In this regard, PA must gather information and produce an initial news release quickly, accurately and as completely as each situation allows. We make every attempt to get as many facts as we can in our first release of information, answering the "what," "where" and "when." We won’t be able to provide the "why," and the "who" may take some time. For example, in the case of an aircraft accident, we could tell the type of aircraft and what the aircraft was being used for at the time of the mishap, but it can take months of piecing together evidence to determine the cause of a crash. Only a formal accident investigation board is qualified to do this.

Who has the facts?

At an accident site, only two AF people are authoritative sources of information: the on-scene incident commander and the PA representative. Others are there to perform a specific function, and they report to the on-scene commander. Media representatives who ask questions of these various respondents may get information out of context or answers based on hearsay or speculation. It is PA’s job to gather and disseminate factual information in conjunction with the on-scene commander. He or she will work to get as much information as is available, consistent with national security. Media interviews with the on-scene commander can be arranged once the situation is under control.

Accident scenes off an installation are under the control of local and state authorities. Officials often rope off these areas to protect the public from injury or to protect government property from further disturbance.

When this is done, the on-scene military commander must coordinate media access to the site with civilian officials. In this instance, military PA representatives will also be in contact with law enforcement, fire protection, medical and other authorities to seek cooperation and gather information.

News Helicopters

Some news outlets choose to use helicopters. Helicopters can be important tools for covering fast-breaking news. Civilian law enforcement officials and media outlets must bear in mind that airspace in and around Wright-Patterson Air Force Base is restricted; however, even for airspace outside the restriction, there can also be problems when covering AF accidents by helicopter.

For example, the AF once lost a B-52 in a remote area of Utah. During the first few hours after the crash, two AF helicopters evacuated casualties and ferried disaster response team members to the scene. At the same time, five area media stations sent helicopters to the scene and an extremely unsafe situation developed when the seven helicopters were flying within uncontrolled airspace amid mountains.

Accordingly, the on-scene commander requested that the Federal Aviation Administration restrict the airspace. This action was not taken to keep the media from doing their job, but to prevent further tragedy.

In a hostage scenario, consider helicopter live video may also provide an assailant with valuable intel, such as law enforcement tactical movements.

In closing

This guide covers most aspects of the DoD and AF policies that govern PA crisis communications procedures. Through mutual cooperation, AF, civil response personnel and members of the media can serve both the public interest and national security in the aftermath of a mishap or other serious incident.

For more information: please call the Current Operations Division of the Wright-Patterson Air Force Base Office of Public Affairs.

Telephone: (937) 522-3252
After Hours: (937) 257-6314; ask to be put in touch with the on-call public affairs representative.

Address: WPAFB Public Affairs
5135 Pearson Rd, Bldg 10, Rm 252
Wright-Patterson, OH 45433
It is Air Force (AF) policy that the public will be given unclassified information on nearly all AF activities. The AF requires its commanders and organizations to provide free and timely release of news, both good and bad, to bona fide news agencies.

The Public Affairs (PA) office is the responder’s and media’s best link for AF information. We are the only base staff agency authorized to speak for the commander on AF issues since only we, through close ties with the commander and higher headquarters, have access to the accurate AF position and details on various issues. We request all civilian emergency responders to forward media representatives to the PA representative.

AF responders to an accident scene have several urgent considerations. Their first concerns are comfort of the injured and awareness of any deceased, the prevention of further injury and damage to property, the preservation of evidence to be considered in an investigation and the protection of classified security information, if any. The media will be denied immediate access to a site if we are concerned about anyone’s safety, exposed classified material or the protection of evidence. Media may be allowed access when there is no longer any concern about these issues. Expert spokespersons like fire fighters, safety specialists and medical people should not be approached as they are actively engaged in managing the emergency response. PA will release as much information as possible at the time and follow up with more details when they become available.

In off-base incidents, we request members of the media to show restraint while visiting the site for the reasons already mentioned. We also ask civilian responders, who will probably be on the scene before AF responders, to restrict access to the area until a military team arrives. Photography at an accident scene, which may contain scattered remains of people and equipment is a concern. While we know the members of the press are sensitive to human feelings when covering an accident, we are also concerned about the security classification of certain pieces of equipment at the site. We ask for the media’s cooperation concerning photography.

When an accident or incident occurs, whether on or off a military installation, or when a National Defense Area (NDA) has been established, the on-scene commander has the legal authority to prevent unauthorized photography.

An NDA is an area established on non-federal lands located within the United States, its possessions or territories for the purpose of safeguarding classified defense information or protecting Department of Defense (DoD) equipment and material.

The commander may bar news people from an area where classified material is exposed or where potential danger exists such as unexploded munitions. Federal law prohibits photography when official permission is expressly withheld (18 U.S. Code 795 and 797). If photos or video are taken after a warning is issued, AF officials will ask civilian law enforcement authorities to stop further photography of the exposed classified information, and to collect or review all imagery.

Once classified material is covered or removed and the area is free of danger, members of the media will be allowed to enter and take pictures. If an off-base site is not declared a NDA, overall authority belongs to local law enforcement officials, but the on-scene commander maintains legal authority concerning photography and may require the assistance of local law enforcement agencies to ensure unauthorized photography does not take place at the scene.

We ask civilian officials and media at the scene to comply with the AF provision for releasing the names of the deceased and survivors.

AF policy allows for the release of names of deceased to the public 24 hours after notifying next of kin; however, when the release of names of survivors makes it obvious who was killed, all names are withheld pending notification of next of kin.

AF people are stationed all over the world. Their families are also at many locations. Such uncontrollable circumstances as severe weather or family’s distance from the nearest military installation can hinder personal notification. When notification is unavoidably delayed, we ask for understanding and patience.

Media may arrive on scene before first responders. Please consider impact to families when filming uncovered human remains and personally identifying articles such as clothing or jewelry.

When an off-base military accident causes significant property damage or civilian loss of life, the commander may release the names of AF members killed in the accident before their next of kin have been notified. This is only done when, in the judgment of the commander, the needs of the public outweigh any potential distress of the victim’s next of kin.

It is DoD policy during normal operations to neither confirm nor deny the presence of nuclear material on any specific location or installation; however, following an accident in the United States, the on-scene commander may confirm the presence or absence of nuclear material in the interest of public safety to reduce or prevent public alarm.

An aircraft crash cannot cause an accidental nuclear detonation, but to the general public, the fact that a nuclear weapon has been involved in an accident sounds very frightening. The very words could cause widespread panic. Therefore, in the interest of public safety, we ask that civilian responders and the media report such information factually, clearly putting involvement of nuclear materials in perspective.

Though a nuclear weapon cannot be detonated by accident, the impact of a crash or the detonation of conventional explosives could scatter radioactive material at the accident site. A radiological team would be called in to determine whether radioactive material has been scattered and to take appropriate clean-up action, if needed.

The AF may suspect the presence of nuclear material at an accident site and call in a radiological team. The presence of the team in no way implies that a nuclear detonation is possible. To speculate on what the presence of the team means without having or providing all the facts most certainly could alarm the public unnecessarily.

We ask civilian law enforcement people, civil defense officials and others at a crash site to exercise caution in talking to others about the possible presence of nuclear materials. The objective is not to hide anything, but to prevent undue public alarm.