coordinate their efforts and resources effectively with the JIC.

## D. EPI STAFF DEFINED

Figure 1: ICS Organizational Chart



### 1. Incident Level PIO Staff

At the Incident Level either the Incident or Unified Commander or his/her designated PIO will coordinate all public information activities. Some of the activities for Incident Level include:

- Relaying communication problems or concerns at the incident level to the EOC EPI staff.
- Ensuring that public information tools and messages are appropriately given to the public.

### 2. EOC Level PIO Staff

EPI staff at the EOC will include the County PIO and assigned

support staff or volunteers.

3. JIC Level PIO Staff

The staffing structure for the JIC is outlined in the JIC Standard Operating Guidelines (Federal Plan) and will include (at minimum) the County PIO, who will act as lead PIO during local JIC activation. A description of the lead PIO's responsibilities is found in the JIC Guidelines – Annex A.

4. Personnel Shortages/Unavailability

At Incident Level, the Incident/Unified Commander will be responsible for designating the PIO. If the County PIO is unable to act as EOC PIO during the incident, the EOC Manager will designate a suitable PIO.

**E. EOC EPI OPERATIONS**

1. Initial Operations

The EOC EPI section may be declared operational when:

- a. The Incident Commander (IC) has asked for the EOC to become operational.
- b. The EOC has been activated by the County Leadership or the Director, DEM.
- c. The public information line becomes operational and the EOC call center with 2 or more phone lines is open and staffed and the EOC PIO is present.

2. Initial Internal Briefing

A situation briefing should take place as soon as possible. It should, at a minimum, include the following:

- Review of incident and current status.
- Report on any media notification.
- Report on EOC EPI staff that has been notified and current status of EOC participants.
- A list of organizations or persons to whom information has been promised but calls have not been returned.
- Up-date on any reported rumors or misinformation.

3. EOC EPI Facility and Equipment

Adequate phone lines will be necessary to conduct EOC operations and support community inquiries, and a fax machine. Several phone lines should also be reserved for outgoing calls. Space at the EOC facility should be reserved for:

- EPI staff, including the call center team.
- Workspace to collate news releases, fact sheets, etc.
- Status boards/maps.
- Copy and fax machines.

4. The first person to arrive at the EOC facility to do the EPI function will, after sign-in, begin preparing the EPI work and call center area of the room for use by EOC EPI staff. Equipment/materials stored in labeled movable containers will be transferred from the storage room to assigned areas of the building. Staff members arriving before equipment/materials are moved into their respective areas should retrieve materials for their own areas from the storage room and begin to set up their areas.

5. EPI SOP Toolkit Description and Storage Locations

- a. An Emergency Public Information Plan toolkit (Annex A) will be available for use during activation. This toolkit will include sample press releases, media advisories, fact sheets, checklists for spokespersons, scripts for public service announcements, contact lists, and other documents necessary for an effective public information campaign. Electronic copies of the toolkit will be maintained on the Island County network as well as on a USB Mass Storage Unit kept in the DEM office EOC.
- b. Hard copies of the EPI toolkit will be maintained in the DEM office.

6. Mass Reproduction of Printed Materials

- a. The Director, DEM will maintain a small stock of hazard specific fact sheets and information sheets ready for reproduction and distribution.
- b. The county EOC or EPI staff will coordinate for reproduction of fact sheets and information sheets for the public in the event of Level II or III EOC activation. The EOC PIO will review and approve all “canned” public information tools and communicate approval to the Logistics Section Chief, who will coordinate the mass reproduction of printed materials. .

7. Plans for Communicating with Specific Audiences

- a. First Responders: During activation, first responders will require information on the nature of the event and the hazards associated to it, specific activities that are underway, what sources and channels of information will be used, who is in command, which agencies/organizations are responding.
- b. Children: A public information handout for parents will be distributed to facilitate concerns that children may have about the current incident or event. There are additional web based tools specifically targeted to children through FEMA kid's web site.
- c. Hearing Impaired, Blind and Other Special Needs Individuals: It is important to consider the needs of hearing impaired, blind and other special needs individuals. During activation, hearing impaired individuals will be able to access the public information hotline with TTY/TDD capabilities. The county website, newspapers and television captions will also be useful in disseminating information to the deaf. For the blind, radio and television will be used to disseminate information.
- d. Minority Groups: Translation of public information fact sheets in a timely manner will be coordinated with the local Churches, the Department of Social Services and all other means available. Non-English speaking media outlets (e.g. radio stations or newspapers that broadcast or print in specific languages) may also be used to disseminate public information.
- e. Elderly: During activation, the elderly may experience a heightened level of threat due to existing health problems and reduced ability to respond. To counteract this, public information tools will be disseminated to elder service organizations such as Senior Services, elder care facilities and Meals on Wheels that can assist with delivering emergency-related information and also provide reassurance about the response efforts and actions being taken to protect the population.
- f. Animal Owners: Communication tools will include information about potential effects of hazard exposure to animals, as well as the type of care that should be taken to protect them from being harmed.

8. Media Notification before JIC Activation

If a JIC becomes necessary and because it may take a significant

length of time to activate staff and equip a JIC, the EOC PIO should provide information about the emergency to the local and regional news media through an initial pre-approved advisory sent via fax and email.

9. Message Development

The EPI toolkit (Annex A) contains documents to be used to assist in message development for emergency communication. Subject matter experts may be called upon as needed to assist in message development.

10. Procedures for Verification, Clearance, and Release of Information from the EOC.

a. The development and approval process for media releases is detailed below:

- 1) The EOC PIO decides that an incident-related news release should be issued.
- 2) The EOC PIO drafts the news release in the approved format (on letterhead) and reviews with the following for approval:

- Senior County Official or Director, DEM
- EOC Manager
- EOC PIO

3) The EOC PIO will send the news release to the local media.

b. Designated Spokesperson

1) In a crisis, the county spokesperson will be the designated EOC PIO. A spokesperson should meet the following criteria:

- a) Person who can speak with knowledge, authority, credibility and empathy on the topic;
- b) Person with a clear understanding of the principles of risk communication in a crisis;
- c) Person who can stick to key messages who will not easily be angered flustered or steered off-message.

2) If the designated county PIO is not available, then

as soon as possible, a spokesperson will be designated based upon the criteria stated above.

3) All spokespersons will be provided with the following helpful documents located in the toolkit:

- a) "Key to issuing timely and consistent advisories and instructions for life safety, health and disaster assistance"
- b) "Techniques for Dealing with the Media During a Crisis"
- c) "Emergency Public Information Spokesperson Preparation Worksheet"

#### 11. Specified Communication Channels and Procedures

The Director, DEM has identified the following communication channels to be used at the EOC level during activation:

- a. A fax and email system that can be used when information needs to reach the media, businesses, medical providers, and other entities listed in the county resource and contact lists.
- b. Website: Emergency information and educational materials for the public are currently published on the DEM pages of the Island County web site. During EOC activation, the web site will be updated at least three times a day (morning, afternoon, evening) as media advisories are issued. Web site links are listed in Tab 27.
- c. Info-Line: The DEM has established a prerecorded information line available at the following numbers

North Whidbey: (360) 678-5111 extension 6000

South Whidbey: (360) 321-5111 extension 6000

Camano Island: (360) 629-4523 extension 6000

- d. The EOC staff will respond to questions about the emergency through the use of fact sheets, prepared statements and media advisories. EOC PIO will maintain a log of queries. The EOC PIO staff will provide (at least daily) feedback to the EOC PIO on the flow of emergency public information.
  - A member of the EOC PIO staff should attend all meetings and media communications to gather information on the emergency. Information

- provided through the EOC call line will be consistent with information provided to the media.
- When an EOC call-taker cannot respond to a citizen question, they should obtain the caller's name and telephone number and refer the call to the EOC PIO or appropriate member of the PIO staff for follow-up and a reply.
- e. Media Interviews: Prior to JIC activation, the county PIO or the Director DEM will coordinate this activity. After JIC activation, all interviews will be coordinated through the JIC.
- f. News Conferences: After JIC activation, news conferences will be held at or near the JIC or other appropriate location and will be coordinated by the lead PIO.
- g. Emergency Alert System: In the event of imminent life safety emergencies, activation of the Emergency Alert System by the Director, DEM or ICOM Supervisor will be used to broadcast emergency messages to the public via radio and television.

12. Communications Feedback and Rumor Control

During any emergency, there is always the possibility for rumors or incorrect information to be generated.

- Media monitoring will be performed, as time allows, detecting the broadcast of incorrect emergency information. This can involve monitoring and/or taping local television and radio news programs and viewing media web sites. Media monitoring will be conducted both at the JIC if activated and as a part of the EOC PIO operation as a rumor control function.
- When incorrect information is detected through media monitoring or other means, this information should be passed to the EOC PIO (if at the EOC level) or lead PIO (if at the JIC level), who notifies the appropriate JIC staff member to prepare a response. To manage rumors, all EOC PIO staff members are responsible for reporting rumors to the EOC PIO.

13. Backup Communication Systems

The EOC PIO operation will be housed in the EOC, which is equipped with a backup generator that can function in the event of a power failure. For failures that affect cell phones, ground lines and computerized systems, EOC PIO staff will communicate via

two-way radio. Additionally, EOC PIO staff should maintain printed copies of all necessary documentation in the EPI toolbox.

14. Full Scale versus Reduced Operation

When a change in the scale of the current incident/operation operation is made, it will be reported to the media and then to the public. Issues that should be addressed at this point include:

- The type of change and significance of this change.
- Impact on facility locations and hours of operations.
- Information on specific public actions to be taken, if any.

**F. EPI DEACTIVIATION**

1. JIC Closure

As the incident or emergency is being closed out or the level of effort reduced, the JIC if established will begin to enter a deactivation phase. The decision to close the JIC will be a joint decision between the EOC Manager, the Operations Section Chief, and the lead PIO. The media will be notified the JIC is being closed and the media will be referred to the appropriate public affairs representatives for follow-up queries. The county EOC PIO will handle all specific inquiries.

2. EOC EPI Deactivation

The EOC EPI operation will also begin to reduce in size and activity level as the EOC operations wind down. The decision to close out the PIO section coordinated decision between the EOC Manager, The Operations Section Chief, and the EOC PIO.

3. Disassembly and Storage of Equipment

All EOC EPI staff members are responsible for assisting the disassembly and storage of EOC EPI equipment and toolkits. EOC EPI staff will retrieve all equipment/materials containers and re-shelf them in the storage room. Missing materials or equipment requiring replacement or repair will be noted and reported to the PIO or the EOC Manager.

4. EOC EPI Staff Debriefing Meeting

Once operations have ceased and all equipment has been disassembled and stored, each EOC EPI staff member will provide a report stating his/her individual perspective of the operation to

the EOC PIO. The EOC PIO will then chair a debriefing meeting for the purpose of discussing problems or concerns that occurred during EOC EPI operation. The EOC PIO will submit a final report to the EOC Manager.

## **V. RESPONSIBILITIES**

### **A. Primary Agency:**

1. The DEM is the lead agency responsible for organization and mobilization of the county EOC during threats or actual emergencies.
2. The DEM responsibilities include:
  - Develop and maintain a public information plan and education program for the county staff and EOC.
  - Coordinate and maintain a working relationship with the media; particularly those who will disseminate emergency information to the public.
  - Support the appointed County Public Information Officer (PIO).
  - Assist with designation of a Joint Information Center that will be the single, official point of contact for the media during an emergency within Island County.
  - As part of the CEMP, list and maintain available media resources (call letters, names, addresses, and telephone numbers) that will disseminate emergency information to the public.

### **B. Support Agencies:**

1. All other agencies and organizations with Public Information Officer functions shall:
  - Ensure all information regarding the county and its departments is cleared with the county PIO, EOC Manager, or any Incident Commander before it is released to the media.
  - Provide additional public information staff as requested by the EOC.
2. Local law enforcement agencies to include Island County Sheriffs Office.
3. Local fire service agencies to include the surrounding fire districts may provide additional staffing for the Public Information section

of EOC.

4. Commercial media may assist with emergency information dissemination.
5. Island County Chapter of the American Red Cross may assist with coordinated emergency information dissemination.
6. The various Island County Chambers of Commerce may assist with county-wide emergency information dissemination to businesses.

## **VI. RESOURCE REQUIREMENTS**

EPI resource requirements are identified in Annex A, PIO Tool Kit.

## **VII. References**

### **ANNEXES**

#### **Annex A PIO Toolkit [to be published]**

The following annexes are part of the complete Island County Emergency Public Information (EPI) Plan to be published separately:

Annex B      Joint Information Center and Joint Information System

Annex C      Post Disaster Evaluation