

Boston EMS Public Information Plan

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I. INTRODUCTION

Boston EMS, the City's municipal 9-1-1 emergency medical services provider and a bureau of the Boston Public Health Commission (BPHC), responds to over 122,000 clinical incidents per year, with as many as 400 or more incidents in a day. Requests for information from local media outlets is commonplace and may vary from a single inquiry verifying transport from an incident location to more complex requests for information.

Boston EMS department members may not represent the department, with the media or in any other public forum, outside of their normal duties, without explicit authorization, as set forth in this document.

II. PURPOSE

The Boston EMS Public Information Plan serves as a communication guide for the department. This plan is inclusive of all forms of public communication, including television, print, digital and radio media inquiries, social media, press releases, speaking engagements, public recognitions, interviews, and requests for information/data. It will also serve as a guide for the role of public information officer, within the construct of the Incident Command System (ICS).

This plan will assist Boston EMS in meeting its operational mission as well as public information obligations. Effective and accurate communication can help ensure credibility, strengthen public trust and promote lifesaving measures.

The Public Information Plan will describe how Boston EMS will respond to varying requests for public information and the flow of communication following the initial request. Furthermore, this plan defines the activities that should take place depending on the level of the incident and at different stages of the emergency response, including notification to the BPHC Communications Office, as well as Boston EMS's participation at a joint information center (JIC).

This plan outlines key assumptions for the response to public information requests, refers to relevant legal authorities and defines the roles and responsibilities for managing public information requests. It is designed to work in-concert with BPHC, city, state and federal plans. It addresses the evolving spectrum of activities related to communications during incident management response and recovery actions.

III. ORGANIZATION & AUTHORITY

Within Boston EMS, the Chief of Department serves as the spokesperson and lead authority for public information decisions and requests. As a bureau of the BPHC, Boston EMS is supported by the BPHC Communications Office. When authorization from the BPHC Executive Director and/or the Mayor's Press Office, is required, this is coordinated by the Office of the Chief, through the BPHC Communications Office.

IV. HEALTH INSURANCE PORTABILITY AND ACCOUNTABILITY ACT

Boston EMS patient records are considered Protected Health Information (PHI), any disclosure of information pertaining to one or more incidents, must comply with the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA) of 1996. Protected individually identifiable health information is information that relates to:

- the individual's past, present or future physical or mental health or condition,

- the provision of health care to the individual, or
- the past, present, or future payment for the provision of health care to the individual,
- and that identifies the individual or for which there is a reasonable basis to believe it can be used to identify the individual (including name, gender, address and birthdate).

This information can only be shared if a HIPAA release form is signed by the patient or the patient's guardian.

V. INCIDENT COMMAND SYSTEM AND THE PUBLIC INFORMATION OFFICER ROLE

As a first response service, Boston EMS organizes much of its day-to-day functions in a manner consistent with the Incident Command System (ICS). ICS is designed to be flexible, with the ability to expand, as appropriate, given the scale, complexity and duration of an incident. Responsibility and authority begins with the Incident Commander (IC), who is typically the senior ranking person on scene. Within the ICS structure, the Public Information Officer (PIO) functions and responsibilities fall under the purview of the IC, assuming he or she is a Supervisor or member of Command Staff, until a PIO is designated.

The PIO may gather, verify, coordinate and disseminate accurate, accessible, and timely information, in accordance with the guidance set forth below.

VI. INCIDENT-SPECIFIC MEDIA REQUESTS

Requests for public information, associated with recent or active incidents, are generally categorized into (A) day-to-day small-scale routine incidents of media interest, with requests to verify transport of patient(s) and receiving hospital(s) or (B) larger scale / high profile events, which may last multiple hours or days.

Unless authorized by the Chief of Department, Boston EMS personnel may not make an unsolicited notification to the media regarding an incident.

A. Routine Incident Requests

Local media outlets routinely submit requests for information pertaining to active or recent incidents, usually occurring in a public location, where they seek to augment their story with confirmation of EMS transport.

1. Communication Protocol

Because such incidents have a relatively short on-scene time and requests for information may occur after Boston EMS has left the scene, it is unlikely that a PIO will be designated. For this reason, anyone in the following rank, role or office may respond to such inquiries:

- On-duty Field Supervisor or Captain (if he or she responded to the incident)
- Dispatch Operations Supervisor or Deputy Superintendent
- On-duty Shift Commander
- Superintendent of Operations
- Superintendent in Chief
- Office of the Chief
- Medical Director
- BPHC Communications Office

Those authorized to speak about such incidents may provide the following information, if approached by the media:

- Verify whether we responded to the location,
- Note the number of patients and how many were transported
- Provide the disposition (numbers evaluated, treated, transported, and/or referred to the medical examiner) and receiving hospital breakdown
- Their name and rank/title, to serve as the source of the information (if desired)

Under the following circumstances, Boston EMS personnel should limit information to ONLY verifying a response:

Boston EMS Policy and Procedure Manual

- Incidents involving other public safety personnel, whether they are a patient or directly connected to the incident.
- Any incidents that involve a police investigation, such as a shooting, stabbing or domestic violence. In such scenarios, publicly disclosing disposition(s) or receiving hospital(s) may place patient safety at risk.

As with all requests for information, the person communicating the information will use discretion when disclosing incident-specific information. Personnel shall not provide names of department members or unit designations that responded to an incident, without approval.

AS SOON AS POSSIBLE after communicating information to the media, the Office of the Chief (including the Chief of Department, Chief of Staff and Deputy Chief of Staff) and BPHC Communications office must be notified, either via an email to media@bostonems.org or a phone call to any one representative within either office, who will then notify others. The notice should include the name of the media outlet the information was provided to and a brief summary of what was communicated.

B. Large Scale / High Profile Incidents/Events

Large scale responses, such as mass casualty incidents, disasters and special events may lead to an increase in requests for information from local and national media outlets. These requests can range from questions about response activities (i.e. resources involved) to the number of patients encountered and/or transported. The IC shall notify the Chief of Department as soon as possible, if he is not already aware of the incident. As a default, the PIO role will follow ICS protocol, with the Boston EMS IC taking on that function, unless someone else is designated. The Chief of Department may opt to serve as the spokesperson for the incident, even if he is not the IC, and/or may designate a PIO. Alternatively, it may be determined that all communication is routed through a Joint Information Center (JIC), the BPHC Communications office or the Mayor's Press Office.

1. Communication Protocol

Although the PIO is bound by the same constraints regarding what can and cannot be communicated to the media (as set forth in the previous section), a more protracted incident may allow for additional detail pertaining to response and recovery operations, as well as safety.

If there is an opportunity for further communication, the PIO may also consider:

- Promoting the hard work of department members, the difficult conditions and physical demands they face, as well as their dedication to serving others.
- Explaining the measures Boston EMS takes to prepare for responding to such incidents, including training, exercises, drills, interagency coordination, planning, and equipment investments.
- Providing guidance on safety and injury prevention efforts the public can take to avoid or prepare themselves for such events.

In the case of multi-patient incidents, the PIO may make the determination to provide additional incident information regarding age group (such as 'adults' or 'minors') or injury status (i.e. 'non-life threatening') to avoid confusion and/or incorrect assumptions.

Boston EMS personnel are advised against representing the work of our public safety partners. The focus of any communication to the media should be on our work, the incident at hand, and what we know; assumptions, opinions, generalities, information on trends and off-topic inquiries should be avoided.

AS SOON AS POSSIBLE after communicating information to the media, the Office of the Chief and BPHC Communications office must be notified, either via an email to media@bostonems.org or a phone call to any one representative within either office, who will then notify others. The notice should include the name of the media outlet the information was provided to and a brief summary of what was provided.

The Boston EMS Office of the Chief, upon notification to the BPHC Communications office, and in coordination with the PIO, may convey incident summary information (e.g. patient counts, disposition and hospital distribution) via social media, to mitigate continued demand for updates during an active incident.

2. Joint Information Center

Significant incidents may require a press conference and/or establishment of a joint information center. Decisions about who to represent the department will be made by the Chief of Department.

Depending on the severity of an incident/emergency a Joint Information Center (JIC) may assume the primary responsibility for all public information efforts and media relations activities. In the event that a JIC is to be established and Boston EMS personnel are requested at the JIC, the Chief or his designee will assign a PIO to the JIC, in coordination with the BPHC Communications Director. The PIO(s) staffing the JIC will attend media briefings and be responsible for bi-directional communication, feeding information in and ensuring relevant information is communicated back out to appropriate parties within Boston EMS.

VII. REQUESTS FOR INFORMATION/DATA

In addition to incident-specific media requests, Boston EMS receives a substantial number of inquiries pertaining to other aspects of department operations, which typically come in the form of interview and/or data requests. Examples of topics include the impact of extreme weather (i.e. heat, cold, storms), marathon bombing lessons learned, special event/disaster preparedness efforts, trends associated with specific incident types (such as Narcotic Related Illness), ambulance response times, and call volume statistics.

In all such instances, prior approval is necessary before speaking to the media or communicating the information to any external party, principally to ensure the department provides a vetted and uniform message. Although recipients of media requests are often determined to be best suited to represent the department, the Chief may opt to respond himself or select another person. In anticipation of media requests, such as in advance of a storm or special event, the Chief of Department may communicate with Command Staff to provide messaging language and pre-authorization to individuals who may be approached by the media.

In the case of data requests, any communication of department data, whether to the media or any third party, that has not already been made public by Boston EMS, must be approved by the Chief of Department. Because a department member has access to data is not an inherent authorization to share that data with others. It is imperative that any data communicated outside of the department has been vetted and is consistent with other instances of sharing similar data. Additionally, Boston EMS is responsible for ensuring the department's data is not misrepresented by others. For this reason, restrictions are often placed on recipients to ensure they adequately cite Boston EMS as the source and accurately represent the information.

For all other requests, the requester should be referred to the media@bostonems.org email (which includes representatives from both the Office of the Chief and Communications Office). If an immediate response is required, the person receiving the request should provide the BPHC Communications Office phone number, which serves as the public line for all media requests. For urgent requests, the department member receiving the inquiry may also notify a representative from the Office of the Chief by phone (the Chief of Department's phone number should never be provided to the media). The Boston EMS Office of the Chief and BPHC Communications Office will work collaboratively to address the request. If BPHC Executive Director or Mayor's Office approval is necessary, the BPHC Communications Office will coordinate such authorizations.

Inquiries may also come in the form of a public information request, which would require a formal response from the Boston Public Health Commission General Counsel's office. The General Counsel's Office will work in coordination with the Office of the Chief, Professional Standards, and/or BPHC Communications Office to respond to the request.

VIII. PRESS RELEASES/PROMOTING A GOOD STORY

Boston EMS department members save lives on a daily basis; it is not uncommon for both internal personnel and members of the public to brush off the heroism associated with these "routine" accomplishments. That said, certain situations do cause individuals within the department to take pause and determine that praise, beyond an internal commendation, is warranted. Such opportunities serve to highlight the great work of individuals, while also shedding light on the tremendous dedication, skill and accomplishments of all department members.

For these instances, as well as other occasions, such as graduations and awards banquets, where the opportunity arises for Boston EMS to be the subject of a positive story, efforts can be made to entice the media. The most common method of engagement is via Twitter, although formal press releases may also be drafted. These efforts are managed through the Office of the Chief, in coordination with the BPHC Communications Office.

IX. REQUESTS FOR AN EMS REPRESENTATIVE

Boston EMS is nationally recognized as a leader in EMS and personnel are often called upon to speak on the department's behalf. Requests come in various forms and frequently through informal channels. When a department member is asked to speak or participate in a public forum or on a committee, by virtue of their role and/or work at Boston EMS, they are inherently serving as a representative of the department. All such requests should be sent to the Office of the Chief, to ensure they are vetted and approved by the Chief of Department (as well as any other necessary parties). This is inclusive, but not limited to, the following scenarios:

- Requests to present or serve on a panel at conferences, educational forums, public events, etc.
- Press conferences, whether speaking or standing on stage
- Requests to represent Boston EMS on a committee
- Requests to be honored or spotlighted, or select another department member to be recognized
- Any other situation where the individual is identified as a representative of Boston EMS, including, but not limited to, in-person or television appearances, as well as radio, print, or online journals/blogs

It is not uncommon for multiple individuals within the department to be contacted for such requests, leading to confusion and duplication of efforts. And, even small-scale events, can have influential attendees, where it is essential the Chief is aware of and has authorized the person to represent the department.

Ultimately, the Chief is accountable to the department as a whole, as well as his superiors, including the Executive Director and Mayor. It is imperative he is not only aware of, but has provided authorization for, all public references to Boston EMS and its membership.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Social media is an important tool in promoting the department and disseminating timely information. Boston EMS manages both a Facebook (www.facebook.com/officialbostonems) and Twitter account (@Boston_EMS). Both accounts are managed by the Boston EMS Office of the Chief. All members of the department are encouraged to provide feedback and suggest stories to promote on social media.

For personal social media accounts, Boston EMS personnel must comply with any current and future guidelines set forth by the department, Boston Public Health Commission and City of Boston. Boston EMS does not have an official policy regarding personal social media accounts,

although current policy, prohibiting disclosure of patient protected health information and taking unauthorized pictures of patients/incidents, would extend to social media.

<http://www.hhs.gov/ocr/privacy/hipaa/understanding/summary/index.html>