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## Talking to the News Media During Disasters

Citizen Corps Partners in Preparedness Conference  
October 25, 2008



DHS Independent. Healthy. Safe




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### What types of events could trigger a CERT response?

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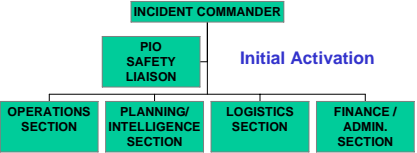
### The Risk of Disasters is Increasing Due to...

- Increased population density
- Settlement in high-risk area
- Aging U.S. population
- Emerging and reemerging diseases
- Speed and increase in global travel
- Increased terrorism

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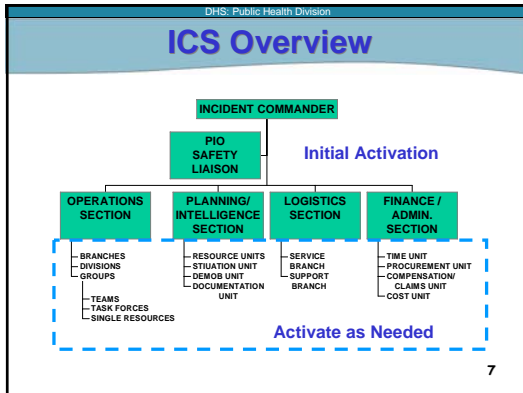
### ICS Overview



```

graph TD
    IC[INCIDENT COMMANDER] --- PSL[PIO SAFETY LIAISON]
    IC --- IA[Initial Activation]
    PSL --- OS[OPERATIONS SECTION]
    PSL --- PIS[PLANNING/INTELLIGENCE SECTION]
    PSL --- LS[LOGISTICS SECTION]
    PSL --- FAS[FINANCE / ADMIN. SECTION]
    
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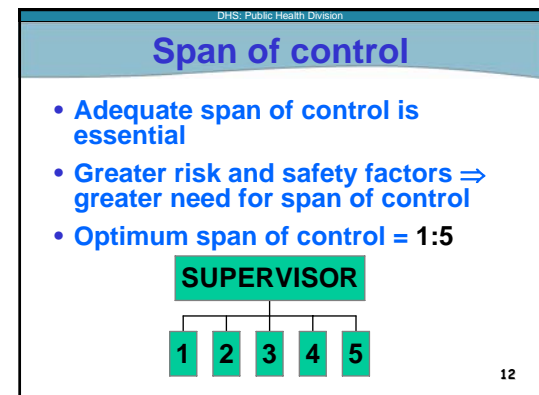
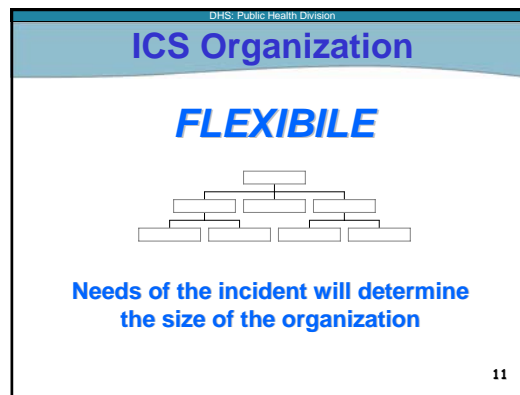
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- ### DHS: Public Health Division Functional responsibility
- **Command** Where are we going?
  - **Operations** How will we get there?
  - **Planning** What might happen along the way?
  - **Logistics** What will we need to get there?
  - **Finance cost?** How much will it cost?
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- ### DHS: Public Health Division Flexibility
- ICS is an all-hazard approach used to manage emergency and non-emergency events
  - ICS works well for both small and large incidents
  - ICS should disrupt current systems as little as possible
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- ### DHS: Public Health Division Benefits of ICS
- Common goals and objectives
  - Efficient, effective use of resources
  - Standardized lines of authority and communications
  - Aids in decision-making
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### Emergency Operations Center



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### Emergency Public Information

- Protects health, safety, and the environment by keeping people informed
- Creates public confidence in the organization's ability to manage an incident



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### Joint Information System

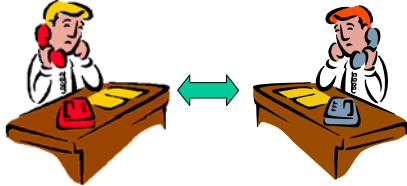
An information network that includes all government, volunteer and private-sector organizations with responsibility for responding to the crisis

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### Joint Information System

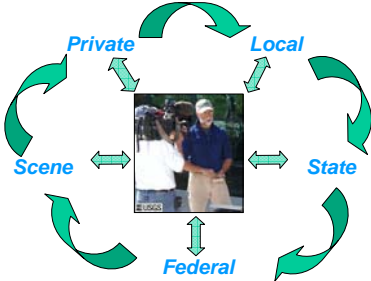
May be as simple as...



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### Or as complex as....




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### Joint Information Center

A physical location where local, state, federal, and private PIOs can co-locate to gather, verify and coordinate information prior to release




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### JICs provide

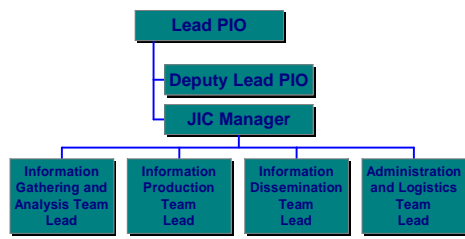
- One-stop shopping for official information
- News briefings and conferences
- Written statements
- Qualified spokesperson(s)
- Answers to media and public inquiries



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### JIC Roles & Responsibilities



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### Contributors to Poor Public Response to Recovery Plans

- Mixed messages from multiple experts
- Information released late
- Paternalistic attitudes
- No reality check on recommendations

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QUIT COMPLAINING! IF IT'LL WORK FOR BIOLOGICAL AND CHEMICAL WEAPONS, IT'LL WORK FOR SARS.

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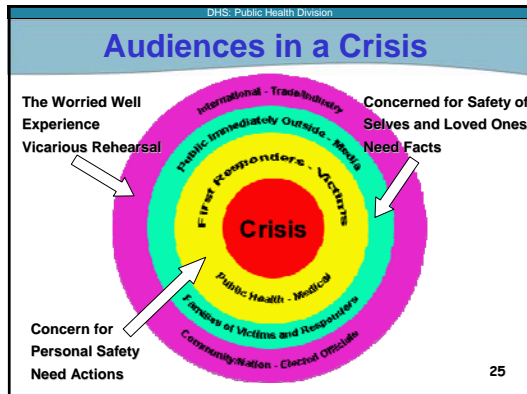
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### The more you know, the more you'll glow

- Know your organization's policy for talking to the news media
- Ask for key messages and speaking points
- Make appropriate referrals to official sources of information

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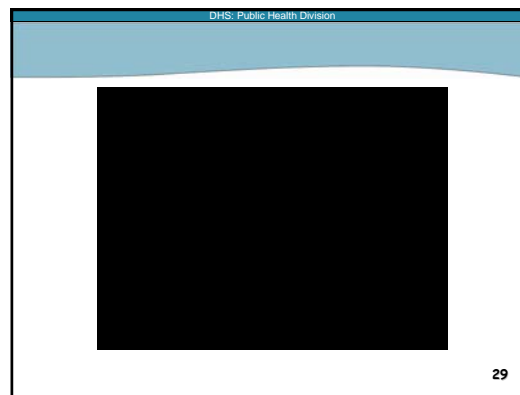
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- ### What the Public Will Ask First
- Are my family and I safe?
  - What have you found that may affect me?
  - What can I do to protect myself and my family?
  - Who caused this?
  - Can you fix it?
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- ### What the Media Will Ask First
- What happened?
  - Who is in charge?
  - Has this been contained?
  - Are victims being helped?
  - What can we expect?
  - What should people do?
  - Why did this happen?
  - Did you have forewarning?
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How strong emotions make communicating effectively during a crisis challenging, but essential

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- ### What Do People Feel Inside When a Disaster Looms?
- Denial, avoidance
  - Fear, anxiety, confusion, dread
  - Hopelessness, helplessness and withdrawal
  - Anger, stigmatization
  - Vicarious rehearsal
  - Seldom panic
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### Symptoms of Denial

People may:

- Avoid receiving warnings or action recommendations
- Become agitated or confused by the warning
- May not believe the threat is real
- May not believe the threat is real to them

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### Fear, Anxiety, Confusion and Dread

- People fear the unknown
- People fear uncertainty
- Their actions to avoid real or perceived threats may be extreme or irrational

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### Hopelessness, Helplessness and Withdrawal

- The threat looms so large
- The situation feels hopeless
- People feel helpless and withdraw

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### Anger and Stigmatization...

- Some people become angry or look for others to blame
- Victims may be refused services or public access
- This can hamper evacuation, relocation and recovery efforts

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### What is Vicarious Rehearsal?

- The communication age gives national and international audiences the experience of local crises
- These "armchair victims" mentally rehearse recommended courses of action

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### Vicarious Rehearsal May Lead to Negative Behaviors

- Demands for unneeded treatment
- Rejection of the proposed course of action
- Self-destructive behaviors
- Multiple unexplained physical symptoms

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### Demands for unnecessary treatment from the “worried well” may ultimately overwhelm the system

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### But we can't forget about the worried sick...



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### Stop Worrying About Panic

- Panic is rare
- Misguided efforts to avoid panic tend to backfire
- Allay public anxiety by providing timely, honest and consistent information

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### Communicating in a Crisis is Different

- In a crisis, people revert to rudimentary “fight or flight” reasoning
- They can handle only limited intake of new information (3-7 bits)

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### Decision-making in a Crisis is Different

- People simplify
- They cling to their current beliefs
- They remember what they see or have previously experienced
- Remember that first messages carry more weight

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### Communicating in a Crisis is Different

- In order to reduce fear and victimization the public must feel empowered
- They need mental preparation and action steps to reduce anxiety

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### How Do We Communicate About Risk in an Emergency?

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### Remember: Not all Risks are Accepted Equally

Is the risk:

- Voluntary or involuntary?
- Controlled personally or controlled by others?
- Familiar or exotic?
- Natural or manmade?
- Reversible or permanent?
- Statistical or anecdotal?

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### Remember: Not all Risks are Accepted Equally

- Endemic or epidemic?
- Fairly or unfairly distributed?
- Generated by a trusted or a mistrusted institution?
- Does it mostly affect adults or children?
- Is the benefit of changing behaviors understood or questionable?

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### Be Careful With Risk Comparisons

Are they similarly accepted?

- High/low hazard (scientific/technical measure)
- High/low outrage (emotional measure)

A. High Hazard	B. High Outrage
C. Low Hazard	D. Low Outrage

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**Remember:  
That which is perceived  
as real is real in its  
consequences**

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**Emergency Risk  
Communication Principles  
That Work!**

- Express empathy
- Don't over reassure
- Acknowledge uncertainty

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**Emergency Risk  
Communication Principles**

- Stop worrying about panic
- Respect people's feelings
- Give people things to do

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**People are more likely to  
cooperate if they:**

- Clearly understand the level of risk and the benefits of taking the recommended actions
- Perceive that compliance is voluntary and that the things they are being asked to do are fair and equal

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**People are more likely to  
cooperate if they:**

- Understand the alternatives and feel they have some control over their own situation
- Are provided truthful information that addresses their questions, fears and concerns

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## Working With the Media

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## Disasters are Media Events

- We need them
- They can reach our audiences
- They can help warn the public about what may follow
- Accept that the media will be involved
- Respond quickly and accurately

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## Effective spokespeople...

- Are made, not born
- Gain support for the response by giving people the information they need to make responsible choices

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## Effective spokespeople...

- Establish trust and credibility by being:
  - ✓ Caring and empathetic
  - ✓ Expert and competent
  - ✓ Open and honest
  - ✓ Dedicated and committed

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## Effective spokespeople...

- Describe the situation and its significance
- Explain the health and safety impacts
- Discuss the process in place for responding to the situation
- Provide anticipatory guidance/protective actions for the public

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### How to work with reporters

- Reporters want a front-row seat
- If you don't have the facts, tell them the process
- The news media is not your audience

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### Developing key messages...

- Think about what you would want people to know about your role in the response
- What do people need to know?
- Anticipate the tough questions
- Prepare a way to say, "I don't know"
- Keep it simple!

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### When a reporter makes contact...

- Stay in your own lane—answer only the questions you are qualified to answer
- Speak only for yourself and your role in the response
- Do not attempt to speak for other responders or response agencies

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### When a reporter makes contact...

- If you are not the right person to answer the question, suggest someone who may be
- Don't guess, speculate or give personal opinions
- Do not talk about the victims (HIPAA)

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### When a reporter makes contact...

- This is not the appropriate time nor place to criticize the response
- Be careful what you ask for
- Do not talk say, "No comment"
- Don't say anything to a reporter you wouldn't want your mother to hear you say

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### When a reporter makes contact...

- Refer the reporter to the public information officer for additional information
- Notify the public information officer that you have been contacted

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### When talking to a reporter...

- Take control/communicate with a purpose!
- Be short and concise
- Use clear, simple language
- Be consistent
- If you stumble it's okay to say, "Let me try that again," and start over

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### When talking to a reporter...

- Maintain eye contact
- Be calm and friendly
- Everything is "On the record"
- Don't get angry or drawn into debate
- Avoid making promises or placing blame

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### How to Deal with Difficult Questions from Reporters

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### Watch out for...

- Machine gun questioning
- Feeding the mic and the "pregnant" pause
- Hot mic



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### Watch out for...

- Sensational questions
- Surprise "props"

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### Beware of...

- Hypothetical questions
- The loaded preface

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### Watch out for...

- The absent party
- The inconsistency

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### Watch out for...


- Irrelevant or personal questions
- Putting words in your mouth

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### Thinking on your feet

- Listen fully
- Pause
- Frame your answer
- Use a key word



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### General strategies for complex or difficult questions

- Ask to have the question repeated or clarified
- If you don't know the answer, promise to get the information
- Speak to one aspect
- Refocus by "bridging"

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### "Bridges" for sensational or unrelated questions

- "What I think you are really asking is..."
- "The overall issue is..."
- "What's important to remember is..."
- "It's our policy to not discuss [topic], but what I can tell you..."

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### Handling a challenging interview

- Be polite, but assertive
- Stay on guard
- Don't be argumentative
- You don't have to answer everything

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### Effective nonverbal communication

- Maintain eye contact
- Open posture
- Don't hide
- Be aware of facial expressions and nervous ticks

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### In summary:


- Be positive, compassionate and memorable!

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### For More Information:

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