

MEDIA MANAGEMENT IN BODY RECOVERY FROM MASS DEATH

The media are often the major means of communication about disasters. Accurate information about such events is critical for the public perception of what has transpired and likely next steps. It is the responsibility of all persons involved in the recovery of bodies from mass death to provide truthful and accurate information to the media. However, there should be only a limited number of persons who are authorized to provide information to the media.

Such information, while accurate and truthful, must respect and be sensitive to the dead, the living, and the workers. Guidelines are applicable before, during, and after the event. The following information applies to United States authorities. These practices may help you to provide the media with the best possible information.

- Preparation is the key to success in any encounter with the media. Develop information in a proactive manner (i.e., anticipate what you will be asked and prepare an answer). Also prepare answers to questions you do not want to be asked.
- Know what information to release and what not to release. Some information is protected by statutes such as the Freedom of Information Act and the Privacy Act and others.
- Distinguish between information that is internal (part of the organization's operations), external (what is going on at the site), and community-related (what is going on around the site). Remember it is almost impossible to prevent internal information from becoming external.

The media are often the major means of communication about disasters.

- Treat the media as an ally. They are there to tell your story. If you help them, they will most likely help you. Do not treat the media as an enemy without cause.
- Know local practices including how death is discussed in the culture. If possible, have a knowledgeable local consultant to assist you.
- In giving an interview, remember the following:
 - Keep answers brief. Answer in sound bites that you want the media to use rather than providing long answers to attempt to tell everything. In such responses, your own expertise can be your enemy.
 - Stick to the issue at hand. Know and communicate the who, what, when, where, why, and how of your organization's involvement in the event. Avoid speculation and personal opinion.
 - Provide "action" communications: what you bring to the situation and what you are doing about the problems. Always be polite and friendly. Keep your cool.
 - Explain the importance of your actions and how they fit into the larger context.
 - Provide a message along with a fact. A message is what you want the public to hear. This is sometimes called "the care factor." Example of a message: "We are doing all in our power to see that the remains are being handled as local customs dictate."
 - Do not be afraid to say "I don't know, but I will try to find out the answer for you."