

PIOs on Fatality Incidents:

Some pointers for working a tough assignment

Having worked on Thirty-Mile, Engine 57, Iron 44, and the funerals for LEOs Shane Wyrsh and Kristine Fairbanks, I have seen some commonalities and “watchouts” for PIOs. The Engine 57 and Iron 44 teams have compiled excellent written resources. What follows are personal observations from the PIO hootch – Tom Knappenberger

In General – *thoughts from experience*

- The incident PIO should not be the unit PAO. The unit will need a full-time PAO for support as it grieves. Just as with a fire, an independent team with an outside PIO needs to be brought in to manage a fatality incident.
- You can't give too much attention to the local employees. They will be emotional and complain that they are not getting enough information. The larger agency, fire community and retirees also won't think they're being kept abreast. Staff internal communications and outreach for this certainty. Be sensitive to collaborating agencies, contractors etc. as well.
- Assigning a mini-team to the family(ies) works well. One person serves as liaison – all contact with the family goes through him or her. Liaisons should be chosen for their people skills without regard to their ICS rating. They should be assigned as soon as possible and continue in that role through any public services.
- Additionally, a PIO is assigned to each mini-team to manage media but often take on other tasks, such as writing obituaries, helping with paperwork, organizing travel etc.
- These family PIOs must be carefully chosen for their people skills. This is a difficult, often emotional assignment that can result in a close bond. It's not for everyone – even though many will volunteer for this unique experience.
- Should an incident involve multiple agencies and/or locations, identify agency concerns and recognize that additional coordination among diverse PIOs will be necessary.
- ICS team members (and the host agency) likely will view the PIO function as semi-law enforcement – keeping the “evil media” away from grieving families and friends. That is only a small part of our function. We are there to help the media with their jobs while ensuring a respectful and appropriate service.
- Learning the families' wishes about media coverage is key. In turn, learning the media's desires and helping them meet those desires within the parameters of the families' wishes is our mission.
- Staffing – Basically, you can't have enough staff. I had about 30 PIOs for the Iron 44 Tribute in August, 2008. There were 75 for Engine 57 in 2006.

- Name-suggest as much as possible. Planning a memorial in a few days is intense work. You need dependable, productive help. Also identify any cultural or language needs and staff accordingly. Plan on graphics help.
- Most likely your efforts will revolve around planning a memorial service and/or funerals. Be sure to have PIO(s) imbedded with the planning team. Do NOT allow the planning team to plan for media without your input. (See first item under media management).
- Be assertive in defining the PIO role, especially in planning a large memorial. Otherwise PIO will be marginalized and left enforcing media rules we don't agree with.

Media Management – *points to consider*

- Media will compete intensely for interviews with survivors; staff for it. They will be relatively tame, however, at the service since there are no “scoops.”
- Media wanting to know the “whys” and “hows” of the incident should be directed to a PIO representing the separate investigation team.
- If possible, bring local media, especially TV, to the venue a few days ahead to show them your plans for them and get their feedback – will help eliminate conflicts and unknowns on the day of the service.
- Cabling needs by TV will involve logistics people – streaming video is on the rise and requires cabling. Think about it early.
- Draft and issue Media Protocols as a media advisory: Where to park, where to enter; where to view; who will be interview subjects (identifying a relative who can speak to the media is helpful along with an agency spokesperson).
- While TV draws the most attention from ICS planners, they are usually well-behaved in my experience. Still photographers cause the most problems. They all want that emotional, personal shot and will sneak around for good angles.
- Make sure you and your staff know about the program: The names and relations of all those speaking; where the honor guard is from; immediate family members' names; what type of planes are flying overhead in tribute etc. Another reason to have PIOs imbedded in the planning effort.
- Consider holding a daily news conference featuring the IC to reduce media demand. Will take an accommodating IC and coordination with the host unit.

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