

ESF 15 – Public and External Communications

Purpose

This Emergency Support Function (ESF) Annex describes how Sumner County will provide disaster-related information to the media and the public. It is designed to improve the ability of all participating agencies and organizations to:

- Quickly relay critical and potentially lifesaving information to those at risk
- Provide timely, consistent information on the status of emergency operations
- Coordinate the release of public information from all responding agencies
- Assure the public that government is responding effectively to the emergency
- Make credible and consistent information available to answer citizen inquiries
- Provide ongoing and useful information regarding recovery activities
- Ensure a system is in place to provide information and guidance to County, City and if appropriate, State and Federal, elected and appointed officials

Scope

ESF-15 is a functional annex to the Sumner County Emergency Operations Plan (SuCoEOP) and to the extent possible, information contained in other sections of the SuCoEOP will not be repeated in this document.

Many agencies have designated Public Information Officers (PIOs) and existing departmental emergency public information plans and procedures. ESF-15 is not designed to take the place of these plans, rather it is designed to complement and support the departmental staffing and procedures already in place.

Policies

This ESF Annex applies to all County, City and participating agencies with assigned emergency responsibilities in the SuCoEOP.

During an emergency, all county departments and agencies will coordinate public information releases with the Sumner County PIO.

Concept of Operations

General

The Sumner County Clerk serves as the County Public Information Officer (PIO), responsible for the overall coordination of public information activities at the county level. A support staff of trained departmental PIOs consisting of the Director of Emergency Management, County Financial Officer, Health Department Director and Economic Development Director will assist the Sumner County PIO, as required, in this effort.

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In the absence of the Sumner County PIO, the support staff will appoint an acting County PIO from among the PIO support staff.

The ESF-15 Coordinator is a critical member of the EOC Team and will work within the EOC framework as described in ESF-5 Emergency Management.

The local media is a logical extension of the disaster operation and recognized as the best means to quickly get information to the majority of the public. Sumner County counts on the local media to provide emergency instructions and potentially lifesaving information to the public following a disaster. A partnership role will be maintained with the media by making every attempt to provide timely and accurate information throughout the disaster situation. In most cases, contact with the media will be maintained using landline and cellular telephones, facsimile, and email.

Organization

If the situation dictates, emergency public information activities will be coordinated from a Joint Information Center (JIC). Activating a JIC will help Sumner County departments and participating organizations coordinate their activities and help to ensure consistent and accurate information is disseminated.

Since many emergencies strike rapidly, the public information system cannot always react swiftly enough to properly inform the public about the hazard and for this reason, it is important that citizens are made aware of potential hazards and appropriate protective measures prior to the occurrence of an emergency. Sumner County makes every effort to provide ongoing public education to its citizens regarding emergency preparedness activities.

Every effort will be made to provide emergency public information to special needs groups, such as the hearing and visually impaired and non-English speaking populations. Close coordination will be required with the government, volunteer and community agencies described further ESF-6 Mass Care, Housing and Human Services.

A large disaster will result in state, national and international media coverage, and in the aftermath of a disaster, media personnel may attempt to obtain information from other than official sources.

Joint Information System (JIS)

The Joint Information System (JIS) describes all public information activities being conducted regarding the event including those outside the EOC and the JIC (i.e., public information functions being carried out at the scene and from departmental offices or other remote offices and locations).

The ESF-15 Coordinator will work to establish communications with all Joint Information System (JIS) components to facilitate the exchange of information. The use of an organized JIS will help to ensure interagency communication and the release of consistent information.

As part of the JIS, the on-scene agency PIO will address media representatives at the incident site and keep the EOC and the JIC informed of these briefings. Contact with JIS components will be maintained primarily by telephone and radio.

Joint Information Center (JIC)

The Joint Information Center (JIC) is a physical location where PIOs from organizations with primary disaster involvement come together to coordinate and disseminate information.

The purpose of JIC is to:

- Gather and coordinate information and serve as the “hub” for the release of timely, accurate, consistent and useful disaster related information
- Allow all involved organizations to speak from “one sheet of paper” providing consistent messages to the public
- Enable the EOC Team to concentrate on emergency decision-making and refer all media and public inquires to the JIC
- Ensure the ability exists to answer direct inquiries from the public
- Monitor media coverage to verify the accuracy of information being disseminated
- Be proactive in responding to the disaster related information needs of all audiences
- Develop and implement a comprehensive public information strategy to gain and maintain public trust and confidence

In most cases, the JIC will be located in close proximity to the Sumner County EOC. However, it may be located anywhere to support emergency activities. Wherever it is located, it is imperative that the JIC maintain contact with decision makers and/or the EOC via telephone, radio, the Internet, facsimile and/or face-to-face communications.

Once a JIC is activated, all emergency public information activities, including media inquires, should be coordinated through the JIC. The JIC will become the central coordination point for all emergency public information and external communications activities. To the extent possible, the JIC will be staffed with Public Information Officers (PIOs) from all agencies and organizations involved in the event.

The JIC is designed to be flexible to accommodate the unique requirements of any emergency or disaster situation and its structure and staffing will be customized for each response. For example, a major event would require JIC activation and full staffing, while a smaller event might only require one or two people performing all of the necessary tasks.

Regardless of the incident, the function of the JIC remains essentially the same, while the number of departments and agencies involved as well as the location and the quantity of information to be disseminated will vary greatly. At a minimum, the following functions must be performed regardless of these variables:

- Establish and maintain contact with local radio, television and print media
- Develop and disseminate written information such as news releases, fact sheets and other reports as needed
- Schedule news conferences or interviews with department heads and other officials; brief them if appropriate
- Provide interview opportunities that meet the unique needs of each medium (television, radio, print)
- Establish and maintain a communications link or a Joint Information System (JIS) with field PIOs and all remote sites performing public information activities
- Monitor the information being released by the media to ensure appropriate information is being released and take steps to correct any inaccurate information
- Exchange information with elected officials, voluntary organizations, industry representatives, State and Federal PIOs and all other involved agencies as the situation dictates
- Provide ongoing information to and coordination with County, City, State and Federal elected officials

PIOs working in the JIC retain the autonomy to represent the public information needs of their respective agencies, while working closely with the EOC Team and/or JIC to ensure consistent information is being disseminated in a timely manner by all departments.

The PIOs working in JIC will have two primary functions: (1) carry out the public information activities of their respective departments and agencies and (2) provide support to and assist with the overall JIC mission.

Designated departmental PIOs may be asked to staff various JIC functions regardless of the level of involvement of their respective departments. This will ensure an adequate number of PIOs are available to support emergency public information activities.

Dissemination Process

Many methods are used to disseminate information to the public during an emergency or disaster. Warning systems, in general, are described in Annex ESF-2 Communications. Considerations for special populations are outlined below.

General Public

Radio, television, print media, fliers, posters, brochures, information brochures are all established methods for providing information to the public. Use of a particular medium(s) will be situation dependent, based upon the urgency of the information and the intended audience. Local cable provider has assigned specific channels to local governments for informational purposes. Newspaper coverage in Sumner County is provided on a weekly basis in most of the cities.

Special Populations

- Hearing impaired
 - The Emergency Alerting System (EAS) provides trailers on TV screens provide weather watch and warning messages and other emergency information
 - Alpha numeric pagers are available through private vendors which can utilize warning information provided by media outlets through subscription services
- Visually impaired
 - The Emergency Alerting System (EAS) provides audio alerting via radio and television stations. Some emergency planning and disaster information brochures are available in Braille
- Non-English speaking
 - Many televisions have the capability to provide closed-captioning in Spanish
- Schools
 - All schools in Sumner County have NOAA weather radios and also monitor broadcast media
- Hospitals & Nursing Homes
 - All hospitals and nursing homes in Sumner County have NOAA weather radios and monitor broadcast media
- Correctional Facilities
 - The Sumner County Jail has NOAA weather radios and receive their information through public safety radios

Specialized Information Protocols

- Restricted Areas & Reentry
 - Information on restricted areas, as well as the process for reentry into an area after it has been declared safe, will be obtained from the appropriate executive officials in coordination with the Incident Commander and disseminated immediately to the media and the public
- Emergency Assistance
 - Information on any federal, state or local disaster assistance that might be available will be obtained from the agency offering the assistance. In some cases this information may given directly to the media and the public. In others cases, a telephone number will be provided for obtaining additional information
- Casualties
 - Information on the number of fatalities, injured and missing will be obtained from the Sumner County Coroner, Sumner County Sheriff or local law enforcement and disseminated immediately to the media and the public. The identity of victims will be released only after confirmation of proper next-of-kin notification

Pre-Scripted Information

The Sumner County PIO will collect and maintain a file of fact sheets, instructions & procedures, and other readily available pre-scripted information on a wide range of topics to support the rapid dissemination of public information. This pre-scripted information will usually be generic in nature and non-specific to the event, but may still prove valuable to both the media and the public in the early stages of an emergency or disaster. Examples of such pre-scripted information include:

- Chemical Fact Sheets -- for known chemical hazards
- Public Health Guidance -- for disease prevention after flooding
- American Red Cross Press Releases

Notifications

The Sumner County Emergency Management Director will notify the Sumner County PIO of EOC activations and request that they report to the SuCoEOC to coordinate ESF-15 activities. As additional staffing needs become apparent, other agency personnel may be asked to report to the EOC to assist with public information and external communications activities.

Actions

Preparedness

- Identify all viable methods to reach the public including but not limited to radio, television, print media flyers, posters, brochures, informational booths and the Internet
- Develop pre-scripted media releases and public advisories dealing with each hazard with the potential to affect Sumner County
- Ensure adequate space and equipment is available for a JIC in a location in close proximity to the EOC
- Ensure all departments have trained staff to support the JIC
- Make accommodations for 24-hour staffing
- Ensure all local media outlets are pre-identified and contacts established. Brief them regularly on emergency public information procedures
- Ensure emergency responders are familiar with public information procedures and know how and when to refer the media to the appropriate field or JIC personnel for information

Sumner County Emergency Operations Plan

- Develop and maintain this ESF Annex as well as supporting Operating Procedures
- Identify special needs populations and be prepared to meet their emergency public information needs Encourage media involvement in the exercise design process and planning

Response

- Inform the public of health or safety concerns and ways to reduce the associated dangers
- Provide evacuation instructions and shelter locations
- In coordination with the EOC Team, release emergency information as dictated by the situation
- Implement a proactive public information strategy to ensure the media's needs are being met.
- If the situation dictates, activate and staff the JIC.
- After coordination with the Sumner County PIO, release information regarding the emergency or disaster to other county departments and agencies, the media and the public
- Resolve any conflicting information & dispel rumors

Recovery

- Continue all emergency public information activities based on the circumstances and the organizations involved in the recovery efforts
- Distribute information on what to do when returning to your damaged home and how and where to apply for different types of disaster assistance
- Provide information regarding available disaster recovery programs and resources to the media and the public
- Compile a written record of events, including any printed materials, news releases, tapes & clippings.
- Prepare reports and provide input to for an after action report
- Assess effectiveness of information and education programs

Prevention

- Develop a campaign to promote the importance of maintaining adequate insurance
- Provide information and increase awareness about safe rooms and other shelter methods
- Conduct all-hazard safety visits to increase home hazard prevention actions
- Promote preparedness information that will lessen the impact of disasters, such as having a disaster preparedness kit and family disaster plan

Direction and Control

The Sumner County EOC will serve as the central location for interagency coordination and executive decision-making, including all activities associated with ESF-15 Public Information and Communications.

Prior to emergency or disaster situations, the Sumner County Emergency Management Department is charged with providing information to the public to prepare them.

In major events or those with considerable media attention, Sumner County will establish a JIC to facilitate the coordinated release of information from all responding agencies. Whenever possible, the JIC will be established in close proximity to the EOC.

The ESF-15 Public and External Communications Coordinator in the EOC will:

- Ensure the most up to date information is available to answer public inquiries regarding the emergency by developing uniform talking points for all employees who have direct, daily contact with the public to help ensure all government employees can answer basic questions and make referrals regarding the emergency

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- Work with the Sumner County Emergency Management Director, or designee, to help ensure the individuals answering the citizen helpline telephone have timely, accurate and useful information available to answer direct inquiries from the public
- Schedule and coordinate frequent news conferences and media briefings as dictated by the event. The ESF-15 Coordinator will work with elected officials and department heads to ensure appropriate representation at news conferences and ample opportunities for media interviews and photos
- Work with field PIOs to establish a media information site near the disaster area and encourage all media to gather at this location for the most recent information
- Make every effort to provide emergency information appropriate for non-English speaking citizens and other special population groups (e.g., the elderly and those with physical and developmental disabilities) by working closely with the volunteer and private sector agencies associated with special population groups to ensure their unique public information requirements are met
- Coordinate with the staff of elected officials and other dignitaries visiting the disaster area (i.e., members of congress, senators, governor, etc.) to coordinate site visits, tours and media opportunities. The ESF-15 Coordinator will ensure local officials are kept apprised of such visits
- Continue to work with the Sumner County Emergency Management Department throughout the recovery phase to help ensure useful information continues to be made available to the media and the public

Responsibilities

All Tasked Agencies will:

- Develop applicable standard operating procedures, guidelines and/or checklists detailing the accomplishment of their assigned functions.
- Use "plain text" when communicating by radio transmission during disaster situations.
- Provide ongoing status reports as requested by the Public Information and External Communications Coordinator.
- When requested, deploy a representative to the EOC to assist with public information and communications activities.
- Maintain updated resource inventories of supplies, equipment, and personnel resources, including possible sources of augmentation or replacement.
- Document all costs and expenses associated with response and recovery activities taking care to clearly segregate disaster related work in the event that reimbursement becomes available from the state and federal government.
- Maintain up-to-date rosters for notifying personnel and 24-hour EOC staffing capabilities.
- Perform other emergency tasks as needed or assigned.

PIO Responsibilities

- Mitigation
 - The PIO is responsible for publicizing county policies regarding all mitigation activities such as the implementation of building codes, awareness campaigns or flood mitigation procedures.
- Preparedness
 - The PIO will assist in the education of the public on subjects such as training opportunities, updates to existing plans and information on new plans and procedures.
- Response
 - The PIO will notify media of disaster declarations and be prepared to answer questions related to the declaration.
- Recovery
 - The PIO is responsible for disseminating information on disaster recovery efforts, programs and the locations of disaster assistance centers. The PIO will also disseminate information for contacting agencies that assist with unmet needs.

Administration and Support

Support

Requests for emergency assistance will be resolved at the lowest level direction and control facility with appropriate response resources capabilities. Unresolved assistance requests will normally flow upward from cities to the county, and/or field deployed command posts to the Sumner County EOC, from there they will be requested from responsible representatives in the State Emergency Operations Center (SEOC), and as required to other states or the federal government for assistance support.

Agreements and Understandings

All agreements and understandings entered into for the purchase, lease, or otherwise use of equipment and services, will be in accordance with the provision of laws and procedures.

The Proclamation of a State of Local Emergency by the Sumner County Board of County Commissioners or a State Disaster issued by the Governor may suspend selected rules and regulations that affect support operations. The primary agency will determine the specific impact of the situation and inform the ESF group members.

Status Reports

The Public Information Officer and the Sumner County Emergency Operations Center will maintain status of all outstanding assistance requests and unresolved ESF-related issues. This information will be summarized into periodic status reports and submitted in accordance with applicable operating procedures.

Expenditures and Recordkeeping

Each ESF agency is responsible for establishing administrative controls necessary to manage the expenditure of funds and to provide reasonable accountability and justification for federal reimbursement in accordance with the established guidelines.

The first source of funds for expenditures by agencies in response to an emergency, imminent disaster, or recovery from a catastrophic incident, is to be from local budget funds such as the County General Fund.

Critiques

Following the conclusion of any significant emergency event/incident or exercise, the primary agency representative will conduct a critique of the group activities during the event/incident/exercise.

Support agencies will provide written and/or oral inputs for this critique and the primary agency representative will consolidate all inputs into a final report and submit it to the Sumner County Emergency Management Director.