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Assuring your agency's Area Contingency Plan is equipped with an effective Joint Information Center Model

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ABSTRACT 299692:

Public trust in joint agency oil spill responses is generated or broken based on how well the Joint Information Center (JIC) communicates. Since the Deepwater Horizon spill response in 2010, responders recognize the importance of communicating with the public and stakeholders about response efforts. Despite this, the development of comprehensive plans to organize an effective Joint Information Center at an Incident Command Post is often overlooked.

Area Contingency Plans (ACP) are designed to ensure effective management and organization during an incident response. However, a review of a sampling of ACPs reveals an overall lack of planning for the organization of JIC operations. Including a pre-designed JIC model within the ACP will help initial Public Information Officers (PIO) avoid errors that can cause disorganized messaging early in the response. Quick organization within a JIC helps participating agencies to speak with one voice and release timely and accurate information.

Using data and experience collected during responses, exercises, and Area Contingency Plans, this paper outlines: the role of a Joint Information Center Plan, the elements of a Joint Information Center Plan, how to be involved in the planning process, and how to better evaluate your plan.

INTRODUCTION:

A Joint Information Center is necessary for any incident garnering a high level of public interest, concern and a high volume of media inquiries. In organizing a JIC during an incident response, the initial Public Information Officer must engage significant staffing and resource increases from a variety of sources to meet the need of the public and media.

"The JIC structure is most useful when multiple organizations must coordinate timely, accurate information to the public and other stakeholders. Emergency situations could include natural disasters, oil spills and other hazardous substance releases or terrorist incidents," (NRT JIC Model, 8).

One of a PIO's first responsibilities is to alleviate media pressure on responders as soon as possible. Unfortunately, a PIO's ability of staffing and organizing people to gather, evaluate, and disseminate response information quickly is hindered due to lack of interagency coordination. This hindrance is unnecessary and can be alleviated with increased emphasis on JIC organization before the incident.

Just as the Operations Section of an Area Contingency Plan needs to be in-depth providing how-to guides for initial response phases, so too should the PIO/JIC section of an ACP be in-depth to provide guidance and concrete information on how to organize/execute a JIC in a particular region and how to manage public information.

The PIO/JIC section of an ACP should provide policies and procedures for the coordination of communications within your agency, between partner agencies, to the media, and to the public during an incident. Incidents include, but are not limited to, oil spills, hazardous material releases, and natural disasters. An effective ACP needs to address media and risk communication issues as well as methods for responding to these incidents. This will help ensure effective JIC management and enables continuity by allowing all responders to speak with one voice.

Once an effective plan has been written it should be exercised, updated regularly, and, most importantly, the ACP should taken out and used during incident responses. This will ensure success in enabling PIOs to hit the ground running with the tools they need.

ROLE OF A JOINT INFORMATION CENTER PLAN:

An ACP is essentially a region's "game plan" or set of instructions that outlines the steps that should be taken before, during, and after an emergency. The contingency plan identifies different possible events for which a response is necessary and has contacts, resources and strategies to be used, contingent on the individual disaster.

The Coast Guard Public Information Assist Team's inspection of dozens of ACPs conducted over a four-year time span and from Alaska to Puerto Rico reveals one common theme: the PIO/JIC sections are underdeveloped and limited in what they provide. Findings reveal that plans typically only outline the need for a PIO, an expectation to gather information, and that the PIO will inform the public with the information gathered. However, most plans do not meet the fundamental role of an ACP. They do not include lists of important contacts, resources available or strategies for the PIO and JIC.

Just as the ACP is designed to bring agency representatives together to collaborate on the operational side of a response, the PIO/JIC plan should bring agency PIOs together to build a robust and effective plan allowing all agencies involved to speak with one voice. "As evidenced by the last two major oil spill events, Cosco Busan and Deepwater Horizon, much of the external political pressure exerted upon the response organization was the direct result of not engaging local officials prior to and during the spill response. All of this could have been addressed, and possibly avoided, during the ACP development process," (Papp et al. 6).

ELEMENTS OF A JOINT INFORMATION CENTER PLAN:

The main objective of a JIC plan is to provide the proper information to the public, partners, media and other stakeholders. However, the main objective is not feasible if the plan does not address critical elements of preparedness, including qualifications of personnel, training, exercises, and equipment necessary in a response.

"Immediately after an incident occurs, there is a high demand for information. The media, public and responders require accurate and timely information for all incidents—large or small, a natural disaster or accident. The PIO is responsible for the dissemination of updated information during a response/incident," (NRT JIC Model, 13).

One of the biggest questions at a response is, "Who is the PIO?" The plan should address this. To identify a PIO the rule should clearly state that there is one PIO for each operational period and that normally, but not always, the PIO mirrors the jurisdictional authority or agency incident commander who has the greatest involvement either in terms of resources assigned or area of concern. To assist the PIO in gathering, preparing and disseminating the information a JIC may need to be established.

Depending on the size of an incident there will be assistants below the PIO. A JIC Manager may be appointed to oversee the Assistant PIOs (APIO) for information gathering, information products, media relations, and community relations. "The JIC Manager is selected by the PIO to supervise the daily operations of the JIC; execute plans and policies, as directed by the PIO; and provide direction to the APIOs to ensure that all functions are well organized and operating efficiently. The APIO/JIC Manager should possess public affairs, crisis response, JIC and management or leadership experience. Personnel are assigned to this position based on training, experience, skills and ability, not rank or employer. The APIO/JIC Manager should have the same training as the PIO," (NRT JIC Model, 19). *See Figure 1 below for the proposed organizational chart of JIC in reference to a Type 1 Incident.*
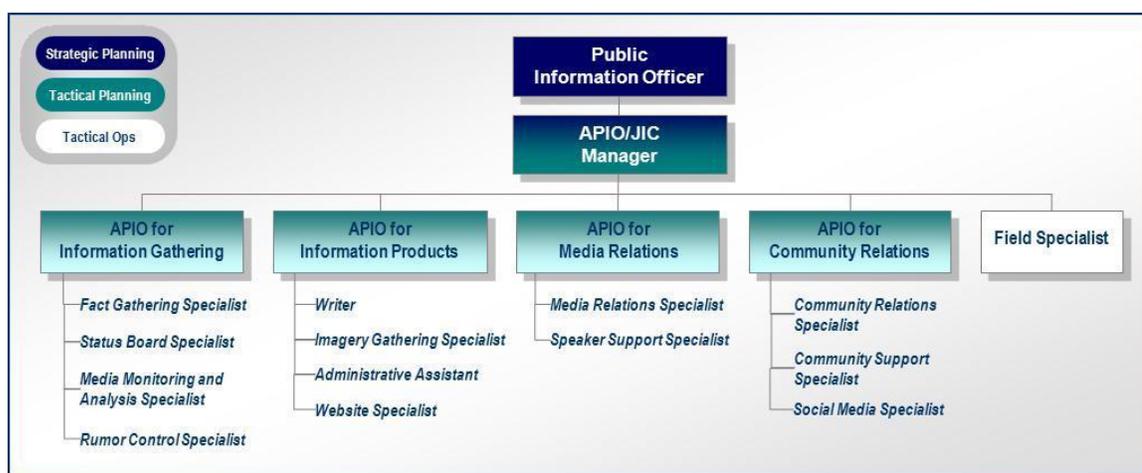

FIGURE 1.

In addition to identifying the PIO for different scenarios, each plan should include key elements:

- Protocol to establish a single JIC location. It is highly recommended that the JIC be in the same building as the Incident Command Post, but in a separate room. This increases timeliness of release of information and allows the PIO to be thoroughly engaged with the command staff.
- Instructions to establish a dedicated JIC phone line and website.
- Include a roster of qualified PIOs from key agencies and participating stakeholders (e.g. Governor's public affairs officer, local fire and police department PIOs, Red Cross, other governmental and non-governmental organization PIOs).
- Include required or recommended training and qualifications needed to fill JIC positions.
- Outline approval, release and spokesperson authorities with the Incident Command. This authority should explain how all information is vetted for approval and edited before release keeping timeliness, security, accuracy, propriety, and policy in mind. Agreements on information release authorities should include who releases what, when, and how.
- Detail the process for the release of information to include over the phone interviews, social media, and news releases.
- List meetings the PIO should attend within the Incident Command System's Operation Planning Cycle.
- Provide instructions on coordinating media interviews with subject matter experts and command staff.
- Recommend pressroom sites for news conferences and briefings.
- A guide for personal protective equipment needed for field escorts and media visiting various sites.
- Provide guidance on public concerns to brief the Incident Command on requiring crisis and risk communication messaging.
- List all local and relevant regional media contacts, including wire services, radio, television and print with after-hours news desk numbers and e-mail addresses, and other relevant information avenues such as popular blogs, Twitter feeds, and Facebook pages that would cover the event.
- Procedures to coordinate with partner response teams to incorporate the joint aspect of a JIC.
- Procedures to secure needed resources (space, equipment, people) to operate the public information and media operation during the response 24 hours a day, 7 days a week if needed.
- Identify vehicles for information dissemination to the public (e.g. e-mail, door-to-door fliers, locally used social media accounts).
- Encourage all responding agencies to speak with one voice.
- Reference NRT JIC Model and provide website link to the model for quick use. Most importantly, including access to the NRT JIC Model is imperative to a successful plan and a successful response. Adding a hyperlink in the

online version of an ACP will allow responders to access the model in a moment's notice.

Familiarity of using the NRT JIC Model will come from having hard copies available for everyone in the PIO workgroup each meeting. The NRT JIC Model has dozens of job aids already developed in it to allow responders to hit the ground running and have all the templates one would need to function in a JIC. Some of the job aids include sample news releases and self-assessment surveys to help the PIO and JIC Manager quickly place people into positions. "Prior to the Deepwater Horizon incident, the Coast Guard successfully employed the National Response Team (NRT) Joint Information Center (JIC) model as its crisis communications structure for hundreds of incidents, including Hurricane Katrina, the Haiti earthquake, and the Tintomara collision/oil spill on the Mississippi River," (Papp et al. 65).

PLANNING INVOLVEMENT:

Immediately establishing a PIO workgroup comprised of representatives from numerous federal, state, regional, and local response agencies within particular geographical areas will greatly increase an area's response readiness and response procedures. Members of the PIO workgroup should regularly attend area committee meetings, and address PIO/JIC issues. The JIC section of an ACP should not be written in a vacuum. PIOs from all affected organizations should be involved in the workgroup and contribute to the JIC. Each Area Committee should work closely with state and local officials to pre-plan for joint response efforts.

"Area Committees represent the core element of oil spill response planning and preparedness for a region," (Papp et al. 12). "The individuals who attend an Area Committee meeting have the opportunity to meet in a non-emergency setting and learn how best to respond together in the event of a spill. Attendance at Area Committee meetings gives members and their respective organizations the opportunity to assist in the development of the ACP. Active participation of dedicated members from the entire spectrum of stakeholders is key to a successful Area Committee."

Participation in area committee meetings will ensure ACPs are up-to-date, complete and reflect current procedures. Plans should also encompass a full range of public information media (including social media how-to-use guides). This is also the appropriate time for the PIO workgroup to develop pre-approved briefing materials, templates and processes for a wide range of topics that will ultimately be used to produce public information in a timely manner.

The advantages of a PIO Workgroup include:
- Provides PIOs the opportunity to meet, network, and build best practices and lessons learned.
- Ability to maintain a 24/7 PIO roster with contact information available for distribution.
- To provide an avenue for PIOs to identify and solve emerging and ongoing issues and concerns.
- Opportunity to share training opportunities and events.
- Combines resources during training events and real world responses to include contact lists, equipment, and web tools.

- Develop job aids and tools for preparedness to include in the area contingency plan.
- Collect contact information for the ACP for quick integration and support.
- Opportunities to jointly participate in preparedness exercises.

EVALUATE YOUR PLAN:

Test your ACP with the JIC in mind. JIC operations should be tested just as thoroughly as the Operations Section of an ACP. An untested JIC is a poorly planned JIC and can cause all to fail in communicating effectively.

It is strongly recommended to train and test with response staff that will likely be engaged during an incident. Utilize resources outlined in the JIC plan. Test to see which resources were used from the plan and whether those resources are practical and effective.

At preparedness exercises test the PIO and JIC participants with in-depth injects, which are likely questions and scenarios the JIC would receive from the media and public in a real-world incident. Often the JIC is given only one overarching objective when testing the overall ACP for a region: to inform the public. Objectives for testing the JIC should be comprehensive, numerous and challenging. Once the crafted injects have been fulfilled by the JIC, test facilitators should conduct follow-ups and adjust on the fly to test where the JIC is gathering their answers.

Social media practices should be tested just as heavily as phone practices. Social media injects can be fielded through mock "posts" on hand-carried on pieces of paper. Create rumors and test how the JIC identifies and monitors those rumors. This more in-depth method of testing the JIC will identify areas for improvement. Testing the JIC plan critically will lead to plan enhancement and more proactive processes.

Once the plan has been tested it should be tested again, and then again. Lessons learned form previous tests should be evaluated to see whether the lessons were actually learned or if the same issues have gone unattended. Success during an actual response will come from using past experiences and hot washes, and from an active PIO workgroup dedicated to continuously improving the plan.

CONCLUSIONS:

A good ACP translates into a good response. ACPs are designed to ensure effective management and organization during an incident response, and the JIC is a crucial part of a successful plan. A JIC plan is worthless if it is not used. For the JIC plan within an ACP to prove effective it must be used, and it must be accessible to those who will need it.

Understanding and appreciating the role of a comprehensive JIC plan and the elements inside of it will help responders when it matters most. Preparedness will be built by extensive involvement in the planning process and then testing the plans that have been created in a joint environment. Maximizing opportunities to update the JIC plan within an ACP at regular workgroup and Area Committee meetings will help strengthen communication efforts between

PIOs from all types of agencies at real-world disaster responses, while building and maintaining trust and confidence with the Incident Command.

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