

Objective #9 Emergency Public Information Demonstrate, discuss in a tabletop, the ability to coordinate and disseminate accurate information about the incident to the public and the media in a timely manner.

A **Basic Intent**

Chemical incidents have the potential to cause significant harm to the surrounding area. As such, these incidents draw a great deal of media attention. Therefore, response personnel must be prepared to respond to media inquiries and convey that the public is being protected. This Objective looks at the abilities of responders to gather and disseminate accurate information to the public. Responders will need to identify and activate warning systems that can inform the public in a timely manner. And, they must demonstrate their ability to coordinate information with the various media outlets.

B **Discussing the Points of Review**

1. *Was an individual clearly identified as the lead Public Information Officer (PIO) for this incident and thus was authorized to draft and release information to the public and media based on subject matter expertise provided?*

A coordinated release of information should be made to the public otherwise conflicting and misleading information could be created. The IC may act as the PIO in small incidents and accomplish the task from on-scene. In larger incidents, the IC should delegate this function. In the larger events, a Joint Information Center (JIC) may be established with a lead PIO selected. The Hazmat Plan, EOP, or even local SOPs should identify who will fulfill the PIO role. The average responder should not answer media questions. Instead, they need to refer all media and public questions to the PIO or IC. The PIO is authorized to draft and release information, but should coordinate these actions with the IC. They may even need to gain approval with senior elected officials when releasing sensitive information. Keep in mind, a PIO may not be the event spokesperson, and therefore not be expected to speak publically.

2. *Was the content of public and media notifications appropriate to the emergency, response actions taken, and protective actions implemented?*

The public and media generally do not understand what problems arise during a chemical incident or how the problems are managed. The messages should avoid the use of technical jargon or response lingo. It should reassure the public that the situation while hazardous is being managed by response forces. The information should not speculate on future events or make accusations about the cause of an incident.

3. *Were pre-planned alert and notification methods effective?*

Responders need to identify what method can best be used to alert the public. Techniques include the use of sirens, public address systems on vehicles, phone calls to special groups/locations, or door-to-door notifications. Responders may rely on the social/electronic media, television, cable, or radio broadcasts, or other technology to inform the public. Live broadcasts are used as well, but this process is used more to provide updated information instead

of the initial alert. All of these options should be pre-planned and thus allow responders to quickly alert the public.

4. Was the public notification process effectively coordinated among involved organizations?

The public information process must be conducted in a controlled manner. This requires each response agency to relay media inquiries to the IC or PIO. Responders should not speculate on the progress of response actions or the scene's hazards. The PIO will need to consult with the IC or EOC as appropriate before it releases press information. The PIO may also need to consult with the local Chief Elected Official to ensure the information reflects their concerns as well. Also, response and support groups off-site should provide the CP/PIO information on actions they are taking that affect the public. Those groups should also provide feedback to the CP/PIO on what concerns they hear from the public. The goal is to ensure the process is coordinated and the public receives accurate information on the protective actions.

5. Once created, were media notifications made in a timely manner?

The IC should have one person or group clearly designated to interact with the media and release information to the public. Often initial notifications are made through a local agency's online platform or social media. The IC and PIO should work with responders to establish a media staging area. This is to answer questions and ensure the media do not hamper response efforts or endanger personnel. The PIO should make contacts with designated media outlets. The EOC may work to see that media outlets outside of the area can obtain information about the incident. Meanwhile, on-site interviews may also be used to alert and brief the media. The location should provide photo opportunities and permit routine access to key response personnel.

6. Did the PIO remain aware of the emergency situation's status and develop appropriate follow-up messages based on incident changes?

As the situation changes, the command staff and/or Executive Group in coordination with the PIO should evaluate the need to update the information provided to the media and general public. The process requires the PIO to be actively involved within the command structure and/or Executive Group to exchange and confirm information about the release. Procedures should be in-place to assess the released information and work with media to correct misinformation. The PIO should establish a method to watch/listen to the media releases to catch and correct misinformation. The PIO may need to have an off-site group (who has access to TVs and radios) monitor the local media stations. This may be assigned to an EOC, a dispatch office, a response agency's main office or the JIC (if activated). These updates should reassure the public that the situation is being managed, dispel rumors, and provide additional information. This may include information about shelter status, health concerns, or protective actions. The PIO or spokesperson should also meet routinely with media personnel on-scene and update them on the current status of the scene.

7. Were procedures and/or guidelines in-place to monitor and respond to rumors raised during the emergency?

Traditional media and social media monitoring, as well as rumor control, are important aspects of emergency public information. It is media's business to cover the story, but the information they release may not be entirely accurate or may speculate on actions taken. Messages may be misinterpreted or altered and thus change the intent of the information.

Generally, it should be demonstrated how media platforms will be monitored and what the response would be if messaging is inaccurate or rumors present. The PIO should address misinformation appropriately.

8. *Were records kept to document messages issued, briefings made, and actions taken?*

Throughout the incident, the command system should document the actions taken to initially alert the public, generate follow-up information, and to work with those media assets on-site and off-site. The designated PIO should record when and how information was released to the public. This process will assist in rumor control, supports the critique, and preserves documentation for posterity.

9. *Were the actions taken based on existing plans and/or operating procedures?*

As noted before, the emergency public information process should be pre-planned. The LEPC plan must contain procedures for the timely and effective use of communications to the general public. The all-hazard EOP typically has an Annex dedicated to this topic. Plus, most ICS training teaches responders how to appoint and use a PIO as part of the command structure. Therefore, this process should be defined in local SOPs.

C Exercise Design and Control Issues

This Objective can be evaluated as part of the Command Post (CP), Joint Information Center (JIC) and Emergency Operations Center (EOC). The Exercise Design Team will need to anticipate how this function will be managed for the chosen scenario. This will determine what inputs or simulations should be provided to fully test the Objective. When designing an exercise with this as an objective, consideration should be given to the role media and social media would play in a real-world incident, such as rumor control and social media monitoring.

The exercise should also include the participation of local media assets. The Exercise Design Team should ask for television, radio, and print media groups to participate in the exercise. They can be used in one of two ways. Media can be asked to respond as if this was a real incident. This free-play technique will permit Players and media groups to interact naturally and should generate a more complete evaluation. To make this work, media assets must commit to playing as would any response agency otherwise the Objective will not be fully demonstrated. Media can also be used as part of the Exercise Design Team and script out messages. The Exercise Design Team will establish what questions should be asked or what challenges media groups should pose to responders. Here, media is an exercise simulator rather than a Player.

If media will not participate at all, the Exercise Design Team could use volunteers for Functional and Full-Scale exercises to act as media personnel. Again, the Team will establish what questions should be asked or what challenges the volunteers should pose to responders. The Exercise Design Team must use personnel that understand the media process otherwise the exercise of this Objective will be ineffective.

For Tabletop exercises, responders will be challenged to thoroughly discuss each Point of Review. The exercise Controller will need to have inputs ready to prompt or direct the course of discussion. The Exercise Design Team will likely need to script out various problems that will be raised by the public and the media for the given scenario. The Controller needs to ensure Players thoroughly discuss the activation of automated alert systems such as sirens and

telephonic notification software. The Players should also be asked to draft and verbally give press briefings to the Controller (who is acting as the media). Players should not be allowed to just say that they would give a briefing, make them demonstrate it.

For Functional and Full-Scale exercises, Players will need to physically complete each Point of Review to its fullest extent in field exercises. They need to actually write press releases and develop follow-up messages as the incident progresses. They should actually contact media outlets for briefings and give on-scene media interviews. If responders decide they should go door-to-door with sample messages, they should physically dispatch personnel and complete that process. It is too easy to “simulate” these actions or just to say it’s done.

There is a caution to this, the media and general public may misunderstand “exercise messages”. The Exercise Design Team should pre-define which media outlets will “play along” and thus take the press release but not actually release information. If Players are going door-to-door, a pre-defined “impact community” should be pre-briefed to expect responders and what they will be doing. If needed, the community can be asked to either implement the protective action or just simply acknowledge the message. As a caution, remember that media and the public may not always hear that this is an exercise. Players must be instructed to state “This is an Exercise” when giving *any* information to the media or general public. Pre-exercise design is critical for Functional and Full-Scale exercises and clearly defined “rules of engagement” must be briefed to the Players *in advance*.

D Evaluation Needs and Issues

This Objective will focus on how the public is informed and thus rests with the person(s) implementing the PIO function(s). The Evaluator needs to understand not only response techniques but also media procedures. Local media members or county personnel who have fulfilled the PIO role make good Evaluators for this Objective.

The Exercise Design Team will need to designate where this Objective will be evaluated. On-scene, the Evaluator can observe the Command Post and it’s interaction with local media assets but will likely shadow the PIO and observe media briefings. Off-scene, there may need to be an Evaluator to watch how this function is managed at an activated JIC or EOC. Evaluators should be reminded that they may need to query media Players and determine what information has been released to them to understand what response personnel have/have not said. Finally, the Evaluators should note when too much simulation was used to demonstrate the Objective and bring that to the Facilitator’s attention. If too much simulation is accomplished, the Facilitator may choose to withdraw the Objective from the exercise and direct the LEPC to re-test it at a later exercise.

This Objective is well-suited to be evaluated along with Objective #8.