

## **OSAC REVIEW SPRING 2025 (OSAC = Organization of Scientific Area Committees)**

**NAME OSAC UPDATE #26:** OSAC 2021-N-0007 (OSAC Proposed)

### **Media Communications Following a Mass Fatality Incident: Best Practice Recommendations for the Medicolegal Authority**

This Standard was developed by the Disaster Victim Identification Task Group of the Medicolegal Death Investigation Subcommittee of OSAC. It has been submitted to a standards development organization and may change as it undergoes revisions in that consensus-based process.

**(Like all OSAC developed Standards, Best Practices, and Guides, these are voluntary and separate from NAME standards and accreditation.)**

*This is a brief summary of OSAC 2021-N-0007, and as such may leave out or misinterpret important details. **See link to full document (below).***

#### **Value:**

*Media Communications Following a Mass Fatality Incident: Best Practice Recommendations for the Medicolegal Authority* provides guidance in creating a strategy for information sharing and could be incorporated into a Medical Examiner or Community Mass fatality plan. Annex A lists Foundational Principles which could be incorporated into any MFI plan. (As a best practice document, recommendations (and not requirements) are provided.

#### **Foreword:**

Mass fatality incidents captivate the public interest. The medicolegal authority can create a strategy for information sharing that both respects families and improves public awareness regarding fatality management operations.

#### **Recommendations:**

- Designate a Public Information Officer (PIO). The PIO should have a pre-existing relationship with the medicolegal authority and thus be familiar with daily and mass fatality operations, and should understand

jurisdictional law regarding decedent privacy. The PIO should be responsible for receiving media requests, dispelling rumors, and verifying the accuracy of data.

- The medicolegal authority should develop pre-incident opportunities to establish proactive relationships with media personnel and outlets.
- The PIO should coordinate with the affected jurisdiction's Joint Information Center (JIC). If a JIC is not established, the medicolegal authority should coordinate release of information with other involved agencies.
- The PIO should educate the media on the legal aspects of privacy within the jurisdiction and should not disclose confidential victim information without proper legal authorization.
- PIOs should develop a strategy to communicate the mission and purpose of the medicolegal authority in fatality management, using multiple communication platforms to reach the intended audience.
- Press releases are useful in the early stages of a mass fatality incident but should only contain factual information, refrain from speculation, and offer information relevant only to the medicolegal authority's responsibilities.
- Information disseminated during a press conference should already have been communicated and explained to victim families.
- Media interviews are designed to elicit specific responses to targeted questions, and medicolegal authorities will have no control over the context in which responses will be disseminated. The objective should be to convey the agency's missions and objectives to a wide audience.
- Social media posts should be monitored, informative and tasteful, and preferably identify the involved agency via the agency logo. Any photographs should be scrutinized for inappropriate content and be devoid of identifying information.
- Pre-incident fact sheets should be developed to address frequently asked questions and complex information.
- Consider agency specific logos and branding on all media communications to source information to the medicolegal authority.

- Take a proactive approach to engaging media rather than a reactive one. As the incident progresses communications should be regular and recurring, and normally the JIC will establish specific times/venues.
- Expect that the media will respond to the incident scene, morgue facility, and family assistance center and may occupy public spaces. Take precautions to mitigate undesired contact with families. Media should not be allowed in any of these spaces.
- As elected officials will be sought out by the media to provide statements, the PIO and JIC should provide them regular, accurate information. (Preferably they have been educated about response plans and victim identification pre-incident.)
- Media can be used as a resource to provide the public with information such as contact information for a call center.
- “The medicolegal authority should assert its responsibility to report the confirmed number of fatalities.” This avoids confusion from contradictory reported fatality counts.
- Avoid using media taglines when naming or describing the event.
- The PIO should monitor news outlets for stories about the incident in order to correct misinformation and dispel rumors.
- Because of the disparate nature of medicolegal authorities and jurisdictional law, the media may have difficulty understanding variations in disaster victim identification.
- The medicolegal authority should avoid speculation and making promises.

**Full Document:**

<https://www.nist.gov/document/osac-2021-n-0007-media-communications-following-mass-fatality-incidentfinal-osac-proposed>