

C. PUBLIC INFORMATION

1. INTRODUCTION

Public Information consists of the processes, procedures, and systems to communicate timely, accurate, and accessible information on the incident's cause, size, and current situation to the public, responders, and additional stakeholders (both directly affected and indirectly affected). Public information must be coordinated and integrated across jurisdictions, agencies, and organizations; among Federal, State, tribal, and local governments; and with NGOs and the private sector. Well-developed public information, education strategies, and communications plans help to ensure that lifesaving measures, evacuation routes, threat and alert systems, and other public safety information are coordinated and communicated to numerous audiences in a timely, consistent manner.

2. SYSTEM DESCRIPTION AND COMPONENTS

a. Public Information Officer

The Public Information Officer supports the incident command structure as a member of the Command staff. The Public Information Officer advises the IC/UC on all public information matters relating to the management of the incident. The Public Information Officer also handles inquiries from the media, the public, and elected officials; emergency public information and warnings; rumor monitoring and response; media relations; and other functions required to gather, verify, coordinate, and disseminate accurate, accessible, and timely information related to the incident. Information on public health, safety, and protection is of particular importance. Public Information Officers are able to create coordinated and consistent messages by collaborating to:

- Identify key information that needs to be communicated to the public.
- Craft messages conveying key information that are clear and easily understood by all, including those with special needs.
- Prioritize messages to ensure timely delivery of information without overwhelming the audience.
- Verify accuracy of information through appropriate channels.
- Disseminate messages using the most effective means available.

Roles of Public Information Officer

The Public Information Officer gathers, verifies, coordinates, and disseminates accurate, accessible, and timely information on the incident's cause, size, and current situation; resources committed; and other matters of general interest for both internal and external use.

b. Joint Information System

The Joint Information System (JIS) provides the mechanism to organize, integrate, and coordinate information to ensure timely, accurate, accessible, and consistent messaging across multiple jurisdictions and/or disciplines with NGOs and the private sector. The JIS includes the plans, protocols, procedures, and structures used to provide public information. Federal, State, tribal, territorial, regional, or local Public Information Officers and

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established JICs are critical supporting elements of the JIS. Key elements include the following:

- Interagency coordination and integration.
- Gathering, verifying, coordinating, and disseminating consistent messages.
- Support for decisionmakers.
- Flexibility, modularity, and adaptability.

c. Joint Information Center

The JIC is a central location that facilitates operation of the JIS, where personnel with public information responsibilities perform critical emergency information functions, crisis communications, and public affairs functions. JICs may be established at various levels of government or at incident sites, or can be components of Federal, State, tribal, territorial, regional, or local MACS (e.g., MAC Groups or EOCs). Depending on the requirements of the incident, an incident-specific JIC is typically established at a single, on-scene location in coordination with Federal, State, and local agencies, or at the national level if the situation warrants. Releases are cleared through the IC/UC, EOC/MAC Group, and/or Federal officials in the case of federally coordinated incidents to ensure consistent messages, avoid release of conflicting information, and prevent negative impact on operations. This formal process for releasing information ensures the protection of incident-sensitive information. Agencies may issue their own releases related to their policies, procedures, programs, and capabilities; however, these should be coordinated with the incident-specific JIC(s).

A single JIC location is preferable, but the system is flexible and adaptable enough to accommodate multiple physical or virtual JIC locations. For example, multiple JICs may be needed for a complex incident spanning a wide geographic area or multiple jurisdictions. In instances when multiple JICs are activated, information must be coordinated among all appropriate JICs; each JIC must have procedures and protocols to communicate and coordinate effectively with one another. Whenever there are multiple JICs, the final release authority must be the senior command, whether using Unified or Area Command structures. A national JIC may be used when an incident requires Federal coordination and is expected to be of long duration (e.g., weeks or months) or when the incident affects a large area of the country.

In light of the need for real-time communications, JICs can be organized in many ways, depending on the nature of the incident.

Table 7 identifies several types of JICs.

Possibility of a Virtual JIC

A JIC may involve real-time, constant links to other sites, thus creating a virtual JIC. All participants should be fully integrated and linked into the JIC so that it functions as a single-site operation.

Advantages include:

- **Rapid establishment of the JIC functions.**
- **Access to expanded resources.**
- **Relationship building.**

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Table 7. Types of Joint Information Centers

Incident	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Optimal physical location for local and IC-assigned Public Information Officers to co-locate• Easy media access is paramount to success
Virtual	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Established when physical co-location is not feasible• Incorporates technology and communication protocols
Satellite	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Smaller in scale than other JICs• Established primarily to support the incident JIC• Operates under the control of the primary JIC for that incident• Is not independent of that direction
Area	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Supports wide-area multiple-incident ICS structures• Could be established on a local or statewide basis• Media access is paramount
Support	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Established to support several incident JICs in multiple States• Offers supplemental staff and resources outside of the disaster area
National	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Established for long-duration incidents• Established to support Federal response activities• Staffed by numerous Federal departments and/or agencies• Media access is paramount

d. Organizational Independence

Organizations participating in incident management retain their independence. Incident Command and MACS are responsible for establishing and overseeing JICs, including processes for coordinating and clearing public communications. In the case of Unified Command, the departments, agencies, organizations, or jurisdictions that contribute to joint public information management do not lose their individual identities or responsibility for their own programs or policies. Rather, each agency/organization contributes to the overall unified message.

e. Getting Information to the Public and Additional Stakeholders

The process of getting information to the public and additional stakeholders during an incident is an ongoing cycle that involves four steps.

(1) *Gathering Information*

Gathering information is the first step in the process of getting information to the public and additional stakeholders. Information is collected from:

- **On-Scene Command:** A source of ongoing, official information on the response effort.
- **On-Scene Public Information Officers:** Report to the JIC what they are observing and hearing at the incident from the news media, elected officials and their staff, and the public.

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- **Media Monitoring:** Used to assess the accuracy and content of news media reports. It also helps to identify trends and breaking issues.
- **News Media:** A valuable source of developing information and current issues.
- **Public and Elected/Appointed Officials:** Inquiries from elected/appointed officials, community leaders, and the general public point to the specific concerns of those in the affected areas.

(2) Verifying Information

The next step in the process is to verify the accuracy of the information that has been collected, by consulting the following sources:

- **Other Public Information Officers in the JIC:** Comparing notes—especially with the lead Public Information Officer and Public Information Officers who are liaisons to the various assistance programs or response/recovery partners—is one way to verify information accuracy.
- **EOC Sources:** Including program leads, who should be asked to confirm information.
- **On-Scene Public Information Officers:** A valuable source for checking the accuracy of information reported to the EOC with reports from the news media, the offices of elected officials, and people on the scene.

(3) Coordinating Information

The next step in the process is to coordinate with other Public Information Officers who are part of the JIS. These Public Information Officers include both those represented in the JIC and those working from another location who are part of the JIS. Coordinating information involves:

- **Establishing Key Message(s):** After gathering information from all sources, unified messages are crafted that address all informational needs and are prioritized according to the overall Federal, State, tribal, and local response/recovery strategy. The mission includes getting accurate, consistent information to the right people at the right time so they can make informed decisions.
- **Obtaining Approval/Clearance From Those With Authority:** Ensuring that the information is consistent, accurate, and accessible. The approval process should be streamlined, however, to ensure that the information is released in a timely manner.

(4) Disseminating Information

The next step in the process is to disseminate information to the public and additional stakeholders. This step involves:

- **Using Multiple Methods:** In an emergency, there may not be many options. Phone calls and interviews might be the primary means of getting information to the news media. Personal visits or town meetings may be the most effective avenue for the public, elected/appointed officials, or other stakeholders. These outreach efforts can be supported by providing talking points and fliers to on-scene Public Information Officers.
- **Monitoring the Media:** Media monitoring is invaluable for ensuring that the message is understood by the news media and reported accurately and completely. Important inaccuracies should be addressed before they are reported incorrectly a second time.

3. PUBLIC INFORMATION COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING

Information communications strategies and planning are essential to all aspects of public information. Plans should include processes, protocols, and procedures that require the development of draft news releases; media lists; and contact information for elected/appointed officials, community leaders, private-sector organizations, and public service organizations to facilitate the dissemination of accurate, consistent, accessible, and timely public information. Public information communications should be a critical component of training and exercises.

D. RELATIONSHIPS AMONG COMMAND AND MANAGEMENT ELEMENTS

ICS, MACS, and Public Information have been described herein as separate elements of Command and Management within NIMS. However, NIMS relies on the relationships among these elements along with the elements themselves.

Some relationships are specifically defined. For example, an Area Command or Incident Command coordinates with Public Information on incident-specific public information through an incident Public Information Officer within the JIS. The relationship between Area Command or Incident Command and MACS is primarily defined by a communications link between Command and/or field-level personnel with resource management responsibilities and a particular staff position within multiagency coordination.

These relationships—along with other relationships among Command and Management elements that are not as clearly defined in advance—must be clearly defined and documented as each element evolves during an incident.