

THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER

Michael S. Williams

A recent incident command class for current and future fire department chief officers included an operational exercise involving a derailed train with a fire and hazardous materials spill that was emitting a toxic cloud towards a hospital, school and businesses district.

Just the rescue of the railroad crew, fire suppression and the hazardous materials spill required over 120 firefighters, more than is on duty at any one time in the entire county. Added to the complexity of the exercise was traffic control, evacuations, sheltering, special needs evacuees, emergency rescue needs, safety, fire suppression support, command and control, backfilling of stations to handle other calls for service, mutual aid coordination and the need for public information, to name a few.

Some may think this cannot happen here in Santa Barbara, but think again. A freight train derailment in August of 1991 at the Seacliff overpass near the Santa Barbara – Ventura County line impacted Santa Barbara by closing the freeway for almost a week, forcing people to drive in and out of Santa Barbara via 166 to Interstate 5, a good four hour drive to get back into Ventura. The Metrolink head-on collision in September of 2008, in Chatsworth, involved a passenger and heavy freight train.

The wreck resulted in hundreds of deaths and injuries. The freight train had passed through Santa Barbara just a couple hours prior to the collision. Another Metrolink head-on collision in January of 2005, in Glendale, involved three trains with hundreds of deaths and injuries, impacting the entire San Fernando Valley and commuters to and from Santa Barbara.

These railroad incidents impacted thousands of people, business and the families of the victims. Firefighters, EMT's, paramedics, law enforcement officers, NTSB investigators, FBI agents, railroad officials, public health officials, coroners, hospitals, private ambulance companies, bus companies, among many others were required to handle these incidents. These are the people that must be on the job and at the ready on a moment's notice to respond.

Fires, earthquakes, plane crashes, train derailments, flooding and hazardous materials spills are all labor intensive. There is no way around it. Trained and skilled personnel in many fields are required to safely address these incidents.

One of the most critical members of the incident command team is the public information officer (PIO). While the incident commander is responsible for the entire incident, it is the PIO who is tasked with collecting the information and disseminating it to the public through the media. Television, radio and the print media are the primary sources of outreach.

Evacuation information is time sensitive. Reverse 9-1-1 systems have become a popular method of getting emergency information out to the public. Secondary methods include Facebook, Twitter, blogs, websites, cell phone messaging. These “social media” technologies are some of the many methods in use today by PIO’s.

These emergency events are extraordinary dynamic and require information from various sources. Traffic and evacuation information comes from local law enforcement based on input from the fire department. Fire suppression and rescue information comes from the fire service. Public health and air quality organizations are frequently involved in hazardous materials incidents. Local, county, state and federal agencies all have their own PIO’s and needs to get information to the public.

To coordinate this flow of information, a Joint Information Center (JIC) is frequently established. It is here that all information is collected, validated and coordinated into a uniformed and consistent message. Rumor control is also a priority for the PIO’s within a JIC. Rumors can cause panic, distrust, and confusion. In an already hectic situation, rumors can become particularly problematic.

The JIC is a separate operation and frequently located within the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) facility. A private area for the media is established away from the main operations area to facilitate their needs while remaining close by to the hub of the operation. It is within the EOC that all of the involved disciplines involved work together to coordinate a uniformed effort to safely resolve emergencies.

The coordination of traffic, evacuations and public health are frequently involved in many emergencies. Larger incidents will include public works, flood control, the finance department, legal counsel, public transportation, communications, IT, risk management, to name a few. Adding to the mix are non-governmental organizations such as the Red Cross, search and rescue and animal rescue groups. A central place of operation is essential for all of these groups to come together.

Recently, Santa Barbara County broke ground on a new modern EOC that will include a JIC and media accommodations under one roof. This new state of the art facility will replace the current temporary facility within the Employee University. The new EOC will include communications facilities to support any incident. Coordination with other agencies will be streamlined all under one roof. The media will now have a centralized location to establish their operations.

For the PIO, this new facility will significantly streamline the public information function. Information will flow faster from the field and be processed quicker. The media will be able to receive relevant updates through a coordinated system of information exchange. Mapping will also be streamlined, providing quicker documentation of incidents. Administrative oversight will be improved to provide better communication between department heads, elected officials, agency staff and partner agencies.

The PIO is one of the most important positions within government. They are the face of an organization. The reliability of information is essential. A total command structure is the only way to address the needs of the public. The new EOC is a step in that direction.

Today's chief officers have a tremendous responsibility towards the victims, the people under their charge, their agencies and the public. Training and experience is essential. Exercises such as train derailments, based on past events, help developed today's chief officers. Administrative support and facilities are important components to enabling these individuals to perform effectively and efficiently.