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Outreach and Information Dissemination Regarding Disaster Relief¹

[Mary Hudak](#)

Federal Emergency Management Agency, USA

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Slide 2

Federal Emergency Management Agency 's Goal

A Nation Prepared

Notes:

The Federal Emergency Management Agency's (FEMA) goal is: to have a nation prepared for whatever comes along. That "whatever" most likely will be some natural phenomenon, such as an earthquake, hurricane, tornado, flood, or wildfire. Something that result in people's homes being destroyed or severely damaged. But since September 11, 2001, "whatever" must also include terrorists attacks.

Slide 3

External Affairs' Objective

Providing information about FEMA before, during, and after disasters

Notes:

Communicating with the American public is one of FEMA's pivotal functions and the job of External Affairs. To better understand how External Affairs works, I've separated communications into three critical time periods: before a disaster, during a disaster, and following a disaster.

Slide 4

Target Audiences

- Government Entities
- Congress
- Constituent Groups

- Media
- Individuals

Notes:

Just as critical as the time periods are the target audiences, those broad sub-groupings of what is commonly called the "general public" to which we send specific messages. The first are government agencies that are involved with disaster planning and response. These include state and county emergency management offices, local first responders (police, fire service, and EMS), and the host of other government agencies that are part of the federal response plan-the departments of Defense, Health & Human Services, Justice, and Transportation, to name just a few.

Members of Congress and constituent groups, such as state legislators and local government officials, are another critical audience; they are a key conduit for relaying disaster recovery information to the ones who need it most-the disaster victims.

The news media form another key audience; for it is most frequently through them that we are able to get vital recovery information to disaster victims, and life saving preparedness information to potential disaster victims. Besides the common thread of concerns about disasters, these audiences have one other thing in common-they all can use libraries as sources of reliable, accurate information.

Slide 5

Before the Disaster-Programs

- Preparedness
 - Communities
 - Individuals and Families
- Mitigation
- Flood Insurance
- U.S. Fire Administration
- Disaster Response and Recovery

Notes:

Before a disaster strikes, FEMA's emphasis is on preparedness programs and is directed to two specific audiences: local governments and individuals or families. During this period the message generally fits into one of four categories. First is mitigation, things that can be done now to lessen the

chance of damage or minimize the damage if some specific disaster occurs. This may be as simple as moving a furnace or water heater out of crawl space so flood water will not damage it; or in areas prone to wildfires, removing vegetation from around buildings and creating fire breaks.

Flood insurance information is directed to local governments and property owners. Local governments are encouraged to adopt and enforce minimum flood safety standards and to convince property owners to build above the base flood elevation and have flood insurance.

The U.S. Fire Administration's message is directed to the nation's fire departments and delivered through the scores of courses it offers at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

The emphasis to state and local government agencies is on planning and training for their disaster response and recovery efforts. None of us wants a disaster to occur, but it is comforting to know that our states, counties, and towns have planned and trained for the kinds of disasters that are more likely to happen in their area.

Slide 6

Tools Used to Get Information Out

- News releases
- Public service announcements
- News conferences
- Public awareness campaigns
- News media interviews
- Radio and television programs
- Internet sites
- Publications

Notes:

The tools we use are the same ones used by virtually every public affairs or public relations organization in the country. We selected ours based on two primary considerations: the best tool to reach the intended audience, and at the lowest possible cost.

Because the news media play such an important role in our daily lives, we use *news releases* to get information to them and rely heavily on them to pass information along to their audiences.

Public service announcements, or PSAs, are nothing more than commercials written or produced by the sponsoring agency. But unlike commercials, we have no control over how often or when they are used. They could appear during prime-time evening programming or at four o'clock Sunday morning.

News conferences are another way to draw attention to our message. To be effective, however, you need to have something worth announcing (not that it is Tuesday again) and someone with enough media visibility to attract the reporters.

Public awareness campaigns, such as national fire prevention week, generally use a centric approach to the topic, that is, where a single message is delivered using multiple avenues in a designated period of time, like a specific week or month. Awareness campaigns frequently involve speakers bureaus, or designated individuals who are trained and equipped to make presentations to civic clubs, community meetings, and similar gatherings.

Directing a story idea to specific reporters will often result in the reporter doing an *interview* for the evening news or morning paper. Unlike the news release that is sent to many media outlets, these are one-on-one conversations that yield a story in a single outlet.

In some markets an increasingly effective way to get information to a selected audience is through *radio and television talk shows*. Radio talk shows that are broadcast during drive-time (six to nine in the morning and four to seven in the evening) are especially popular.

With more and more people having access to the *Internet*, web sites have become a popular way to make needed information available to anyone with access to a computer.

Publications include brochures, flyers, booklets and maps that are often produced in cooperation with other agencies, such as the National Weather Service and American Red Cross. Printed publications are frequently the preferred way to distribute disaster recover information since disaster victims may not have access to their usual news media or the Internet following floods, fires, and power outages.

Slide 7

During the Disaster - Response and Relief

During and immediately following a disaster, information is just as important as water, food and shelter

Notes:

During and immediately following a disaster, information becomes just as vital to the disaster victims as food, water, and shelter. They are better able to cope with hardships they may face if they know what to expect and when. It is during this period that the communications function faces its greatest challenge, for the disaster victims are frequently displaced from their homes and without access to their normal channels of communication.

Slide 8

Information Needed

- What types of assistance are available
- How to apply for assistance
- Health and safety

Notes:

Yet victims' need to information is more critical then ever. They want, and need, to know what types of assistance will be available (monetary grants, low interest loans, legal aid, tax incentive, temporary housing, food and clothing) and how to go about receiving the help they need. During some disasters, such as wildfires and floods, response agencies have the added need to get life saving health and safety information to disaster victims.

Many of the tools used in this phase are the same as in pre-disaster phase: news releases, public service announcements, news conferences, interviews, radio and TV programs, and publications.

Slide 9

Message Coordination

- Coordinate with state and local agencies
- Audience analysis
- Media monitoring
- Operational issues
- Message of the day

Notes:

It is during this phase that coordination of public information between all the responding agencies becomes even more important. The messages that are sent out must be consistent, for sending mixed or contradictory messages spreads confusion and delays recovery. To ensure that the messages are coordinated and distributed to the right audiences, disaster response agencies use a joint information system (JIS) or joint information center (JIC). In its most basic form a JIS is a network of disaster response agencies that have analyzed the types of disaster they may experience and concur on the message or messages that will have to be distributed if the event occurs.

A JIC is a physical location where the news media and the public can go to get current, accurate information concerning a specific disaster. Every agency involved in responding to the disaster should be represented at the JIC, and the JIC should deal only with information concerning that disaster or event. To be most effective in delivering a health or safety message a certain amount of demographic information is required: who is the audience and what do they know about the topic? Message coordination also means monitoring the news media to ensure that they are conveying the right information and have not inadvertently misstated the facts.

A coordinated message often involves operational issues, such as health and safety concerns, or the location of shelters, feeding stations, and medical aid. Such information may be disseminated using a technique known as the "message of the day," where all agencies concentrate on that one subject for a set period of time.

Slide 10

Tactics

- Public Information
- Congressional Affairs
- Community Relations
- Intergovernmental Affairs

Notes:

Besides the disaster victims, or potential victims, that we target under the general heading of public information, there are three other tactics we employ to communicate with vital audiences-Congressional Affairs, Intergovernmental Affairs, and Community Relations.

As the names imply Congressional Affairs and Intergovernmental Affairs involves keeping members of Congress, state, and local governments up to date about what the federal government is doing to help people recover from disasters that occur in their state or district. When people don't know whom else to call (and FEMA is not listed in the local phone book) they call the person they think can help the most-their senator, congressman, state legislator, or the mayor. By keeping these elected officials informed about activities in their area we are able to use another channel to communicate with disaster victims.

Slide 11

Message Distribution

- Shelters
- Libraries
- Schools
- Churches
- Community centers
- Governmental buildings
 - Fire departments
 - Courthouses

Notes:

Community Relations personnel are the "foot soldiers" of the External Affairs team. They are the ones who attend community meetings in the disaster area, visit the churches, and if necessary go door-to-door to ensure that the disaster victims have the information they need to begin the recovery process. They will visit shelters, libraries, schools, community centers, and government buildings in their quest to communicate with the disaster victims. You might even see them at the hardware store, mini-mart, or local diner, anywhere people gather.

In addition to giving out recovery information, Community Relations specialists have a second, critical function-checking people's understanding about disaster recovery programs. This lets us know if the information reaching them is accurate and true or if we need to adjust what we are doing and/or how we are doing it.

Slide 12

Libraries as the focal point

- Physical location as repository for information; and
- Location for citizen meetings
- Virtual library to gather related information from around the world

Notes:

Libraries play a key role in FEMA's effort to get factual, timely information to victims following a disaster. Even more important from the prevention standpoint are the libraries' function as a repository of information about disaster preparedness and mitigation. If you don't know where to go, go to the local library for help. If they do not have a publication on the topic you need, most have the ability to access libraries of the world via the Internet.

Slide 13

After the Disaster - Recovery

- After action reports
- Anniversary updates
- Success stories
- Rebuilding efforts

Notes:

When the disaster response transitions into the recovery phase, the External Affairs function transitions as well. In this phase, External Affairs has two initial objectives. The first is to provide disaster victims with information on how to rebuild-better and safer. This is frequently done using success stories showing how others have overcome challenges and adversity in similar disasters. Disaster recover topics span a wide range of things, from mosquito control and cleaning up after a flood, to available legal services and crisis counseling.

The second objective is to complete an After Action Report that captures information about how the External Affairs function worked on this disaster, both what worked well and what should be changed in the future.

The next External Affairs involvement with a particular disaster will not occur until an anniversary of the event-typically at one, five, and ten years. Anniversary stories and observances typically revolve around the damage that was done, how the area has recovered and what is being done to prevent similar disasters in the future.

Slide 14

Complete the Cycle

- Mitigation - taking steps now to prevent bad things from happening in the future.
 - Construction
 - Flood insurance
- Preparedness
 - Family Disaster Preparedness Plan
 - Citizen Corps

Notes:

This brings us to *mitigation*-doing something now to prevent adverse impacts in the future. Mitigation normally involves doing something to a building's physical structure such as installing hurricane shutters or elevating critical components so they will not be flooded, or purchasing flood insurance.

At this point in the post-disaster phase we complete the circle and begin preparation for the next event. For our ultimate goal is to have a Nation Prepared to help each other and ourselves in times of need.

Endnotes

1. This is a presentation given at the American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference in Atlanta, GA, on June 16, 2002. The session, Promoting Public Health and Community Protection - Can Libraries Help? was sponsored by the ALA/Social Responsibility Round Table, Task Force on the Environment.

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