

Section 5: Maintaining Readiness

Topic 23

ARES PIO: The Right Stuff

Objectives

Welcome to Topic 23.

After reading this topic, you will acquire the basic understanding of the role of a Public Information Officer (PIO) when attached to a deployed Amateur Radio Emergency Service (ARES) unit. The topic is meant to encourage further training in this specific activity area.

Student Preparation required:

None.

Introduction

More and more Sections are appointing ARES-specific PIOs. These PIOs are specialists in covering media relations when ARES units are deployed in an emergency or community service operation. While general PIOs may also do this work, the entire emergency field is becoming increasingly complex, and special training is not only advisable but strongly encouraged.

The goal of a PIO in an emergency is:

“Providing the Right information to the Right people at the Right time so they can make the Right decisions.” — FEMA Advanced PIO Course

In addition to the regular PIO duties and tasks of establishing media relationships, informing the public and attracting new members, the ARES PIO has the opportunity to become an integral part of the Incident Command System (ICS).

The public needs to know the scope of the emergency or disaster, how big the emergency is, what is being done about it, and what they may need to do themselves. Silence and/or errors on any of these topics breeds rumors. The ICS has standardized ways to coordinate this information in a unified voice. Short-circuiting that process will only make you unwelcome at best.

As the gravity of a situation unfolds and more responders and agencies become involved, a Unified Command is activated. The Unified Command comprises a group of trained and

qualified individuals that work together to lead and orchestrate the effort. One component of forming the Unified Command is that of a group of PIOs representing the various responders, agencies, and disciplines will come together to form a Joint Information Center (JIC). It is the duty of the JIC to establish a unified message and become the voice of the event, provide consistent and unified information, and dispel rumors, as well as to provide a central location for media to receive information and ask questions. A trained ARES PIO may be invited to represent Amateur Radio within the JIC.

As an ARES PIO, your job is to be the “expert” on Amateur Radio efforts involved (the number of ARES personnel involved, locations of ARES stations, etc.). You may be assigned multiple additional duties within the JIC to assist the Lead PIO. You will be expected to perform these additional duties as well as your ARES PIO duties simultaneously. Should the media inquire about ARES or Amateur Radio involvement, the Lead PIO may call on you to provide accurate information regarding Amateur Radio and ARES.

The ARES PIO will also be the person who guides reporters to meet and talk with other ARES members. For example, if a TV reporter wants to interview an ARES operator, the PIO will set it up, stay close to make sure it goes well, aid the operator if the interview gets “sticky,” and frame it in the best possible way. The PIO is also responsible for seeing that the operator makes a good impression with appropriate clothing and appearance — not a stained, dirty T-shirt with inappropriate logos on it! (This has happened.)

Under no circumstances should you ever speculate to the media regarding the outcome of the situation, nor should you provide any information about the names of victims, condition of individuals, or gravity of the situation.



This is the job of others, not an ARES operator nor an ARES PIO. The PIO may be asked to speak to the media about Amateur Radio involvement, number of ARES personnel involved, and the kinds of communications being supported by ARES, but even the PIO can only talk about ARES' own work and must refer other topics to more appropriate personnel.

And, always remember, especially during an emergency situation that involves risk to life and property, *there is no such thing as "off the record."* Anything you say directly or within earshot of the media, even in jest, can lead to disastrous results that could jeopardize the entire operation, cause your dismissal, and risk exclusion of Amateur Radio from future incidents.

An ECs Is Not a PIO

Each role, if being performed correctly, is a full-time job. The best media relations are done by specifically designated and trained people whose singular function is to work with media, allowing ECs and others to do their job. While the EC and the PIO should work closely together, they have different roles that call for different people.

Who May Talk to the Press

While there will always be people who want their 15 seconds of fame in the media, they usually end up (at best) promoting only themselves, not ARES and Amateur Radio. In many cases they don't have accurate information, numbers, or a larger perspective on the situation. In the worst cases, they start guessing rather than admit that they do not have the real information.

Your job as an ARES operator is to relay messages for the partners. Refer the media to your ARES PIO, the Lead PIO, or the JIC.

Some Rules You Need to Know

Amateur Radio must *not* be used to assist news media in gathering information *when telephones or other normal means of communication are available.*

Amateur Radio operators may assist news media representatives in their efforts to gather information for relay to the public *from areas where normal communications have been disrupted.* Amateurs may ask questions of, or relay media questions to, other amateurs in the emergency area, and their responses may be recorded by media representatives.

Who Can Record and What They Can Transmit

One constant area of confusion is in the recording and retransmission of Amateur Radio messages.

- Amateur Radio operators *cannot* record and retransmit commercial radio and TV

broadcasts.

- Commercial radio and TV reporters *can* record and then broadcast Amateur Radio messages.

Reference Links

There are Basic and Advanced PIO classes offered both via online and in classrooms by many state emergency management agencies as well as the FEMA Emergency Management Institute in Emmitsburg, Maryland.

FEMA Independent Study PIO Course

<https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-29>