Communicating Fire Information: My Experience Attending “Introduction to Incident Information”

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Whenever fire incidents happen, the public and the media want to know what is going on. They have a natural need and a right to be informed, especially when their livelihoods and homes are threatened by wildland fire. As a corollary, the firefighting community has a need to be informed as well. This makes public information flow two ways: internally and externally. Anticipating these needs, the wildland firefighting community provides public information officers (PIO) as part of the Incident Command System (ICS). Through vigorous training and experience, PIOs are often the first people the media and the public go to for information concerning fire incidents.

In order to train professional PIOs, the National Wildfire Coordinating Group (NWCG) mandates that all candidates attend S-203: Introduction to Incident Information. That is why I was in Prescott, Arizona in mid-March at the Arizona Wildfire & Incident Management Academy. The course was taught by some very experienced PIOs who made sure that we students received a solid grasp of PIO duties.

Accompanying the course was the S-203 student workbook, which had the lessons and review questions. Using that as a template, classroom lecture was very well structured. Instructors teamed up and took turns instructing each module, playing to the strengths of each individual. All 18 students learned how PIOs prepare for assignments, how information centers are set up, how information is disseminated, and the PIO's relationship to the public, the media, and other members of the ICS. Additionally, we learned why timely and accurate information is so important in wildland fire management and how the role of the PIO contributes to successful fire missions.

It is important to note that even though the class is mandated by the NWCG, PIOs may serve in that capacity on incidents other than wildland fire, including all-hazards incidents such as floods, hurricanes, earthquakes and terrorist attacks. In fact, our lead instructor Cathie Schmidlin served in New York after the attacks on September 11, 2001.The simulation exercises we participated in were very important for our understanding of incident information. These are the interactive moments in the course where we used lessons from our class lectures and applied them to realistic simulations that PIOs might experience in the field.

The first simulation was on the second day of class. We formed into teams of four and organized a communications strategy regarding a simulated fire incident. Provided with a fact sheet, our group summarized the incident (who, what, where, when, why, and how), created communication goals and objectives, determined target audiences, key messages, and communication methods, and created action items, assignments, and timelines. When finished, I served as group spokesman and explained our strategy to the rest of the class.

On the third day, we conducted simulated media interviews. This task really played on my strengths and experience of presenting research, interviewing for jobs, and speaking in public. We were briefed on a railway accident that caused a chemical spill into a local river (an example of an all-hazard incident). I wrote a fact sheet and a news release and tried my best to commit the details to memory. When it was my turn, I went in front of a camera and the "media" asked me questions regarding the incident. It was my job to inform them with timely and accurate information, and to quash unsubstantiated rumors, which I think I did well. After the rest of class finished interviewing, we saw all the interviews and critiqued each other with constructive feedback.

Day four was the big Information Center simulation. In groups of six, we operated our own information centers. We began the simulation with an incident briefing at the incident command post (ICP) where our incident commander (IC) briefed us on the situation: a 200 acre fire spreading rapidly near a small community. At the information center, we wrote a fact sheet and created an incident action plan. We designated tasks, and mine was to represent the fire agency to the media, meaning I conducted the interviews and escorted reporters. My "deputy" prepared updated news releases and fact sheets, which he used to keep me updated. Other PIOs conducted local community relations, managed action plan tasks as the situation developed, and communicated with the rest of the incident management team (IMT). A barrage of complications tested our ability to stay calm under pressure. For example, residents came to us asking questions about threats to their homes, missing dogs, what to do with their cattle, if they could bring their class to the ICP for tours, and how best to volunteer. At the same time, various parts of the media would call or stop by for interviews, asking questions about containment percentage, threats to air quality and structures, and most importantly, asking questions about unsubstantiated rumors. As the media relations PIO, it was my duty to address reporters in a professional manner without giving them cause to sensationalize the incident. Lastly, an incident within an incident hit us when a helicopter "crashed" near the fireline. That heightened complication of the incident further. We responded with information requests from Operations so we could better inform the public and the media. After three hours, the simulation ended.

On Friday, day five, I took the S-203 exam and passed. Now, I am considered a PIO trainee, and as long as I earn my firefighter

certification in the near future, I may be called upon to serve in that capacity. As a trainee, I have a task book that I have to complete in order for me to be considered a full-on Public Information Officer.

Overall, the course went very well. I feel confident in my ability to provide services to the public as a PIO trainee. The Arizona Wildfire Academy was a good way for me to get to know the fire community outside of the office. It was great meeting new people, and I hope to attend more fire courses in the near future.