

SOUTHEAST MINNESOTA JOINT INFORMATION SYSTEM

Guidance for Regional Emergency Public Information Coordination

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Guidance for Regional Emergency Public Information Coordination

The following pages contain best practices for topics in emergency public information. Jurisdictions and organizations in the Southeast Minnesota (SEMN) Regional Joint Information System (JIS) can adapt these tips and techniques to enhance their public information plans and practices. The content is based on best practices and national standards. Topics addressed in this document include:

- 1. Strategic Message Development;
- 2. Message Dissemination;
- 3. Coordination and Information De-confliction; and,
- 4. Joint Information Center Operations.

The guidance documents include helpful tools, good practices, and templates.





Strategic Message Development

Tools

Tools to help with effective message development include, but are not limited to:

- Crisis communications plans;
- Incident information, including what has happened, where, who is responding, etc.
- Background and reference information about the incident (e.g. for a public health emergency, background on how the emergency started and reference information about the disease)
- Population data or information on partners and stakeholders;
- Priority matrix template; and,
- Message map template.

Message Content

All messages should contain the following five elements:

- 1. The source of the message or who is providing it
 - a. For example, the Emergency Management Agency Director or the National Weather Service.
- 2. Where the emergency is taking place.
 - a. This information helps clarifies who is impacted and may need to take action.
- 3. What actions people should take.
 - a. For example, if people should move to a pre-designated shelter such as a basement. If an underground shelter is not available, move to an interior room or hallway on the lowest floor.
- 4. When people need to act.
 - a. For example, immediately, no later than 10:00 a.m., etc.
- 5. Why people need to act, including a description of the hazard and its dangers, and potential consequences.
 - a. For example, the conditions of the severe weather pattern passing through our area could produce tornados.

Use numbered lists to organize the sequence of events in a multi-step process.

Message Language

Basics

- Messaging should be prompt, truthful, and succinct.
- Use short, simple, clear sentences.
- Unnecessary words or phrases should be removed.
- Avoid double negatives, and exceptions to exceptions.
- Place the main idea before any exceptions or conditions.
- Messages should use an active voice in the present tense.
- Never use jargon or acronyms.
- Use language which reflects a 3rd grade reading level.
- Work towards being transparent without being alarmist.





Think Rule of Threes

Keep key facts to threes. Studies have shown people remember better when key items are spoken in threes. Remember these famous quotes?

- "Veni, Vidi, Vici (I came, I saw, I conquered)." Julius Caesar
- "Friends, Romans, Countrymen lend me your ears." William Shakespeare
- "Stop, drop, roll." Public safety announcement (PSA)

Show and Tell

Studies have shown that retention and understanding increase with the use of two or more communication pathways such as auditory and visual. During a press conference or other visual messaging, show visuals, graphics, or demonstrations to emphasize information. For example, if people need to bring their medication, money or clothes, have those handy and show a medicine bottle, some money, or a clothing item.

Repeat, Repeat, Repeat

People don't usually have pen and paper next to their TV or radio. It's important you repeat things to ensure that any contact information for the public to request assistance or ask questions in the emergency is easily available. Repeat contact information often. It never hurts to say it multiple times throughout the press conference. Also reiterate key actions and messages.

Message Amplification: When more agencies or organizations are saying the same thing, the public is more likely to comply with recommended public safety actions. Encourage other jurisdictions and agencies within the Regional JIS to amplify messages, for example by sharing social media posts.

Message Structure

Message structure depends some on the technology being used to disseminate the message. For example, a 90-character text message must be more succinct than an emailed message. Message structure should include:

- Source:
- Hazard (the why);
- The location of the hazard (the where);
- Guidance on what people should do; and,
- The time that they should take action by.

Strategic Messaging Priority Matrix

This matrix is a tool that that can be used to assist in strategic analysis of the incident and message planning (Table 1). It provides a quick snapshot of all stakeholders and issues involved in an incident, ensuring that planning efforts are broadly focused and not wrapped around individual concerns.

Stakeholders, both internal and external, are plotted in the "Who" boxes. Issues, concerns or significant events, both internal and external, are plotted in the "What" boxes. Table 2 provides an example of a completed strategic messaging priority matrix. As a starting point, SEMN JIS members could develop a template matrix with general stakeholders and likely issues in preparation for an incident as.







Table 1. The priority matrix is a tool to help identify key actors and issues during a crisis.				
	Internal	External		
Who?				
What?				

Table 2. Example priority matrix for a winter storm emergency				
	Internal	External		
Who?	 Employees affected Employees assessing damage and/or working Hospital staff First Responders 	 Local health departments / hospitals Local EMAs Minnesota HSEM Elected Officials (local, state, federal) Media FEMA Private Industry General Public SEMN JIS 		
What?	 Damage Assessments Employee Accountability Coordination Responders en route Govt. office closings 	 Power out/lines down Road closures EOCs activated Sheltering Search and Rescue Pets School/business closings 		



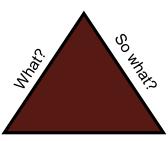
Message Map

Jurisdictions and organizations may use message mapping to help identify messages in an emergency. A message map template is provided to help support the identification of messages during an emergency (Figure 1). Message mapping steps include:

Step 1: Identify the audience - The audience may include victims, victims' loved ones, individuals who are directly affected, potential volunteers and donors, neighboring communities not directly impacted, elected officials, the media, access and functional needs populations, healthcare professionals, special interest groups, business community, etc.

Step 2: Identify the common, overarching concerns of the audience - Attempt to identify what the audience needs and wants to know. The needs and wants of the audience can be thought of as three key questions – what?, so what?, now what?. Or in other words:

- What is the most important information I need to know?
 - Example: Evacuation routes, shelter in place, boil water before drinking, etc.
- What issues are impacting or could impact me the most?
 - Power outages, sheltering, loss of loved ones, recurring terrorist attack, etc.
- What actions are being taken to keep me safe and cared for?
 - What should I do?, where do I go?, what is government doing?, How can I help, etc.



Now what?

Step 3: Develop 3 key messages that address the concerns of the audience - These 3 key messages are what go in the first set of boxes. Messages should be brief, concise, and written at a 3rd grade reading level. Messages should parallel any emergency public information objectives.

Step 4: List supporting facts for each key message – The supporting facts should support and elaborate on the message.

Step 5: Finalize and distribute the message maps - In consultation with subject matter experts and Joint Information Center (JIC) staff, message maps should be approved by leadership and shared with staff, all relevant partner organization, and jurisdictions.

 $^{^1}$ Message Mapping template and guidance is also outlined in the Southeast Minnesota Joint Information System Example Template for a Local Emergency Public Information Plan.









Message Map Template

Stakeholder:					
Question or Concern:					
Key Message 1:	Key Message 2:	Key Message 3:			
Supporting information 1-1:	Supporting information 2-1:	Supporting information 3-1:			
Supporting information 1-2:	Supporting information 2-2:	Supporting information 3-2:			
Supporting information 1-3:	Supporting information 2-3:	Supporting information 3-3:			

Figure 1. A message map template helps support the process of identifying key messages during an emergency.



2. Message Dissemination

Emergency public information is used to help the public avoid risk or harm. In avoiding risk, morbidity and mortality are reduced and community resilience is enhanced. Effective messages enhance self-efficacy, reduce harm, and can give individuals a sense of control in disasters. Message dissemination relates to ensuring the target audiences can receive and understand the messages. In order to be most effective, messages must be disseminated so that they reach the right people, at the right time, and in the right place.

Tools

Tools for effective information dissemination include, but are not limited to:

- Crisis communications plan.
 - For example, plans articulate the roles and expectations for staff to disseminate information.
- Distribution lists and/or contact databases.
 - Lists should be updated regularly, secured to protect confidential information and available to authorized users. Electronic lists can also be hosted on a secure server for remote access with a web browser. Hard copies of lists should also be available at operations locations such as the JIC and/or Emergency Operations Center (EOC).
- Mass notification systems including, but not limited to:
 - o Sirens;
 - o PA Systems;
 - Text messaging;
 - o Email;

- Voice call;
- Digital signage;
- o Radio or television alerts; and,
- Websites.

- Media including radio, TV, and web.
- Call centers, such as 311.
- Social media platforms, such as Facebook, Twitter, etc.

Understanding the Audience

When developing message dissemination procedures, first determine the target audience. For example, are you attempting to reach the whole community or a specific geographic area within the community? Specific incidents may call for different target audiences, message content, and notification priority. Use the Strategic Messaging Priority Matrix (page 4) as a guide.

Match Method to Audience and Incident

Once the target audiences have been identified, identify the appropriate mode of communication for each audience. Different modes of message dissemination may be more appropriate for specific audiences. For a wide audience where the highest performance and throughput is required, emergency public alert systems are likely the most effective method. SMS alerts can be ideal for mass notification within a known network, such as a college population.

Ensure Accessibility

Messages must be disseminated via methods that ensure they are fully accessible to people with disabilities. Emergency public information is required to be made available to people with disabilities under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). Messages should be made accessible for the whole community, including people with access and functional needs. This includes but is not limited to translating messages into prevalently spoken languages other than English.





Use Consistent Content

While the dissemination method should be targeted, message content should be consistent across all populations no matter the communication method. Research has indicated that targeting message content to different populations during the response phase can lead to confusion and even harm.

Evaluate Limitations

Evaluate the potential coverage and capacity limitations of each available message dissemination mode. Each will have its own strengths and weaknesses. For example, sirens are effective for communicating to a broad population outside and not effective at targeted messaging.

Frequency and Level

Establish general policies to guide the frequency and level of communication to be disseminated. These policies must balance speed versus deliberation because, in many cases, there will not be a clear picture of the situation before a message must be disseminated. Clearly identifying policies regarding frequency and level of communication can help set expectations within the communications function and with the broader audience. For example, an update will be provided every hour even if there is no new information.

Clarify Approval Process

Define coordination around the approval and dissemination process in detail and document the process within the appropriate emergency plans. Identify one function to be the lead for approving a message for dissemination and also define the process for issuing various types of messaging. Different situations may require different agencies or organizations to take responsibility for sending a message.

Build in Redundancy

Ensure that the messaging dissemination process is redundant. For example, a message may be emailed, texted, posted on a website, shared with media, etc. Redundancy should include accessibility components like American Sign Language (ASL) interpretation, language translation, relay, etc.

Social Media

Social media gives organizations a platform to communicate in an immediate, direct manner through which the public can also respond. The rapid pace and public nature of many social media platforms, such as the retweeting ability within Twitter, can facilitate rapid dissemination of information throughout connected networks. In addition to dissemination of information, social media can help organizations gain situational awareness, develop relationships with their audience, and engage in conversations about the incident. During an emergency, agencies and organizations typically assign someone to monitor social media for ground truth, trending questions/concerns, rumors, misinformation etc. Many organizations utilize social media aggregator tools, such as Hootsuite or TweetDeck, to assist in monitoring efforts. These tools allow social media monitors to search for multiple keywords and/or hashtags and monitor these conversation threads simultaneously. Many regional joint information systems also encourage sharing social media intel (e.g. ground truth, trending rumors) with JIS members and amplifying the messages of member organizations by "sharing" or "retweeting" posts, as appropriate.





3. Message Coordination and De-confliction

Message coordination and de-confliction are important elements in ensuring that the public can fully and appropriately act upon the information. When messaging is unclear or reported differently by more than one source, people can be confused about what they should do and take inappropriate actions.

Coordination involves ensuring that all appropriate parties, such as those involved in emergency public information, have the same information, have as much information as is possible, and are on the same page about what should be done with the information. Coordination should occur not just among communications personnel and within the communications function, but also with operational functions personnel. The operational personnel have the component information that will ultimately be crafted into concise messages and disseminated to the public.

Tools

Tools for message coordination and de-confliction include, but are not limited to:

- Crisis communications plan;
- Distribution lists and/or contact databases of JIS partners;
 - Lists should be updated regularly, secured to protect confidential information, and made available to authorized users. Electronic lists can also be hosted on a secure server for remote access with a web browser. Hard copies of lists should also be available at operations locations such as the JIC and/or EOC.
- Conference calls with other members of the SEMN JIS; and,
- Document sharing sites such as Dropbox or Google Drive.

Relationship development

Strategic relationships with organization and agencies that are likely to collaborate on messaging should be developed pre-incident. Establishing relationships, determining roles and responsibilities, and then formalizing the relationship via a Memorandum of Understanding (MOUs) will facilitate more effective coordination during an incident. A case study on communications during the 2001 anthrax attacks found that pre-existing organizational and professional networks increased trust among key decision makers and communicators during the crisis.²

Identify a Spokesperson/Spokespeople

Each jurisdiction should create a policy authorizing only identified spokespeople to speak to the media. Potential spokespeople should be identified prior to the event, provided training, and practice via exercises. Other personnel within the organization should be instructed not to speak with the media and to refer all media inquiries to the appropriate channels.

Define terms

Communications partners should work together to define key terms for emergency mass communications. Using appropriate, unambiguous terminology helps reduce confusion and enhances self-efficacy. For example, would the word gunman be appropriate for a female assailant? Minimize use of any terms that are unique to your organization, jurisdiction, or agency.

² Clarke, L., Chess, C., Holmes, R., & O'Neill, K. M. (2006). Speaking with one voice: Risk communication lessons from the U.S. anthrax attacks. *Journal of Contingencies and Crisis Management*, 14(3), 160-169.









Pre-scripted messages

Pre-scripted messages related to likely hazards and risk should be drafted, coordinated, approved, and exercised during the planning phase. Pre-scripting messaging allows all potential stakeholders a chance to review, edit, and approve the content increasing coordination and message quality. Additionally, pre-scripting allows messages to be translated into prevalent languages other than English and provided in alternate formats to accommodate individuals with disabilities and others with access and functional needs.

Foundational Information

In addition to pre-scripted messages, foundational information such as likely hazard fact sheets, biographies, photos, safety records, historical hazard information, contact information, etc. will facilitate the rapid creation of complete and thorough messages.

Exercises

All emergency-related actions are more fluid if they have been practiced. Practicing message coordination and de-confliction via exercises will make the activities easier and more effective during an incident. Public information officers and other communications personnel should be engaged in emergency exercises. They should practice coordinating among themselves and also with operational personnel. In addition, public information officers (PIOs) should be asked "trick questions" in an attempt to get them off track and away from their coordinated messages.





4. Joint Information Center Operations

Mission of the Joint Information Center (JIC)

To provide a central location (physical or virtual) that facilities operations of the Joint information System (JIS) by bringing together public information officers and other emergency communicators to collaborate and share information before, during, and after an incident that involves multiple agencies and/or jurisdictions.

Concepts

"Get the right information to the right people at the right time."

The Joint Information System provides a structure and system for:

- Developing and delivering coordinated interagency messages.
- Developing, recommending, and executing public information plans and strategies on behalf of the Incident Commander.
- Advising the Incident Commander concerning public affairs issues.
- Controlling rumors and inaccurate information.

The JIS is a way of coordinating; the JIC is one location where the message coordination takes place.

Pre-Incident/Preparedness Phase/Activation

Prior to the activation of a JIC or during the time it takes to establish the JIC, initial activities and considerations may include any or all of the following:

Preparedness Activities

- Conduct training and exercises to practice JIC roles and responsibilities and JIC/JIS coordination.
- Establish and maintain a list of media agencies that includes:
 - o Contact information;
 - o Deadlines; and,
 - o Delivery systems.
- Identify and prepare contracts for translation, interpretation, and other accessibility services to ensure appropriate and timely information can reach people with disabilities and others with access and functional needs.
- Identify and connect with stakeholders.
- Prepare pre-scripted Emergency Alert System messages, news releases, factsheets, and backgrounders.
- Monitor media reports.
- Monitor social media and engage in dialogue.
- Set up phone numbers for press inquiries.
- Establish contracts for call centers or discuss coordination with existing call centers that may support public inquiries in an emergency.
- Create and maintain an emergency contact list for individuals in the SEMN JIS.





Location

- Ensure only *one* JIC being established for the organization and/or jurisdiction, and identify primary and alternate locations for the JIC.
- Once JIC locations are arranged, sign a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), agreement or contract with the facility.
- Assess the JIC locations for sufficient size and space, power, communication, parking, ADA compliance, and security.
- Designate areas for PIOs, staff, equipment, supplies, meetings, press briefing etc.
- Prepare, gather and set up the appropriate equipment and supplies, depending on the type of JIC, such as:
 - o Telephone lines;
 - o Cellular phones;
 - o Computers with internet access;
 - o Printers and copiers;
 - Lectern and Public Address system;
 - o Video equipment;
 - o Office furniture; and,
 - Papers and pens.
- Ensure the IT department sets up all telecommunication and IT equipment for activation.

Staffing

- Understand the function, roles, and responsibilities of the JIC.
- Review JIC organization and staffing chart, and understand lines of command.
- Identify the skills needed for each position in the JIC and staff the positions appropriately.
- Determine the staffing needs based on the potential or actual effects of the incident.
- Become familiar with the available job resources, such as plans, equipment, and staff, and JIC plans and forms.
- Designate a local spokesperson and alternate.
 - o For example, a PIO, health officer, agricultural specialist, etc.

During the Incident / Response

Once the JIC is activated and in full response mode, the following activities and considerations can be taken:

Staffing & Briefings

- Schedule JIC briefings on a regular interval, preferably at least one per each operational period.
- Ensure there is a transition plan for staff between each operational period. Follow procedures for transferring responsibilities between shifts.
- Apply the span of control concept. Under the National Incident Management System (NIMS), an appropriate span of control is 1 supervisor for between 3 to 7 individuals.
- Create pre-recorded updated messages on the public and press hotlines to prevent the call center from becoming overwhelmed.





Manage Information

- Establish conference call lines for media briefings.
 - o Remember to use the mute button during sidebar discussions.
- Gather situational awareness from field PIOs, field command, public inquiry, the call center, media monitoring, and news media.
- Verify all information by consulting other PIOs in the JIC, emergency operations center (EOC) sources, and PIOs in the field.
- Coordinate information with other PIOs who are part of the JIS, and establish key messages and obtain approval and/or clearance from the appropriate and/or designated authority.
- Disseminate information to the public using multiple methods of delivery such as media briefings, interviews, news conferences with multiple spokesperson, news releases, and other methods using technology.
- Establish a process for rumor control.
- Monitor media, both traditional and social, for any inaccuracies regarding the incident.

Post-Incident

- Deactivate the JIC by following check-out procedures.
- Notify the media of the demobilization, and provide a phone number for the media to call following deactivation.
- Notify local PIOs and jurisdictions associated with the regional JIS.
- Complete and submit all required documentation.
- Ensure all materials are returned to their proper storage location, and file requests for replacement of resources that are expended or inoperative.
- Share lessons learned at After-Action conferences to contribute to the After-Action Report and inform future activations.
- Update plan(s).
- Archive all documentation pertaining to the operation of the JIC and the incident including the Administration and Logistics sections.

Keys for Success

- Always think two-steps ahead, anticipate unmet needs and identify future gaps in equipment, supplies, and expertise.
- Everyone needs information. Know your audience and what they are looking for.
- Understand that some problems cannot be solved easily, quickly, or alone.
- When managing information, do not be an optimist. Present what the data says and have a course of action to make the situation better.





Sample JIC Functions

The following outlines the four functions of a JIC and the areas of responsibility each function typically covers.

List of Common Emergency Public Information Functions

Information Gathering and Analysis

- Communicate regularly with the Emergency Operations Center (EOC), Incident
 Command Post (ICP), Unified Command, Senior elected officials, or other leaders as
 appropriate to gather new or clarifying information on the incident, provide
 information on crisis communications response activities as appropriate, and
 coordinate messaging and talking points.
- Monitor local and national traditional media (radio, television, and newspapers, including their websites), and social media, noting trending topics, rumors, or misinformation.
- Identify rumors and misinformation, as appropriate.
- Ensure that any liaisons to external agencies are approved by the Incident Commander or Unified Command.
- Provide liaisons and participate in regional, state, or Federal coordination centers when activated.
- Monitor partners' websites for situation updates and statements.

Coordination and Production

- Develop written/visual products consistent with the JIC's messaging strategy (e.g., social media posts, holding statements, talking points, fact sheets, videos, news releases, website updates, etc.), reviewing all products for grammar and other errors.
- Draft messaging to guide written/visual product development.
- Identify audiences and tailor messages to those audiences, when necessary.
- Translate written products (e.g., news releases, website content, social media posts, etc.) and provide translations of media articles.
- Determine accessible messaging considerations for audiences with access and functional needs (e.g., translating written products, ensuring that the website updates are 508 compliant, etc.).
- Update official websites with emergency information.
- Coordinate translators to attend news briefings and news conferences.



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Information Dissemination

- Disseminate written/visual products consistent with the local jurisdiction's messaging strategy (e.g., holding statements, talking points, fact sheets, videos, news releases, website updates, etc.).
- Post to social media, as the incident demands and using pre-approved messages.
- Respond rapidly to rumors or misinformation harmful to public safety or the success of emergency response efforts.
- Take media inquiries, maintain a log of inquiries, and respond to them in a timely manner and accurately with approved messaging.
- Maintain a list of media contacts.
- Hold news conferences or media briefings when necessary (including providing speakers, invitations, locations, scripting, etc.), ensuring that the needs of populations with access and functional needs and people with disabilities are considered during the news conference (e.g., requests media widen camera shot to accommodate sign language interpreters, addresses needs for close captioning, etc.)
- Arrange for any multimedia resources or visuals that may accompany a spokesperson.
- Provide a spokesperson(s) (e.g., executive, subject matter expert, etc.) for media briefings and interviews, as needed and support spokesperson(s) as needed.
- Coordinate media briefings and other public events as needed.
- Ensure that official websites are 508 compliant and accessible to individuals with access and functional needs.
- Coordinate with public call centers (e.g., 211 or 311) to disseminate emergency public information.

Administration and Logistics

- Manage arrangements for a JIC a physical facility or virtual platform to conduct operations.
- Acquire resources for the JIC (e.g., office supplies, food, water, room space, telephone equipment and services).
- Support IT staff to resolve issues with the JIC facilities or platforms.
- Help set up facility for news briefings and news conferences.
- Provide administrative support as necessary (e.g., making copies, obtaining signatures, compiling documents, etc.).
- Collect, organize, and file documentation (e.g., on costs, staffing charts and hours, activities, official reports, publicly released information, etc.), working with other functions in the JIC to confirm accuracy and completeness.





Following are responsibilities which may be handled by a JIC Manager.

JIC Manager

- Assess situation and gather verified incident information.
- Activate a crisis communications team or IIC.
- Prepare and disseminate initial holding statement and/or social media post quickly following incident notification.
- Hold an initial team or JIC briefing.
- Assign staff to functions on team or JIC and establish a shift/rotation schedule.
- Ensure that staff is clear on the reporting structure and roles; provide training and coaching to staff as needed.
- Establish and set up a virtual or physical JIC to conduct emergency public information activities.
- Assign liaisons to coordinate with stakeholder groups, as necessary.
- Obtain ongoing information about the status of the incident.
- Hold regular team briefings during the response.
- Establish a process for shift changes during response efforts that will last more than one shift.
- Lead the development of messages in line with objectives in the Incident Action Plan.
- Approve written/visual products consistent messages (e.g., social media posts, holding statements, talking points, fact sheets, videos, news releases, website updates, etc.).
- Share messages and/or written products with incident leadership and jurisdiction executives as appropriate.
- Identify stakeholders and keep them appropriately informed.
- If a public call center (like 211 or 311) will support message dissemination, assign staff to coordinate with the call center. Work with Coordination and Production to establish talking points/scripts, etc.
- Deactivate the JIC when the incident no longer necessitates the support of the JIC.
- Following deactivation, assess the JIC's response and conduct a hotwash.
- Ensure that JIC activities (including messages and written materials) have been archived appropriately.



