



Rogers Fire Department Standard Operating Procedures

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PURPOSE

The department shall endeavor to maintain a positive working relationship with the news media and to keep the public informed of department activities and procedures that can save lives. This policy guideline defines the manner in which interaction with the news media will occur.

POLICY

At some emergency incidents, a public information officer will be appointed under the formal incident command system. Performing this action allows for the following:

- Timely and accurate dissemination of emergency information to the public regarding actions necessary for public protection such as evacuation during a hazardous materials incident
- Ensuring the safety of the news media at emergency operations
- Keeping reporters and photographers from interfering with emergency operations

The department shall also have an appointed public information officer (40-hour work week employee) that provides normal day-to-day interaction with the media. It shall be the responsibility of this person to:

- Provide effective fire and accident prevention information to the public.
- Respond to special inquiries about the fire department
- Report incident logs to media outlets
- Manage special affairs, events, and public displays
- Maintain a positive image of the fire department

Incident Public Information Release

1. To prevent the release of incomplete or conflicting information, only one person within the Department shall release information on an incident, or coordination shall occur among those releasing information.
2. One of the Captains assigned to the Training Division shall serve as the Department's primary Public Information Officer (PIO). When he/she is not available to handle news media inquiries, an alternate member of the Command Staff will be designated to serve as PIO.
3. Any incident commander or his/her designated representative may release incident information to the news media and is encouraged to do so if the PIO is not available or assigned to the incident.
4. The Battalion Chief will be responsible for providing interviews and information as soon as other duties permit. This includes responding to reporters at the scene and to inquiries from the news media.
5. The RFD PIO is responsible for updating the news media on the status of investigations and other incidents. For major incidents, such as two-alarm fires, a fire fatality, accident involving a fire department vehicle or other non-routine event that may bring close media scrutiny, the PIO or other member of the Command Staff shall be notified and will handle dissemination of information to the news media in coordination with the Battalion Chief or incident commander.

Multi-Agency Operations

When there are multiple agencies responding to an incident, The RFD will release only information related to its operations.

1. At fires, rescues, and hazardous materials incidents, where the RFD has primary responsibility, the RFD will release information. Exception: When another agency is responsible for investigation of a fire, such as for fires that occur outside the city limits, inquiries related to the fire's cause and the investigation shall be referred to the investigating agency.
2. Information on incidents that the RFD does not have primary responsibility for, All questions shall be referred to the primary agencies, such as Highway Patrol or RPD. If a media representative wants information from the RFD, only information regarding the fire department's actions shall be released. Speculation and opinion shall not be released on ANY incident where the RFD is not the clear lead agency.
3. At major incidents, the RFD Public Information Officer will coordinate with other agencies' PIOs on the release of information.

Approved Information for Media Dissemination

Unless otherwise authorized by the RFD PIO or the Chief of Department, information provided to the news media will be limited to that which is normally recorded on the NFIRS report.

Anyone releasing information is encouraged to provide a fire safety message related to the incident, but he/she must be certain that the information is accurate and pertinent. Information recorded on an EMS report is considered to be personal medical record and cannot be released due to HIPPA. The names of suspects of crimes including but not limited to arson and false alarms and the names of juveniles charged with a crime shall not be recorded on the NFIRS report and may not be released. Adults arrested for crimes related to an incident can be recorded and can be released in coordination with the fire investigator.

When the cause of a fire and information related to it is still being sought, no speculation shall be given. The cause shall be released as "Under Investigation". When the cause and related information is determined and can be recorded on the incident report, then it can be released to the news media. Speculating on the cause of a fire or stating that a cause is undetermined before an investigation is complete can undermine the investigation and can discredit the Fire Department. Where fires are under investigation, suspicious or determined to be arson, release of information related to the cause shall be coordinated with the fire investigator.

The IC or the designated PIO will be responsible for coordinating activities of the news media at incidents. The media will be free to work around the perimeter of an incident provided there is no personal risk, but shall only enter an incident area when accompanied by the PIO or by another representative of the RFD assigned by the PIO. Fire line tape, police officer and other security measures will be used to secure the area as needed.

Tours of an incident area by the news media are encouraged to provide more accurate information and to facilitate the taking of photographs and video. Tours must meet the following conditions:

1. The PIO and IC authorize the tour.
2. The media is supervised while in the area.
3. The areas toured are safe.
4. Media representatives are not in an area that will interfere with operations or the investigation of the incident.
5. On private property, the property owner or occupant, or his/her representative agree to a tour.

Unless otherwise authorized, any information about the Fire Department, its operations and personnel, shall be released only by the Chief of Department or RFD PIO. Information released shall be in accordance with the Arkansas Freedom of Information Act and the City's Public Information Policy.

Public Information Officer Notification

- A. The RFD PIO shall be notified of all news media contacts except for basic incident information provided by fire department officers.

- B. The PIO will be notified of the following incidents:
 - a. 2nd alarm or greater fires
 - b. Technical rescue events
 - c. Hazardous Materials incidents
 - d. Any incidents requiring a dedicated PIO to manage on scene media representatives
- C. It will be the responsibility of the Fire Chief or acting Fire Chief to contact the Mayor and other city staff of any incident requiring their notification.