WE ARE IN THE AGE OF THE JOINT INFORMATION CENTER (JIC)

One of the best life-saving and therapeutic measures during a pandemic is information. If the public cannot understand the mandates, directions, non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI), and decisions being made, there will be a significant increase in the loss of life. By providing consistent, timely, honest, and accurate information to the public we can reduce the anxiety caused by misinformation or a lack of information.

Pacific Northwest Team 2, a Type 1 Incident Management Team (IMT), was tasked with providing strategic level planning and coordination to the Unified Area Command located at the Washington State Emergency Operations Center (WA EOC), in support of Washington State's response to the COVID-19 pandemic, maintaining statewide perspective.

Regarding the information function, we were asked to evaluate the state's Joint Information Center (JIC) and make recommendations to the JIC Director.

GENERAL RECOMMENDATION:
Recognize the JIC as the first, best, and most reliable source of information for the COVID-19 pandemic response statewide.

SPECIFIC RECOMMENDATIONS:
- Develop a process and identify a single position in the JIC to have daily contact with the Unified Coordination Group, Unified Command, and State Emergency Operations Center in order to answer the primary question: "Is the State JIC **meeting expectations**?"
- Develop a **strategic communication** planning cycle for both short-term (24/48/72 hours) and long-term (7/14/21/28 days) planning. This will assist the JIC in developing appropriate methods to communicate planned, predicted, or inevitable events.
- Efficient and proactive **information flow** is critical to effectively meet public information needs and carry out PIO responsibilities. This is particularly true when multiple organizations unite into a cohesive team for emergency response. By maintaining a centralized communication facility, resources are better managed, and duplication of effort minimized (*Washington State EOC Standard Operating Procedures 11/15/2019*).
- Build on the excellent outreach to all Washingtonians with consideration to **equity, diversity, and inclusion**.
- Maintain and increase **public trust and consistent messaging** throughout the state using virtual community meetings and town halls; frequent media updates; daily video updates; virtual "personal contact" with SMEs via live streams.
- Actively manage **long-term staffing** (30/60/90 days) based on known or anticipated events.

In addition to the above bulleted list of recommendations, PNW2 Public Information Officers documented the following observations, lessons learned, and best practices from one of the first state JICs to be opened during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic.

BE ROBUST, RESILIENT and MINDFUL

An organization that is going to remain effective, sustainable and able to cope with the challenges that we face should cultivate three fundamental qualities:

1. **Robust** – Be strong enough to "take a hit."
2. **Resilient** – Be able to "take a hit and get back up."
3. **Mindful** – Be strategic and forward thinking so you have the space to recognize that "it's best if we don't take that hit at all."

COVID-19 REDEFINES OUR UNDERSTANDING OF A LONG-TERM EVENT

Experts suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic will affect our communities in waves, with spikes and lulls depending on time of year, adherence to NPIs, and the amount of time it takes to test, approve, manufacture, distribute, and administer a vaccine. Rebuilding and recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic could last for years. Plan for an organization that is capable of staffing a centralized information response over the next several years that has:

- Appropriate redundancy across the organization.
- Staffing based on skills, rather than qualifications, when qualified staff are not readily available.
- Organizational permission to be invasive when being invasive is needed to provide the public with the best information.
- Collaboration of organizations and individuals that are not going to view information as a resource to be hoarded.
- Leadership that:
  - Promotes the well-being of responders and resists resignation and despair,
  - acknowledges that no one person can fix the problem, and
  - accepts and understands that we are all in this together for an extended period.

MEETING EXPECTATIONS

- Ensure that the JIC has a communication link with Unified Coordination Group to advise of potential challenges, provide expertise on suggested messaging, and avoid communication failures.
- Document actions and retain records.
- Ensure that the Unified Coordination Group, Unified Command, and State Emergency Operations Center understand the role of the JIC.
- Get/give clear leader's intent to manage expectations of what success looks like.

> **Watch Out**: The JIC needs a seat at EOC planning meetings and needs to be involved in conversations with the advanced planning group to see what events/actions are being forecast. Depending on the experience and culture of the advanced planning group, they could be *"worried the info people were*

there to point out gaps and not there as a partner in the process to improve the outcome for the public and business community" (JIC Co-Director).

Reminder: Closed-loop communication is the key to the JIC knowing what major policy or planning changes have happened. Otherwise, the JIC can easily be blindsided and fall behind on messaging or fail to support major policy announcements with appropriate messaging - leaving the public frustrated.

LONG-TERM CHALLENGES

Staffing:
- Use resource tracking spreadsheet to manage current/future staffing needs.
- Develop good documentation, so that new staff can begin where others left off.
- Ensure comprehensive transition occurs - ideally a full day to "shadow" the position.
- Solicit interest for assistance from state agency communications employees.
- Develop rotation of "teams of people," so that there is a rotation of people able to fill in if a "whole team" becomes quarantined.
- Follow guidelines for symptomatic individuals (*72 hours, 14 days, etc.*)
- Remote onboarding and learning how to work as a team while virtual.
- Develop SOPs, best practices, cheat sheets for the incoming staffing to facilitate speed to competency.

Inability to Interact in Person (Low Tech Outreach):

Non-pharmaceutical interventions (NPI) have drastically changed the way we implement our traditional "low tech" outreach strategies. This necessitates eliminating traditional responses such as personally interacting with the public at designated locations. Community meetings have changed to "virtual town halls".

Solution: reorganize into sub-teams and work to ensure that essential businesses can download and print messaging materials, and that email lists are robust and inclusive of the target communities.

Existing Processes:

As with any organization focused on dealing with a complicated incident such as a pandemic, there is the tendency to remain in "initial attack" mode. Despite having established processes in place, there is a tendency is to be constantly overwhelmed by the day-to-day deluge of media requests, both announced and unannounced pressers, and updating talking points with the latest information.

- Leadership within the JIC must focus on stabilizing the incident by asking:
  - Are we following our established processes?
  - Are we flexible enough to correct our course before it is necessary?
- Establish daily meeting schedule, 24/48/72-hour plan, longer-term planning (10/14/21/30 days) to anticipate, assign, or begin work on messaging packages for predictable or significant events to avoid extremely stressful situations.

- Enlist PIOs with experience on long term incidents to help set pace for this long-term response.

Some of the processes that were established for ESF15 and the JIC in the 2019 Washington State Emergency Operating Plan Standard Operating Procedures included:
- The Public Information Officer (PIO) provides leadership for and manages Emergency Support Function 15 (ESF 15) External Affairs in the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC). **AND** Supervises: … Joint Information Center Manager/ Deputy Manager (if state provides leadership for incident JIC).
  - Reports to SEOC Supervisor
  - Coordinates with: Governor's Communication Director, state agency Communication Directors
- FEMA Region 10 public affairs staff are contacted and briefed on the state's response and emergency public information activities.
- A State Joint Information Center is established as requested by the MAC-G and/or is necessary to accomplish operational requirements.
- During RECOVERY:
  - Planning for a Joint Information Center within the FEMA-State Joint Field Office is discussed with FEMA Region 10's Public Affairs Office (note: this **assumes the Governor requested or is planning to request federal assistance from the President via an emergency or major disaster declaration**).
  - State emergency public information activities are transitioned **from ESF 15 in the SEOC to the Joint Field Office's JIC (once established)** after the **receipt of a Presidential emergency or major disaster declaration.**

Span of Control:
- Ensure that the leaders are not also the tacticians.
- Create a team of people that allows the leaders to stay removed from the operation, while others are engaged in the execution and distribution of information.
- Build an organization that maintains advised ratio of 5-10 PIOs per team lead.

STRATEGIC COMMUNICATION
- Map the processes within the JIC to ensure the correct people are involved.
- Enlist PIOs with experience on long-term incidents to help set pace for this long-term response.
- Anticipate impacts to the mental health of the JIC staff, as well as the population they serve as isolation, health and family concerns, loss of income, and the sudden reshaping of daily life takes its collective toll.

STRATEGIC ANALYSIS
- Identify individuals that can be dedicated to evaluating the entire information web (at all levels – local, state, Federal, other (neighboring) states.
- Conduct a SWOT analysis periodically

- What are the strengths, weakness, opportunities, and threats?
- Map the network of information flow from top to bottom.
  - Can the workload be distributed across the network?
- Maximize virtual platforms to share information/resources.
- Be clear about the mission of the statewide JIC.
- What happens if whole teams go down and need to be replaced?
- Develop contingency plans using PACE model planning (Primary, Alternate, Contingency, Emergency).
- What can be staffed remotely?
  - Who must be physically located "in" the JIC?
  - Develop a plan for a virtual JIC.
- JIC needs to take on a long-term analysis function.
- Work with Long-Term Planning and COVID-19 modelers to identify long-term messaging needs.

UTILIZE GAP ANALYSIS TO IDENTIFY WEAKNESSES
Always be asking:
  - What are we missing?
  - What do we need to be successful?
- Use feedback loops to make sure messages are received.
- Have someone dedicated to monitoring federal messages and tracking differences with state-approved messaging.
- Also look at other states' directives, guidance to find similarities, differences, tools, etc.

INFORMATION FLOW
- Ensure mechanisms support accurate, accessible, and timely information sharing with the public and various stakeholders during emergencies and declared disasters.
  - Put emphasis on "one-stop-shop" websites, and ensure they meet accessibility requirements for all user groups.
  - Utilize platforms for virtual media briefings, community meetings, or town halls.
  - Increase outreach to radio stations.
  - Consider Facebook or YouTube live streams and produced video updates with subject matter experts.
- Improve two-way intelligence gathering and information sharing by assigning specific liaisons between JIC and:
  - Emergency Support Function (ESF) 15 – External Affairs
  - WA 211 Resource Directory (approx. 2000 call/day and increase following Governor announcements)
  - Public information staff in the field (County JICs/IMTs)
- Share official, approved JIC products with all internal audiences (WA211, other JICs/PIOs).
- Gather official, approved information products from other sources within the state.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH SHOULD INCLUDE EQUITY, DIVERSITY and INCLUSION

- Develop partnerships with people who are full-time equity social justice workers.
- Consider a wide range of outreach platforms including traditional and nontraditional. For example: streaming animated ads, coloring books for underserved families, and social marketing campaigns targeted to areas where infection rates are increasing.
- To best serve the deaf, hard-of-hearing, and sight-impaired communities, work through the leaders of those community organizations.

> **Example**: WA EOC JIC contracted with a company in Seattle to create nine ASL video PSAs in coordination with community partners. These PSA are hosted on the state's primary COVID-19 website (www.coronavirus.wa.gov) where they can be shared individually or in a series during social media campaigns.

- Target Limited English Proficiency (LEP) translations based on community member input as to what languages are needed.

> **Example**: WA JIC compiled a list of over forty languages used within the state and prioritized translating messaging based on the importance of the news release and the capacity of available translators. They contract for 26 languages when a new release is particularly important; however, more commonly they translate the top 5-6 languages.

DEVELOP ALL MESSAGING FOR ACCESSIBILITY

- Ensure that all products made for online distribution are crafted in an accessible format. Prepare documents with appropriate color schemes that are colorblind-friendly and will print clearly.
- Retain the services of translators to assist JIC PIOs with replying to emails in compliance with Federal law.
- Create content crafted to a low reading level, written in plain language without the use of complicated medical terms. Ensure health educators review messaging to ensure the health-related points are still clear.
- Constantly monitor to ensure the target audiences are truly being reached and educated with this life-saving information.
- Secure the services of translation companies and be prepared to compete with other local and regional agencies for their services.

> **Example**: Finished WA EOC JIC products are translated with the requirement that each piece has a third-party review to verify that the translation is accurate. Then, it is posted to the website or disseminated through appropriate channels. The cost of inaccurate translations is extremely high.

> **Challenge**: Translation companies are overloaded as demands on their services from other JICs, state and county agencies, and businesses have skyrocketed.

> **Solution**: the JIC has expanded the list of certified translators from overwhelmed companies to individuals (approximately 40 identified) who can turn around end products much faster, often within a couple of hours, to meet the JICs objectives of delivering "timely information." Plan ahead for larger campaigns, allowing time for third party review.

TARGET UNDERSERVED AUDIENCES
Over 60 and those with Underlying Health Concerns:
- The mortality rate for this population group is significantly higher due to the way COVID-19 inflames lung tissue causing pneumonia, air hunger and respiratory arrest.

Limited English Proficiency (LEP) Groups:
- Seek the advice and support of an immigrant refuge population specialist.
- Recognize that many groups feel more comfortable opening up to trusted figures in their own communities or will only listen to their church leaders.

Indigenous Populations:
- During a pandemic, coordination with tribal governments and communities must be as strong as possible.
- Tribal members are often English speakers but often have had other challenges in receiving information.
- Contact a tribal liaison for advice on how to serve a particular tribe or group.
- Keep in mind tribal leaders represent sovereign nations, and as such have direct contact with the Governor's Office through pre-existing channels.

> **Example**: Determine which language speaking groups are providing the childcare services in your state or county and ensure that the information flow matches your findings.

> **Example**: In Washington State, the Somali and Spanish speaking populations are the most likely groups to provide childcare.

> **Challenge**: The messaging from the JIC must be similar or the same as to what the county is releasing, so that these language groups do not receive conflicting information.

PUBLIC TRUST and CONSISTENT MESSAGING
- Be the authoritative source for information.
- Increase the public trust and reliance in your efforts through clear, consistent, and timely information developed with equity, diversity and inclusion in mind.

- An incident specific webpage was created as the landing page for Washington State's COVID-19 Response (https://coronavirus.wa.gov).

- Use established communication channels to avoid confusion by the public and media.

   Example: State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC) Standard Operating Procedures (SOP) lists a phone number and email that is to be used by ESF15 (and then JIC, when activated); however, the phone and email used was different from the ones listed in the SOP.

- If multiple agencies are sharing information, post to established, authoritative site first and then have others share to their pages. This ensures consistent messaging and reinforces public trust in the information being shared, while avoiding duplication of effort.
- Increase social media presence using frequent livestreams, cross-posting, and sharing produced videos with subject matter experts (using 508 compliant subtitles and American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation).

- Ensure there is access to those with expertise to monitor social media, which is critical to assessing message effectiveness and anticipating issues.
- Host daily virtual media briefing with public officials and SMEs.
- Monitor JIC products to determine if efforts are being received as intended.
   - Determine if there is information out there that is contrary to the information PIOs are producing.
   - If there is, develop corrective messages.
   - Order a virtual operations support team (VOST) with the goal of the VOST training those with similar skillsets within the identified JIC PIO pool to serve in the VOST role as needed over the long term.
- Be proactive with messaging and provide assurance through all available mediums/ products to reduce panic-shopping, anxiety, and loss of trust.

   Example: On 03/23/20, the WA EOC JIC was not informed that Governor Inslee was announcing that all non-essential businesses would be required to close in 48 hours.

   "If we had a day's or even a few hours of notice to prepare and prep, we could have had systems in place and could have avoided a scenario where we frustrated the business community and possibly lose trust. As an example, the business outreach lead (BOL) lost two days of work because of the deluge of emails from business owners. The BOL didn't know that the Governor's office put her email on a critical announcement and was not just caught off guard, but actually had to deal with hundreds of emails requiring attention and customer service" - JIC Co-Director #1

   "Advance notice to the JIC of major policy change results in not just being efficient with our time, but it also gives us the only opportunity we have to push proactive messaging. Proactive messaging leads to increased public trust, and the significant decrease in panic shopping and the redundant submission of online forms and requests." - JIC Co-Director #2

LONG-TERM STAFFING

Develop mechanisms and processes to ensure the JIC can be sustainable for months.

- Look for qualified instructors that can offer a modified virtual course for those courses not available online.
- Create a recruitment video to demonstrate roles/functions/flow of JIC processes for potential staff.
- Provide a work environment where there is a shared value of coaching and mentoring as the norm.
- Agencies may need to deploy staff that can commit to 4/6/8 weeks.
- Develop and present a roster of skilled PIOs, approved communicators, and generalists.

TRAINING

- Encourage online training appropriate to the positions needed.
- Incorporate training into long-term planning.
- Share online training resources with current and potential staff (ICS 100-400, 700, 702, 800, etc.). Training could and should be online (virtual, webinar).
- Cross train among functions.

CARING FOR THE NEEDS OF THE JIC STAFF

- Follow all Non-Pharmaceutical Intervention (NPI) recommendations by the CDC.
- Maximize use of virtual assignments, so that staff can maintain physical distance and care for others at home while using WebEx, Teams, and other platforms to perform their work.
- Anticipate current and future challenges related to mental health, isolation, family concerns, and other socio-economic issues.
- Create a list of resources available to staff (testing, mental health care, access to services to reduce burden on self and family)
- Utilize Behavioral Health Strike Teams as available, ensuring all are aware and are provided with the contact info.
- Manage fatigue by instituting appropriate work/rest guidelines.

HAVE A PLAN FOR THE CONTAMINATION AND CLEANING OF THE JIC

- Waves of infection are predicted to occur throughout the next 18 months along with periods of recovery. There will also be a very long period of rebuilding the business community.
- If COVID-19 is discovered in the JIC, make sure there is a plan to conduct deep-cleaning and understand how long it will take to complete.
  - Is a contract in place with a cleaning company with pre-negotiated rate?
  - What is the backup location for continuing JIC operations?
- Implement back-up staffing plan in case of positive COVID-19 cases within the JIC or JIC labor pool.

APPENDIX: Examples of the Roles and Responsibilities for the WA EOC JIC COVID-19

JIC Directors
JIC directors serve three primary functions: JIC operations, strategic planning, and liaison with the Governor's office and the SEOC. The JIC Director serves as the primary liaison with county JIC leaders. JIC Directors report directly to Unified Command.

Public Information Team
This team manages media requests, produces and disseminates press releases, drafts holding statements (*a few brief sentences given to the media when they call immediately after the crisis*), send media advisories, assists with preparing leaders and subject matter experts for interviews, creates and updates talking points, works with JIC Directors to develop media/communications strategy for specific issues, handles logistics for press events and briefings, updates the DOH website, handles social media, and maintains key relationships with local and other stakeholder communications partners including the governor's office. This team also gathers information from subject matter experts on emerging topics and works with the Info team on producing fact sheets or other public information materials.

Media & Public Relations
This group manages information in the JIC, mainly in the form of talking points. The group's purpose is to:
1. respond to PIO, media, or public information needs through research and writing
2. establish and follow a process for gathering, vetting, approving, and distributing that information
3. ensure distribution of information to appropriate channels, such as:
    *   storing and maintaining updated talking points and holding statements in JIC Teams site for PIOs or social media team to access.
    *   distributing updated information to public information channels, particularly the hotline/211.
    *   providing advance notice (via holding statement) to public information channels of events likely to generate significant public inquiries.
    *   researching issues and developing written communications plans, news releases, etc.
    *   tracking and triaging incoming media requests.

Specialist PIOs
The following APIOs are lead on developing communications strategy for outreach to targeted sectors. They work closely with SEOC, state agencies, government relations, and the Community Engagement Team on messaging and outreach. They work with Information Management to produce any public materials. Agencies will work with JIC Directors to staff these positions. These positions represent agencies more heavily engaged in the response.

Information Management
This team works with PIOs to prepare, format, and produce fact sheets and informational materials to share with the public to help respond to or update the public. Team members review materials to ensure 1) materials are responsive to the questions and concerns being raised by stakeholders and the public, and 2) materials have gone through a review process that ensures a health education and equity lens has been applied, and that materials are translated appropriately.

Writers/Editors
Staffing: 2
Responsibilities:
* Creates presentations and emails for stakeholder groups.
* Develops executive talking points.
* Works with JIC leads to develop fact sheets and public information resources.
* Acquires reviews from the Community Engagement Team (CET).
* Follows review and approval processes established by JIC Directors.
* Coordinate with LEP/AFN lead to ensure materials are translated appropriately.
* QA/QC for other writers — proof read, edit and fact-check materials.
* Ensure consistent branding and style.
Reports to: Information Team Lead

Web Portal
Staffing: 4
* 2 content creators/managers/editors
* 1 who can manage the mechanics/design aspects of the web or backend work
* 1 who can continually review links and make sure everything is current
Responsibilities:
* Liaisons with agency webmasters to coordinate content with agency websites.
* Maintains daily update cadence.
* Updates information as requested by incident teams.
* Suggests new content, updates, or improvements for consideration.
* As available, scours existing web content to flag needed updates.
Reports to: Information Team Lead

Graphics
Staffing: 1
Responsibilities:
* Designs and lays out content, such as fact sheets or infographics.
* Implements document accessibility and ensures ADA statement is included.
* Ensures consistent branding / style.
Reports to: Information Team Lead

Community Engagement Team (CET)

CET informs the development of proactive community outreach and communications to assure the planning identifies and engages vulnerable and underserved segments of the population. This includes individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP), individuals with disabilities, LGBTQ+, immigrant/refugee communities, communities of color, high-risk populations, or those with underlying health conditions.