Serious Accident Communication

In the event of a serious accident or an incident within the incident, there are certain responsibilities that the lead PIO will assume. According to the Organization document for Serious Accidents, PIOs should follow these steps:

 1. Delegate the Command Staff Information Officer duties to another qualified Information Officer for the Fire Incident.

 2. During the Agency Administrator Briefing, set up the protocol to be used in releasing information with the local agency: A) The usual manner would be to have the local unit authorize the release of information, B) Set up who will be the accident contact with the local unit. This person might be the Public Affairs Officer or Administrative Officer.

 3. Set up how the release of accident information will be handled with the Incident Commander.

 4. Once an accident occurs, reconfirm what protocol will be followed with the local agency.

 5. Make sure that no names are released to media until the official release is done by the local unit.

 6. Restrict media from the accident scene until the Accident Operations Section Chief authorizes entry.

 7. Work with the Security Manager to prevent accident survivors from being interviewed until authorized.

 8. Work with the Safety Officer to gather correct information in preparing any news releases.

 9. Set up a press conference and/or interviews with the IC or another assigned person (i.e. local unit representative) after the official release of information.

The official release of information regarding serious accidents or fatalities will nearly always be a responsibility of the local unit. If, as an incident PIO, you are asked to participate in the writing and dissemination of an official release, some examples of those releases are available below.

In the event that a serious accident results in a fatality, information officers will be expected to meet the information needs of the other personnel assigned to the incident. This may mean that a bulletin board dedicated to the news concerning this incident alone is built and placed so that firefighters have easy access to it. If a separate board can’t be built, then clearly establish a section of the existing bulletin board dedicated to this event. Share as much information as it is possible to. In the void of real information, imagination will supply fiction.

As a member of the Incident Management Team it is also your role to remain mindful of the intensity of emotions that will surface immediately and to prepare those who will delay their grieving.

One of the best sources for helping to cope with a sudden loss within the wildland fire community is the Wildland Firefighter Foundation. Go to the website at <http://www.wffoundation.org/resources.html> and select “Family Liaison & LODD Tool Kit. On this page download “Family Liaison Role,” “Family Info Form” and “Line of Duty Death Information. Remember that firefighters are action-oriented individuals. They will want to do something. Assist in providing them with outlets. The Wildland Firefighter Organization website has several resources that will be appropriate in this type of event. Be guided not just by compassion, but also by a dedication to heal. Don’t assume that you know what people need: ask them.