



**Grant County  
EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT**

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Incident

Public Information Officer

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COMPREHENSIVE EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT PLAN – EMERGENCY SUPPORT FUNCTION 15: PUBLIC AFFAIRS

## **GUIDELINES FOR PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER & MEDIA COOPERATION DURING EMERGENCY INCIDENTS**

Grant County Emergency Management, along with our partnering agencies, is proactive, straightforward and concerned about sharing critical information with the public. We understand the public's anxieties, fears and concerns, and we work to address those concerns head-on. Therefore, in all matters in our relationship with the media in dealing with current news, we will make every reasonable effort in providing the media representatives with full and accurate material.

### **Grant County Emergency Management Public Information Goals**

1. Assist local public safety agencies at emergency scenes;
2. Establish an effective public information sector at emergency scenes in accordance with the NATIONAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM;
3. Provide effective information to the public while the news media's attention is focused on an incident;
4. Provide safety information on a routine basis in support of public education; and
5. Maintain a positive image of all agencies and local governments.

### **PIO & Media Guidelines for Emergency Incidents**

1. All media representatives shall have the proper identification (credentials) before being allowed access.
2. All interviews will be on the record.
3. While serving at emergency incidents, the Grant County Emergency Management Public Information Officer (PIO) will make every reasonable effort to serve the needs of the media in informing the public about information pertinent to the incident at hand. Information provided to the media should relate only to facts of the incident.
4. The main topic points which PIOs will address/emphasize:
  - a. **Public safety.** Is there currently any risk to life and/or property? If so, warn and inform people in danger about the threat, and tell them what they can do to reduce their risk.
  - b. **What happened?** What the emergency is, how it started, and what's happening now.
  - c. **What are public safety agencies doing about it?** What are officials doing to bring the emergency to a conclusion and protect the public?
5. All media will be afforded equal access to incident scene areas which, in the opinion of on-scene emergency personnel, are safe and/or do not interfere with a criminal investigation. Because of safety and/or crime scene security requirements, media must stay with public information officers/official escorts while on scene.
6. The media should understand there are certain steps PIOs take to gather, verify and disseminate information, based upon best practices and the NATIONAL INCIDENT MANAGEMENT SYSTEM. Prior to public release, all information is reviewed and verified as correct by the Incident Commander. The IC may delay providing information to media representatives when an emergency exists or until such time that the pertinent information is available to him. Media representatives should be advised why a delay is necessary and provided the appropriate information as soon as possible.

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7. The media may photograph or report anything they observe when legally present at an emergency scene. Where publication of such coverage would interfere with an official investigation or place a victim, suspect or others in jeopardy, the withholding of publication is dependent upon a cooperative press, not upon censorship by the department. Upon such circumstances, the PIO should advise the media representative of the possible consequences of publication. However, Grant County Emergency Management personnel may not interfere with media's activities as long as that performance remains within the confines of that law.
8. The media will be told all that can be told **except** the following categories of information, as applicable to the current incident:
  - a. Identities of medical emergency patients and their protected healthcare information (45 CFR Part 160, RCW 71.05.390),
  - b. Information that may affect the process or result of any criminal investigation or legal proceeding (RCW 42.56.240),
  - c. Personal opinions about victims or injured persons,
  - d. Specific cause of death until announced by the Coroner's Office or his/her designee.

Information will be given which will not impinge on these four areas. If asked to divulge this information, the PIO will simply state that nothing more can be said.

9. The PIO may release the following victim conditions which do not specifically identify a person. These are the only victim condition descriptions approved for release:
  - a. **Life-threatening injuries/illness** – Based upon assessment of medical personnel, the victim's injury or illness is severe and life-threatening.
  - b. **Non-life-threatening injuries/illness** – Based upon assessment of medical personnel, the victim's injury or illness is not severe and life-threatening.
  - c. **Treated and released** – Patient received treatment but was not transported to/admitted to a hospital.
  - d. **Dead/died** – Self explanatory.
10. To safeguard the privacy of victims, the disclosure of a victim's location will be limited to the following:
  - a. **Transported to a hospital** – the specific hospital will not be disclosed, or
  - b. **In the custody of the Coroner**, or
  - c. **In the care of family**, or
  - d. **In the care of relief personnel** (Red Cross, Salvation Army, clergy, etc.).
11. If the PIO does not know the answer to a question, he/she will tell the media so. The PIO may then either:
  - a. attempt to gather the information for the media (if it is pertinent to the incident), or
  - b. direct the media to a source for such information.
12. If the PIO makes a mistake in reporting, the PIO will admit it and supply corrected information. Likewise, if the media makes a mistake in reporting, we expect the media to admit it and correct the information.
13. In some cases, Emergency Management PIOs will act as secondary support to assist another agency's PIO whose agency has primary jurisdiction for an incident. When that is the case, Emergency Management PIOs will follow the primary agency's guidelines or policies related to public information.

**Crisis Communication Partnering Agencies:**

Grant Co. Sheriff's Office, Ephrata Police Dept., Ephrata Fire Dept., Moses Lake Fire Dept., Moses Lake Police Dept., Rural-Metro Fire, Quincy Police Dept., Columbia Basin Hospital, Grand Coulee Fire Dept., Grand Coulee Police Dept., Grant Co. Fire Dist. #4, Grant Co. Fire Dist. #7, Grant Co. Fire Dist. #10, Grant County Fire Dist. #11, Grant Co. Fire Dist. #13, Grant County Health District, Grant County Fire Marshal's Office, Grant County Board of County Commissioners, Soap Lake Police Dept., Soap Lake Fire Dept.