

Joint Information Systems

What do hurricanes, sniper shootings, and SARS have in common? It's the fact that they're all events that require multi-agency response to the public. In this day of instantaneous media coverage, coordination of communication at local, regional, provincial and national levels has never been more important. It's all about getting the right information, to the right people, at the right time; so the public can make the right decision. And that requires a coordinated single voice.

Joint forces operations (JFOs) are not new to police. Municipal departments have worked hand-in-hand with provincial and federal counterparts for years. At the local level, at a crime scene where there's a fire, police and fire personnel automatically share information. Emergency officials compare notes and decide which department will say what.

Today, joint information systems are crucial to ensure your agency maintains and builds public confidence and trust. The system can be loosely structured, like at the fire scenario mentioned above, or it can be formally organized during large-scale events as with the G-7 meetings in Kananaskis. The key is in presenting a harmonized, united voice to the public. Without it, they will lose confidence in your organization and the media will go to others to "fill in the blanks".

During the Columbine crisis, the public got much of its information from the media, not law enforcement. It wasn't uncommon to see reporters interviewing other reporters to fill airtime! This led to confusion, frustration, and in the end ... lawsuits.

On the other hand, during the sniper crisis in Washington, DC last year, Chief Moose acted as the media and public's single source for information. While he certainly wasn't directly involved in every aspect of the investigation -- which included officials from the FBI, ATF, local and state police, and a host of other agencies -- it was decided he would be the lone spokesperson for information dissemination on the shootings. PIOs from all agencies involved worked to develop the messages, determine what would be said and when. Behind the scenes, chaos often reigned with disagreements and debates about releases of information and news conference messaging, but to the media and public, that single, united voice gave people confidence in what law enforcement was doing to apprehend the suspects.

Natural disasters could well be the most frustrating event police may face communications-wise. You will find yourself working with agencies that may not deal with crises and high-profile media coverage. In addition, not many of these organizations are used to the paramilitary structure that pervades emergency services agencies. It's important to bring these groups into the joint information system to ensure they are not out there on their own providing contradictory or damaging information.

For example, after a severe storm in North Carolina last year, all responding agencies were part of the state Joint Information Center (JIC), except the Red Cross. A large portion of a downtown area was cordoned off because of looting and police were urging people to stay away from the area. However, because the Red Cross was not part of the communications loop, a spokesperson went to the media and encouraged people to donate blood. Problem was, the blood donor clinic was smack-dab in the middle of downtown - exactly where police did not want people to be. This well intentioned 'rogue communicator' precipitated great frustration among citizens who wanted to help, and prompted many to think, "the right hand doesn't know what the left hand is doing". That kind of perception results in a loss of confidence in 'the powers that be' in the eyes of the media and public.

In most cases, inter-agency information sharing is advantageous. In circumstances that require response in crisis, it's critical. Key communicators should be at the same table as your Emergency Operations Center (EOC) to help advise commanders on what the media will want and what information the public needs to

hear.

Things to keep in mind when setting up a Joint Information Center include:

- Developing a media staging area, complete with a contingency plan for the myriad of satellite trucks that may appear out of nowhere
- Managing the logistics of having a lot of media people at a scene, i.e. parking, power, toilets, a working area
- Creating a relationship with PIOs in your area before a large-scale event occurs, so a pool of knowledgeable PIOs is available in the event of a crisis; better to meet and learn how these people work prior to an emergency
- Recruiting people who are media-friendly and speak other languages if the local public is multi-national.

The advantages of joint information systems and JICs are obvious. You will speak with a united voice to disseminate information that is accurate, timely, understandable and most important, consistent. It links all PIOs involved in the incident and provides one point of contact for the media. This unified method of communication goes a long way to ensure the public heeds your messages, and feels confident and comfortable that their police are doing the 'right thing' during extraordinary circumstances.

In the end, you **can't** control the media, but you **can** control your message. A joint information system will help you do just that.

About the Author

Judy Pal has more than 25 years experience in the field of communications and broadcast journalism. She has taught public relations at the university level and has worked as a reporter, producer and news anchor, as well as a PIO for a large law enforcement agency and municipal government. For more information on media relations and media training, please contact the writer at info@prforpolice.com.