

COLUMBIA FIRE DEPARTMENT

Public Information OPS-023

Standard Operating Guidelines Manual

EFFECTIVE DATE: 06/21/99 **ISSUED BY:** J. D. Jansen Jr., Chief of Department

RESCINDS: No previous policy.

PURPOSE: It is the Fire Department's policy to maintain a positive working relationship with the news media and to keep the public informed of fire department activities and operations and of procedures that can save lives and property through the media. This guideline defines the manner in which interaction with the news media will occur.

SCOPE: This guideline applies to all CFD/CRFS personnel including Columbia-Richland Central.

POLICY:

I. Reasons for Maintaining Good Working Relations With the News Media.

A. To establish an effective public information sector under the incident command system at emergency scenes.

- 1. This ensures timely and accurate dissemination of emergency information to the public regarding actions necessary for public protection such as evacuation during a hazardous materials incident.
- 2. It helps to ensure the safety of members of the news media at emergency incidents.
- 3. It keeps reporters and photographers from interfering with emergency operations.

B. To provide effective fire prevention and fire survival information to the public while the news media's attention is focused on an incident.

C. To provide fire safety information on a routine basis in support of public fire education.

D. To respond effectively to special inquiries about the fire department.

E. To maintain a positive image of the Fire Department, City government and County government.

F. To effectively manage damage control when an issue may reflect negatively on the Department, the City or the County.

II. Determining When to Release Information and Who Will be Responsible

A. To prevent the release of incomplete or conflicting information, either only one person within the Department shall release information on an incident, or coordination shall occur among those releasing information.

B. The Assistant Chief for Administration serves as the Department's primary Public Information Officer (PIO). When he/she is not available to handle news media inquiries, an alternate member of the Command Staff will be designated to serve as PIO.

C. Any incident commander or his/her designated representative may release incident information to the news media and is encouraged to do so.

D. The Battalion Chief who responds to an incident, or to which a company under his/her command responds, shall ensure that accurate and timely information is released to the news media when the incident meets certain criteria. Incidents that fit any of the following criteria shall be handled by the Battalion Chief.

- 1. A member of the news media requests information.
- 2. A member of the news media appears on the scene.
- 3. There is a structure fire with \$10,000 or more in damage.
- 4. An occupant or firefighter is injured at an incident.
- 5. Firefighters save a life at a fire, river rescue or other special tactical rescue, not including vehicle accidents. Fire companies make a stop on an especially difficult fire or perform in some other exemplary manner.
- 6. A fire involves a public landmark or historic structure.
- 7. The Battalion Chief thinks that an incident is newsworthy.

E. The Battalion Chief will be responsible for providing interviews and information as soon as other duties permit. This includes responding to reporters at the scene and to pages from the news media. Battalion Chiefs must keep the duty pager with them at all times so as to respond quickly to media inquiries. F. When demands of the incident permit, or soon after return to the station, the Battalion Chief will call any local television station, radio station or newspaper that is staffed at that time of day that he/she has not made contact with.

G. The BC will also make follow-up calls to the media when significant new pieces of information regarding the incident become available within his/her shift, such as a cause, a relevant fire safety message, or a damage estimate. The BC will also call the media as soon as possible if his/she discovers that information previously provided was inaccurate or has changed significantly.

H. The CFD PIO is responsible for updating the news media on the status of investigations as information can be released and for other follow-up to incidents. I. For major incidents, such as two-alarm fires, a fire fatality, accident involving a fire department vehicle or other non-routine event that may bring close media scrutiny, the PIO or other member of the Command Staff shall be notified and will handle dissemination of information to the news media in coordination with the Battalion Chief or incident commander.

J. During major incidents the Public Information Sector will coordinate news media interviews with the IC and others, and tours of the incident as conditions permit. As authorized by the Public Information Sector Commander, other CFD personnel can provide interviews to give their accounts of the portion of the incident that pertained directly to their actions.

K. When there are multiple agencies responding to an incident, the CFD will release only information related to its operations.

- 1. At fires, heavy rescues and hazardous materials incidents, where the CFD has primary responsibility, the CFD will release information. Exception: When another agency is responsible for investigation of a fire, such as for fires that occur outside the city limits, inquiries related to the fire's cause and the investigation shall be referred to the investigating agency.
- 2. Information on incidents that the CFD does not have primary responsibility for, such as vehicle accidents with injuries, shall be referred to the primary agencies, such as Highway Patrol and EMS. If a media representative wants information from the CFD, only information regarding the fire department's actions shall be released. Never speculate on the cause of a vehicle accident. The responding law enforcement agency is responsible for investigating, determining the cause and releasing this information.
- 3. At major incidents, the CFD Public Information Sector Officer will coordinate with other agencies' PIOs on the release of information.

III. Information That Can be Released A. Unless otherwise authorized by the CFD PIO or the Chief of Department, information provided to the news media will be limited to that which is normally recorded on the NFIRS report and on the Public Information Worksheet contained in this SOG.

- 1. Anyone releasing information is encouraged to provide a fire safety message related to the incident, but he/she must be certain that the information is accurate and pertinent. The Public Information Worksheet for gathering information is included in this procedure and shall be carried in each battalion vehicle.
- 2. Information recorded on a first responder report or EMS report is considered to be a personal medical record and cannot be released.
- 3. The names of suspects of crimes including, but not limited to arson and false alarms and the names of juveniles charged with a crime shall not be recorded on the NFIRS report and may not be released. Adults arrested for crimes related to an

incident can be recorded and can be released in coordination with the fire investigator.

B. When the cause of a fire and information related to it is still being sought, no speculation shall be given. The cause shall be released as "Under Investigation." When the cause and related information is determined and can be recorded on the incident report, then it can be released to the news media. Speculating on the cause of a fire or stating that a cause is undermined before an investigation is complete can undermine the investigation and can discredit the Fire Department. Where fires are under investigation, suspicious or determined to be arson, release of information related to the cause shall be coordinated with the fire investigator.

C. The IC or the designated PIO will be responsible for coordinating activities of the news media at incidents. The media will be free to work around the perimeter of an incident provided there is no personal risk, but shall only enter an incident area when accompanied by the PIO or by another representative of the CFD assigned by the PIO. Fire line tape, police officers and other security measures will be used to secure the area as needed.

D. Tours of an incident area by the news media are encouraged to provide more accurate information and to facilitate the taking of photographs and video. Tours must meet the following conditions.

- 1. The PIO and IC authorize the tour.
- 2. The media is supervised while in the area.
- 3. The areas toured are safe.
- 4. Media representatives are not in an area that will interfere with operations or the investigation of the incident.
- 5. On private property, the property owner or occupant, or his/her representative agree to a tour.
- 6. There are no other reasons to prevent the tour.

E. The Department's Public Education Officer who is assigned to the Fire Prevention Bureau, the Fire Marshal and other Deputy Fire Marshals may release fire prevention information at any time as a part of the Department's routine Public Fire Education program. Release of this information shall be coordinated with the CFD PIO and with the City's Public Information Office.

F. Columbia-Richland Central will provide the following information about an incident as time permits.

- 1. The type of emergency.
- 2. The address and, if applicable, the business name.
- 3. When it was dispatched.
- 4. When the last company cleared the scene.

- 5. Who to call for more information and how to reach him/her. For most incidents this is the responding Battalion Chief. Central will provide the responsible Battalion Chief's pager number to the media.

G. Unless otherwise authorized, any information about the Fire Department, its operations or personnel, shall be released only by the Chief of Department, the CFD PIO, the City's Public Information Office or by the City Manager or his/her staff. Information released shall be in accordance with the South Carolina Freedom of Information Act and the City's Public Information Policy.

IV. Notifying the CFD PIO and the City's Public Information Office

A. The CFD PIO and the City's Public Information Office shall be notified of all news media contacts except for basic incident information provided by Columbia-Richland Central.

B. The Battalion Chief, CFD PIO, Public Education Officer or others providing the news media with information will use the News Media Contact Form located on CFD's Internet site to record basic information regarding news media contacts. The form shall be filled in as completely as possible. When the form is completed, it is automatically sent by E-mail to the Command Staff and to the City's Public Information Office.

C. When more urgent contact is needed due to a major incident or an incident that may impact the department, City or County, the PIO will contact the on-duty City public information representative by pager. Central can also notify the representative when the IC or public information sector does not have time to do so or is not close to a telephone.

D. During major incidents, such as evacuations, the City's PIO can be called on to assist in keeping the news media posted from his/her office or home.

V. Establishing a Public Information Sector Under the Incident Command System

A. The IC is responsible for the management of public information on the fireground. At large or complex incidents, Command will establish a Public Information Sector to relieve him/her of the burden of dealing directly with the news media during critical operations. The Public Information Sector will provide standard information that the news media requires to accurately report on the situation. The incident command radio designation for this sector will be "PIO Sector."

B. If the CFD PIO, who will normally serve as PIO for an incident, is not available, or is performing other tasks at an incident, Command may assign another

individual or a company to the Public Information Sector. The assigned PIO will use the Public Information Worksheet to gather the necessary information.

C. A Public Information Post will be established at a safe location near, but not in, the Command Post when possible. This area shall be made accessible to the media.

D. The City's Public Information Office shall be notified as soon as possible of incident in which they can be of assistance, such as evacuations. If the City's PIO is to work from a remote location to keep news media not on the scene informed of the incident's progress, a cellular telephone will be used to establish direct communications between the Information Post and the City Public Information Officer.

E. When there is a significant incident, the IC or the designated PIO Sector, when established, will either call the news media directly, will have the City's Public Information Office do so, and/or will coordinate with the Richland County Emergency Services PIO and any other agencies' PIO who may be available to assist. The PIO Sector will make contact with the news media as soon as possible when there is a threat to the public's safety or a major inconvenience to the public, such as the closing of a main road.

F. Upon arrival on the fireground, the CFD PIO will communicate with Command to determine support and advisory needs including the status of the Public Information Sector. If there are no other more pressing needs, he/she will coordinate with the individual working as PIO for the incident and will take control of the Public Information Sector.