Initial Incident Release

Despite our best efforts, bad things happen. A plane crashes, a tank inadvertently fires a round off range and destroys a civilian building, or a ship hits a pier. As the public affairs officer, when bad news happens, your adrenaline will begin pumping in anticipation of knowing you will soon be tugged in a thousand directions. Your people want you to tell them what they should be doing. The press will be clamoring for answers. Your boss will be seeking your advice.

As a PAO, you will be smack in the middle of this chaos. While your job can be easy during good times, it is often during crises that your career and reputation are defined. Today, we will focus on your role during an accident/incident and provide you guidance that will help you weather the storm.

Photo courtesy of co.ng.mil
Maximum Disclosure, Minimum Delay

One of the maxims of PA communications is to acknowledge that an incident has occurred. We do not withhold bad news simply because it's bad news. We must provide the information in a timely manner. It may, and likely will, be incomplete, but we must provide what we know. We must provide accurate information, but sometimes that takes time to get, as the situation may be still in progress and developing fast.

As information starts to come in from your sources, you may receive the names of victims and the injured. It is very important to remember that the names of government civilians and military personnel who have been killed or injured in an incident cannot be released until 24 hours after the next of kin have been notified. You must be sure this has occurred before you release this type of information.

It is very important to gather and compile accurate information for release as soon as possible, preferably within one hour of the incident. You will have a lot of phone calls and inquiries and will have to do your best to provide timely information.

Getting out this timely information isn't as easy as it sounds. Once you absorb and go through the information provided by your sources, you must decipher it and decide what is releasable and true. You do not want to interpret or speculate about the cause of an incident. Once the investigation is complete, the cause of the incident will be released. This can take several days, weeks or even months, depending on the incident. Sometimes we may never know exactly what happened.

In addition to figuring out what information to release, you will have to rely on credible sources. Let's talk about some of the sources you can use.
Sources

You must have credible sources for the information you release. Developing working relationships well before the incident occurs will help you get fast and accurate information when the need arises.

Some possible credible sources include:
1. Provost marshal
2. Personnel officer
3. Medical officer
4. Fire chief
5. Safety officer
6. Other staff officers

Now that we know we must release information about an incident and possible sources to get information from, let’s discuss the structure of the release.
Structure

The structure of the release is important and will include the lead, the bridge and all other releasable information in the body.

The Lead

The initial incident release will begin with a basic summary lead answering the W’s and H. Since this is an initial incident story, the lead emphasis is more controlled. If there are deaths, they are the lead emphasis, followed by injuries and then damage to any property. When writing the lead, use the impersonal who, if you have the information. If not, use general information.

Dead and Injured

An example would be:
One post soldier was killed and eight others were injured when they were struck by lightning at 5:17 p.m. Friday while watching a rugby match at a post recreation field.

Injuries Only

An example of an injuries-only lead would be:
Three people were injured in a fire at 5 p.m. Friday in the Johnson-Smith barracks on post.

Damage Only

An example would be:
A fire caused almost $500,000 in damage here Wednesday when it swept through the west wing of the Defense Information School.

When you have to use dollar amounts, make sure they are from an appropriate source. You will also need to use correct terms; "damage" is destruction and damages, is a legal term, such as "damages" awarded by a court.

Now that you have the information to write the lead, let's move on to the bridge.

The Bridge

The bridge statement in the initial incident story is simple. If the next of kin have not been notified, the bridge will be one sentence stating that the names are being withheld until 24 hours after notification has happened.

Example:
One post soldier was killed and eight others were injured when they were struck by lightning at 5:17 p.m. Friday while watching a rugby match at a post recreation field.

The names of the dead are being withheld until 24 hours after the families have been notified.

Now let's move on to the body of the story.

Body

The body will contain all other releasable information. If your lead began with dead and injured, the body of the story will be in the same format to address the information in the lead. Keep in mind if some issues are answered in the lead, i.e., number of dead, then it does not need to be readdressed in the body.

Releasable information for the dead includes:
1) Number of dead
2) How they died
3) Where they died
4) Cause of death
5) Where the body or bodies was taken and how it got there

Things that are not releasable are:
1) Sex
2) Age
3) Race, ethnicity
4) Home address; phone number
5) Social security number
6) Marital status/dependents

The next set of information will deal with the injured. If there are no dead in the story, you will begin with the...
Structure (continued)

injured, which was in the lead.

**Releasable** information for the injured:

1) How many injured
2) Where they are (hospital) and how they got there
3) Their status/condition, but **NOT** their specific injuries:
   a) Undetermined
   b) Good
   c) Fair
   d) Serious
   e) Critical

**Not** releasable information would include:

1) Sex
2) Age
3) Race/ethnicity
4) Home address; phone number
5) Social security number
6) Marital status/dependents
7) Specific injury information

Now that you have the information you want to put in your release, let's make sure you attribute it properly.

**Attribution**

All medical information and causes of death will be given by a credible source. An example would be: "...," said the attending physician at MacArthur Army Hospital.

In the initial release sources are identified by only job title and unit. This helps keep media and private citizens from contacting the sources while they are trying to do their job. The **provost marshal** is often the best source for initial information. Always be wary of eyewitnesses, as they may see only one side of the incident.

There are some additional releasable details about the incident you will want to include with the release. These will include:

1. When the officials were notified.
2. When responders arrived on the scene.
3. What was happening at the scene when the incident occurred, in general terms.
4. Anything else that is releasable.

Now that you have all the information you can release in the story, it is time to end it.

**The Last Paragraph**

The last paragraph lets the reader know that the cause of the incident has not been determined yet.

The statement is: *The cause of the incident is under investigation.*

This answers the "why" for the story, by telling readers an investigation is determining a probable cause. Don't speculate because you most likely don't know at this point.
Conclusion

During stressful times, a PAO must be able to handle multiple issues. This formulaic approach to the initial incident release makes it easier to get it written and released, which serves to answer the media's questions and give you time to continue to gather information.
References and Additional Resources