

Chapter 5

MEDIA RECOMMENDATIONS

PRE-PLAN PREVENTION PHASE RECOMMENDATIONS

TRAINING

Training is probably the most important phase for the media. Reporting a crime or incident of violence takes but a few minutes; however, the effects last a lifetime. Now is the time to build foundations and networks with the media. About 40 media and some task force members attended a workshop (April 14, 2000) on victims and the media. Further training should include:

- A. Bring in a reporter who has covered a violent event with sensitivity to talk to other media.
- B. Bring in Dr. Frank Ochberg, a psychiatrist who deals extensively with journalists about covering victims.
- C. Provide laminated cards to police and other agencies to be handed out to victims. These cards are currently being used in Virginia by police departments. This would greatly empower victims at the time of a crisis to be able to make reasoned decisions about being interviewed. The contents of the card should include phone numbers of victim assistance agencies on one side of the card and a message on the other side of the card that says: “News media may wish to interview you regarding this incident. You have the right to grant or refuse interviews. If you choose to give an interview, please call one of the numbers on the reverse side. You will be given advice important to protecting your rights and the investigation, but there is no legal requirement to contact police prior to an interview.”
- D. Address the newsroom environment itself. Task force members should offer to present annual workshops (because of the high rate of turnover of reporters) to cover preparedness of the newsroom to deal with staff covering violent events. Topics should include:
 1. Are you prepared to cover such an event?
 2. Do you know who would be assigned?

3. How would you deal with deadlines and counseling the reporters afterwards?
4. Do you have access to mental health counselors or chaplains?

Journalists need the crisis training that is provided for other members of the crisis team. Journalists go from the event to the newsroom or camera, and there is no one who debriefs them or helps them deal with the emotional impact. This training would have a tremendous impact on their coverage and follow-up of events.

Written guidelines should be prepared to outline communication methods available to access information during a crisis. Guidelines should include the following:

- A. Delegation of authority or spokesperson
- B. Phone numbers or Internet addresses to be used by media
- C. Limiting factors for media e.g. identification tags, parking
- D. Expected times of communication and press conferences from Incident Command

Information should also be uploaded onto a virtual newsroom crisis Web site to be created by the City of Mount Pleasant staff. Crisis kits should be prepared for the Media Coordinator, and two other backup representatives.

Crisis kits should include:

- A. ID tags for media, provide if media can show proper credentials. If media do not have ID tags from Media Center (location of media coordinator and backups during an incident, which is explained more fully in Incident Phase Recommendations), they may be arrested at the site of coverage.
- B. Rip-and-run sheets of emergency contacts for task force media representatives.
- C. Written materials for journalists about sensitive coverage of victims.
- D. Phone books, paper, pens, and other materials.

Communication devices should be available. Media representatives should be trained in the use of any communication devices necessary.

- A. A laptop computer with the appropriate city software to enable uploading accurate, approved information to the virtual newsroom very quickly.

The quicker we can get factual, accurate information available for media and families and the public, the fewer rumors will impact how personnel handle the crisis situation or demoralize families. The Media Center won't be defined until an event occurs (see p. 44). A laptop is the only reasonable method to make sure all the software and programs are available for use.

- B. Backup batteries for the laptop are a necessity. The web site for the virtual newsroom, software, and e-mail access for Media Center are no cost items.
- C. Two-way radios are needed to enable contact between Incident Command and Media Center. Instant communication will enable rumors to be squelched and media to get the most accurate information. It will also provide a means for Incident Command to direct Media Center staff and distribution of information in a timely manner, which may mean every 15 minutes initially. Media Center has to have a way to communicate directly with Incident Command.
- D. One pager that rotates among the media representatives throughout the year would enable emergency responses in time of crisis, similar to what hospitals and other emergency agencies use now.

The virtual newsroom is a key element in the distribution of information, not only during a crisis, but prior and following. It will be a link from the city's main page to a separate site that will contain news releases, information, banners, and interactive capability for press conferences.

The media and public can use the site to see the history of the task force, the preparedness plans, and crisis contacts. The crisis action plan can be loaded with frequently asked questions, library resources, links to national and other sites that deal with school violence and resources and tips for journalists on covering violence and victims.

The Media Coordinator will prepare written materials. News of interest about schools and the community can be added to the site periodically. In effect,

it is a site mainly for information during a crisis or incident, but can be used at other times to distribute educational and other information.

FUTURE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Media staff will help develop a community resource guide with the task force and help stage a mock crisis.

The Media staff will develop “easy access” materials for task force members and others to facilitate media relations and response to inquiries. This may involve the development of a community newsletter to distribute important news to the community. Involvement from local media, schools, and Central Michigan University will be sought. A separate newsletter, distributed two to four times a year, could be used. Outside support may be possible to help defray the cost or it could be incorporated into another newsletter. Initially, it will need some trained staff to create, but they could be voluntary.

Media staff will coordinate preparing photo ID’s for local media, with the cost to be borne through the overall task force system selected.

Thought should be given to developing a curriculum or lecture series to be incorporated into local school curricula at elementary, junior high, and high school levels. The project could be piloted and copied by other school districts later. The contents would include:

- A. Preparation for students to react to media inquiries about a broad range of subjects, positive and negative.
- B. Information about the rights of students and others during an interview.
- C. Information on how to refer a member of the media to a higher authority. Students need to know their rights and the impact of their statements on others. If this were incorporated into the general curriculum on a regular basis, students would not be primed for a violent event, but taught about media in general terms, both the positive and negative sides of being interviewed.
- D. Regular updates and in-services. The person doing this should have an educational background with a major in journalism and extensive

professional experience working in and with media. While an official at a police department or other agency may have experience in giving out information to the media, this training needs someone with personal experience of working in the media to provide the perspective needed.

INCIDENT CRISIS PHASE RECOMMENDATIONS

The Media Coordinator and backups report to Incident Command when notified by Command. They are contacted via pager, with the coordinator contacting the backups. Crisis kits, carried with representatives, are brought to the scene. Kits contain all previously noted items.

- A. The reporting hierarchy is from Incident Command to Media Coordinator.
 1. Incident Command contacts Media Coordinator at least every 30 minutes to give status reports. Some events may need a shorter time interval, some longer, depending upon circumstances and level of media involvement (local, national, international).
 2. Media Coordinator and backups will set up press conferences at the direction of Incident Command.
 3. If media are being directed to the Media Center, it has to have the most current information, or media will leave that site and look elsewhere for information.
 4. The Media Center, whether it is mobile or stationary, must be set up as close to the scene with communication devices necessary to maintain interaction with Incident Command and the city's web site.
- B. Identification of Media.
 1. Media who cover events and do not have an Isabella County task force ID will be able to get an ID at the Media Center if they can provide photo identification of their active employment by a news organization and other valid supporting documentation of their identity.

2. Any media person who shows up at a scene without proper ID will be told where to get an ID or told to leave the area. If any reporters persist without proper ID, they could face arrest.
 3. The Media Center will provide every reasonable accommodation for media personnel who need ID tags.
- C. A Mental Health Counselor may be needed at the Media Site. Incident Command will determine the need for any mental health counselor at a media site. The Media Center will help link families and the public with chaplain programs as needed.
- D. Additional determinations made by Incident Command relating to media.
1. Incident Command determines need for media representative to go to another site.
 2. Incident Command determines the extent of media at crisis site and reports to Media Center via communication devices, with appropriate contact information to report any concerns or incidents involving media to the Center in charge. If media personnel were to be injured and unable to notify his or her own agencies, Media Center would provide this service with direction from Incident Command.
 3. Incident Command approves release of any and all information from the Media Center. All press conferences are scheduled at Media Center as needed.
 4. The Media Coordinator prepares key written messages with approval from Incident Command after every press conference. Information is distributed on paper and uploaded on the web site when approved.

POST-INCIDENT FOLLOW-UP PHASE RECOMMENDATIONS

EVALUATION

- A. Participate in an evaluation of media performance as soon as possible after event. A written report of evaluation goes to Incident Command.

- B. The Media Coordinator and backups attend all evaluations of task force members.
- C. The Media Coordinator and backups help Incident Command set up meetings with other groups. Meetings with school, families, and students are to be held on a daily, weekly, or as-needed basis.
- D. The Media Coordinator and backups are on call for the duration of events to create and dispense information for press and the web site. This includes any meetings with school or other groups and subsequent releases of information that might be necessary.
- E. The Media Coordinator and backups are available to write releases for distribution as necessary.
- F. Incident Command determines if it is necessary to regroup the task force.

The Media Coordinator may seek additional information that may have been overlooked during the crisis to present to media, i.e. heroic stories, plans that worked well, assistance provided by various groups. Timely news is uploaded to the virtual newsroom.

HEALING PROCESS

Much consideration must be given to the healing process and the media's role in that.

- A. Support must be provided for reporters needing accurate follow-up information with regard for their deadlines and the drive by their news agencies to get the stories.
- B. A support network of Media Coordinator and backups must be available for victims and families to call for guidance in this regard. While no efforts would ever be made to stop the media from interviews, or stop victims and families from giving interviews, some guidelines may help those being interviewed during this process.

- C. Written guidelines and personal support should be given to victims, who may want to tell their stories and just need support from others while being interviewed or in preparing for such an interview.
- D. All information should be placed on the virtual newsroom as needed.