

SOURCES OF INFORMATION

1.0 Background

1.1 Sources of information for the public

During an emergency, most people will be highly motivated, receivers of information and actively seek it from multiple sources. This presentation talks about describing the origins of information that inform the public and the public information officer (PIO). The participants should get to understand the different sources of information that inform the public and the PIO.

2.0 Sources of information for the PIO

While much attention is given to what the PIO/team says and how it communicates to various audiences, to be effective it has to plan for how it will find out what it needs to know in order to do its job. Key sources of information need to be identified. Contact information with key sources of information has to be assembled. Mechanisms need to be established and tested.

Some of the information the PIO/team will come from internal sources within the emergency response organization. But a lot of information is available through many other sources communicating about the event. These need to be monitored so you can learn from what they are saying, and stay on top of rumors or misinformation that you want to immediately correct.

The larger and more complex the emergency, the greater the number of organizations that will be involved in responding and communicating. The risk communication programs have to list these players and establish mechanisms for coordination of communication.

Emergency response has various aspects. It has to deal with the injured, respond to the ongoing event (fire, industrial accident, etc.), conduct radiation monitoring, coordinate with the responsible parties at the site of the event if it's at a plant or hospital or some other facility, among other tasks. Each of these functions provides a source of information for the communication team.

Risk communication plans should include a list of these internal sources, and their contact information, and establish and test mechanisms for communicating with these sources during an emergency. Sometimes the communication team will want to initiate the contact with these sources. Sometimes these internal sources will want to contact the information team. Work out these procedures in advance.

Your emergency organization will probably not be the only one involved in responding to the wide range of aspects of a nuclear or radiological emergency. Local fire departments, hospitals, schools, public health agencies, environmental safety agencies, and food safety agencies, among others, will also be involved, depending on the nature of the event.

The general public will be a source of information to the communicator as well. This information can come from the things that people call or email about, or questions they ask. That will tell you about events and circumstances people are observing which you and your organization might

not yet know about. Also, and quite importantly, inquiries from the public are a good source of information, in real time, about how people are feeling. Although keep in mind that those who contact the agency are a minority of the whole population and are probably more anxious than most. Risk communication is not just about the facts. It's about how those facts feel. You can communicate better if you take into account how people are feeling.

Information from the general public can also come from monitoring social networks. This so called "Web 2.0." The network of online sites people use to communicate with each other like Twitter and Facebook is very active during emergencies and can be a valuable source of information from the public about what's going on and how people feel. This was an invaluable source of information to emergency responders during the 2010 Haiti earthquake, for example. It is also another good way to monitor the emotional 'temperature' of the public's response in real time as the emergency develops.

3.0 Monitor information from all sources

A lot of information is available through all the other sources that will be communicating about the emergency. These need to be monitored for three reasons.

First, they represent a lot of eyes and ears and they can help make you aware of circumstances or events your organization doesn't know about. You can learn a lot about what's going on from what these sources say.

Second, the news media and social networks and bloggers will almost surely be getting some things wrong. Stay on top of rumors or misinformation and correct them quickly,

Finally, you need to know what others are reporting and saying because if you are asked about some event or circumstance that has been reported, but you don't know about it, it will damage your credibility, and that damages public trust and confidence, which weakens your influence on public behavior as part of overall risk management.

4.0 Sources to monitor

The news media will be very active in case of a nuclear emergency. They will be reporting from many places. They are a potential source of information. Monitoring these reports can provide valuable knowledge. The media also provide information just in the questions they ask you directly, which also reveals what they know.

In addition, the media will be a major source of information to the public and some of this information may not be accurate. You need to know that too so you can correct any misinformation, both directly to the media reporting it and in general messaging to the public through various channels.

Don't forget the new information media that are online. This includes information and news sites. It also includes blogs and the websites of NGOs that are interested in nuclear or health or environmental issues. These are particularly important to monitor for inaccurate information. Online social media sites should also be monitored (eg. Twitter and Face book).

Make a list of all the media and online sites you want to monitor. Set bookmarks for the online sites in a computer that can then quickly be used to monitor such sites.

When you do learn something new or important via any of these sources, ensure that there are mechanisms in place to bring that information to the right people in your organization who can use it in the emergency response.

5.0 Coordination amongst organizations

In addition to the organizations responding directly to the emergency, many of which will already be part of the coordination plan under the Incident Command system, other organizations will be responding to or have an interest in any nuclear emergency. It is important to coordinate your communications with what these organizations are saying. This is not a matter of getting everybody to say the same things. But it is important to be aware of what the others are saying to avoid inconsistencies or conflicts. Lack of coordination about communication among various levels of government during the Three Mile Island emergency made the public confused, and scared, and led to a massive evacuation even though only a small one was suggested just as a precaution.

For each potential nuclear emergency you are planning for, consider all the organizations that might be involved or have an interest, at all levels of government. Health, food, agriculture, police, national security, meteorology, trade, tourism, transportation, education. International organizations are also important since even a small nuclear emergency can spread concern and interest worldwide very quickly.

Make an inventory of these organizations and establish contacts with them. Establish communication mechanisms for emergency situations and appoint staff specifically assigned to just this task. This is particularly important during the acute beginning stages of an emergency.