

Sneak peak into FEMA MGT-467 Sport and Special Event Public Information and Emergency Notification
By KD5BJ

I recently attended one of the most fascinating FEMA courses: Sport and Special Event Public Information and Emergency Notification, administered by TEEX. I had great instructors and a fantastic, dynamic team at my table.

The course explained how to address the public and partners in print, verbal, and digital communications, from voice pitch to attitude, from geographical to generational considerations, and how to listen, always considering your audience in mind.

We learned about the different media channels and their impact, the pros and cons of each, and the different kind of messages between emergency and routine communications. During emergency communications our goal is to save lives, reduce injuries, and protect property. We need to educate, inform, calm fears, and install public confidence. To add to the incident, we may be doing all this while we may be witnessing an audience resistance to information and instructions.

We received great tips about what to say and not say in front of reporters as they are not our friends. They want a story, even a sensational one to tell their own audience. There is not such a thing as "off the record" and opinions must be avoided at all costs. We need always to be in control without appearing controlling. Always appear in charge, message driven, and use self-contained responses.

Interestingly enough, a middle message is seldom remembered by listeners. So if you give the three bits of information, you state the least important in the middle. For example "Alert! A tornado warning has been issued. Public officials are monitoring the situation. Take shelter immediately."

If we are in the field, or taking calls on weather events and watching the radar, we need to give each other, the Emergency Manager, or the PIO concise information that is needed for the job. We need to know how our audience consumes the information: verbally, by texts, by radio, via slack, or FaceBook, etc.

We need to be prepared for an event to transform itself in an incident. From reporting weather to a tornado has struck a part of town and has caused unconfirmed injuries, deaths, and damages. We must be prepared ahead of time about what to say, not to say, when to say it and through which means. If the event has become an incident, and regular means of communications work, do not disseminate certain info on the air during SKYWARN net for example, but by text. If the lines are busy, remember your GETS card.

Communications have a chain of command or hierarchy. Designated people may distribute information when appropriate. These people should be selected in advance and their names

and contact info contained in a document for such occasions as these. It is also important to have a protocol and directives for sharing information for internal and external communications as certain information may not be beneficial to be disseminated to all.

Instructors stressed the fact to build a strong foundation. Hopefully we will be able to do this with the new Lee Co EM. To build a foundation, agencies need to invest time in meetings on a regular basis, make a basic plan with a multifaceted approach. Proper planning creates consistency and eliminates unnecessary chaos during an incident. Transparency between agencies is essential to gather facts and build trust among the agencies' personnel which facilitates communications during a crisis.

Face to face communications during planning is also essential to build a foundation because during incidents or a crisis people would not communicate via computer but at the incident command post or in the field. Reading people's non-verbal clues is important and verbal communication helps to socialize with individuals we may be working with in the field under stress. Face to face interaction facilitates engagement and innovation.

Planning should create clear expectations and goals, hold people accountable, and be reasonable with time.

We learned about techniques to answer reporters and how to handle interviews.

We also learned the importance, during planning, to write pre-scripted messages. If anything happens, it makes it much faster to send the information out by just writing the facts into the blanks.

We also conducted several table top exercises to simulate how to manage large events and how to transition to an incident when a natural threat, like a tornado, or a terrorist attack, like explosions, interrupt the event. We learned how to do a trigger chart that guides us to whom to call when.

This is KD5BJ, back to net.