



MNICS Type 3 IMT – Public Information Section After Action Review

The MNICS Type 3 Incident Management Team Public Information Officer (PIO) section was a growing group this year, who ultimately joined together mid-season in a united effort that made the season a success. Initially, the three teams were comprised of two qualified PIOFs and three PIOF-t trainees. The arrangement left the initial group with a challenge of how best to cover the needs of all three teams while assuring the PIOF-t on Team C would be given a fair opportunity for a quality training experience.

Collectively, we recognized each fire was unique, as were the public information needs. What resulted was a group of five that stepped up to fill voids, face our vulnerabilities, and develop into PIOFs that better understand the range of dynamic information needs that can result during a Type 3 incident in Minnesota.

We sincerely appreciate Sarah Shapiro, U.S. Forest Service, for stepping up and filling the qualified PIO void after earning her qualifications toward the latter half of the spring wildfire season. Her support became an invaluable resource for the remainder of the relentless season. In addition, the three qualified PIOFs made it work to assure coverage for all rotations, even if it meant picking up multiple “on-call” weeks.

The assigned trainees that were able to fulfill the season were always willing and eager to step up, try it out, and share suggestions and feedback that helped the section grow. Many thanks go out to all in the public information section this year.

After Action Review Topics

As we reflect on the season, four common themes stood out:

- Training
- Consistent platforms for public access to information
- Lack of standard process for all MNICS teams to follow
- FireNet and virtual support

Training

We all recognize the benefits of supporting trainees on team assignments and the potential to ultimately lead to a larger pool of qualified MNICS PIOFs. The current design of establishing a committed trainee to a specific team resulted in pros and cons. A pro was that those who could commit to the team schedules had the best opportunity to participate in multiple assignments this season. They were included in team communications from the moment the team began its rotation through a team’s

mobilization. A noticeable con was that identifying specific lead and alternate trainees didn't leave much room to provide experiences for the alternate trainees. We all recognize this is a new system, and the traditional ways of doing business may not be the ideal path until we have a stronger qualified alternate list in place.

Recommendation: Instead of assigning a committed trainee to a specific team and having a separate alternate list, we feel it would benefit all trainees to be assigned to a weekly rotation (not to a specific team).

DISCUSSION: We found alternates who were not available on short notice or had not completed the annual requirements to maintain their red card status. Establishing a weekly rotation among all alternates provides greater chances to roll with a team, the ability to plan ahead for the next season (known dates to be available), a chance to experience different styles to complete information efforts and reiterates the need to follow through on required annual training before the start of the season.

Recommendation: Eliminate the idea that all task book components can be signed off during any Type 3 assignment in Minnesota.

DISCUSSION: Recognizing this was a rare season for Minnesota, our section felt there was a lot of pressure to sign trainees off as quickly as possible. The assignments we participated in this year rarely produced the level of need or variety for a quality training experience. We all agree that observation and practice are critical to building the desirable knowledge, skill, and ability toward becoming a qualified PIOF. We also agree that trainees should be encouraged to pursue larger-scale assignments (Type 1 and Type 2) where they are more likely to experience incidents that involve complex public information needs. While these types of assignments can happen in Minnesota, it is rare. The public information section wants PIOF-ts to feel supported in pursuing opportunities out west. We want to encourage participating in higher-level incidents to gain dynamic experience that will help prepare them to meet the needs of a rising public information event in the future. We don't want any PIOF-t to feel pressured to simply get signatures in a task book and then feel they must take on a leadership role because their task book is signed off.

Consistent platforms for public access to information

The interagency approach doesn't necessarily mean an instant understanding of agency administrator expectations on how best to get the message out. We feel agency administrators rely heavily on PIOs to just know what they need to do or that MNICS will sweep in and cover it all. Establishing a consistent method of distributing information will ultimately help the public information section.

Recommendation: Establish a consistent use of InciWeb for all Type 3 and higher wildfire incident assignments in Minnesota.

DISCUSSION: InciWeb has become synonymous with public information efforts on a national scale. The public information section will request the MNICS Information Working Team to look at what options exist to set up InciWeb for the State managed wildfires and identifying the superusers from BIA, FWS, and NPS who can grant access for any Type 3 or greater wildfire events in Minnesota.

Lack of a standard public information process for all MNICS teams to follow

Having only one of the MNICS teams mobilize to a non-wildfire incident before this season, the PIO section did not have an opportunity to fully identify consistent processes that all the teams could follow during an assignment. While the season was successful, we all agree that moving forward it will be beneficial to have a standard operating procedure to reference for:

- setting up a newly developing incident in Minnesota (including the role of FireNet)
- consistent guidelines for update/fire fact sheet design and use
- consistent processes for releasing information
- critical PIO kit needs to have at every assignment

Recommendation: The Public Information section will work with the Information Management Team to develop a standard operation guide and an infographic on “what to expect” for developing PIOF-ts. The section will also work to establish off-season events to train each other on tools and technology that will improve our information efforts. The section will develop a basic PIO kit list for the team trailer that should arrive at every team assignment.

FireNet and virtual support

FireNet became a valuable tool throughout the season; however, there continues to be inconsistent direction on whether teams want to have a FireNet Teams account set up for the incident they are managing. As COVID mitigation continues to rise and fall, we’ve come to recognize the valuable role of virtual support, but also realize that it may not work well for every assignment.

Recommendation: All MNICS Type 3 teams should establish a FireNet Teams account and email for each assignment and define who is responsible for requesting the FireNet Teams account.

Discussion: The Public Information Section found FireNet to be a valuable tool. We also recognize there is a lot of room to learn about and grow with the capabilities of the tool. We all agree that having an email established for the incident through FireNet brought the recognition that this was a greater event and made it easier to establish consistent email distribution lists. It does require establishing a FireNet account, so all team members should consider establishing a FireNet account prior to the start of the season. It also provides an accessible location to store sharable resources through Teams and Public information channels.

Recommendation: Continue to work with the Plans and ITSS sections to develop tools and strategies to incorporate more virtual components to team and community meetings.

Conclusion:

The MNICS Teams PIOFs feel proud of the work we accomplished this season and recognize the value in multiple team assignments to identify areas of improvement. As we strive to achieve more consistency in our style and efforts, we will work with the MNICS Information Working Team to develop the tools and identify paths that can lead us to using industry standards in technology like InciWeb.