**Public Information Functional Annex**

**Updated: August 23, 2024**

I. **PURPOSE AND SCOPE**
   A. **Purpose**
      1. The purpose of the Public Information Annex is to establish how public information activities will be coordinated to meet the needs generated by disasters affecting Alexander County.
   B. **Scope**
      1. This section identifies the key policies, concepts of operations, roles and responsibilities, and capabilities associated with public information in Alexander County. Specific operating procedures and protocols are addressed in documents maintained by the participating organizations. Public Information applies to all individuals and organizations that may be involved in public information and are required to support disaster response and recovery operations in Alexander County. Public Information encompasses the full range of external affairs functions including media relations, community relations, and governmental affairs.
         a. Media Relations includes providing incident-related information through the media or other sources to individuals, families, businesses, and industries directly or indirectly affected by the incident.
         b. Community Relations activities include identifying and communicating with community leaders (e.g., grassroots, political, religious, business, labor, and ethnic) and neighborhood advocacy groups to ensure a rapid dissemination of information, identify unmet needs, and establish an ongoing dialogue and information exchange.
         c. Governmental Affairs includes establishing contact with members of the Alexander County Board of Commissioners and legislative bodies representing the affected areas to provide information on the incident and the status of response and recovery activities. It also includes coordinating responses to inquiries from the Board of Commissioners and legislative bodies.

II. **SITUATION AND ASSUMPTIONS**
   A. **Situation**
      1. The public needs timely and accurate information regarding disasters. This information is needed before, during, and after disasters.
      2. All organizations involved in disaster preparedness and response in Alexander County maintain the capability to provide information to the public at some level. Many of these organizations maintain capabilities and procedures for coordinating the release of emergency public information and perform these activities regularly.
      3. There are a variety of tools and systems available to assist with notifying and disseminating information to the public. These include emergency notification systems such as HyperReach (phone, text, email, etc.),  Emergency Alert System (EAS), NOAA All-hazards Weather Radios, media outlets, websites, and social media forums.
   B. **Assumptions**
      1. Alexander County citizens turn to television, radio, NOAA radios, and the Internet a majority of the time to receive emergency preparedness and response information.
      2. There will be a strong need for the public to get disaster assistance information. The

timely dissemination of accurate, well-coordinated emergency public information will reduce the impact on life and property, help maintain public trust and confidence, and ensure uninformed citizens do not impede the timeliness or effectiveness of on-the-ground operations/response efforts.

3. The County will receive extensive local, regional, and national media coverage during and after an emergency or disaster situation.

4. Jurisdictions and organizations involved in response and recovery will recognize the importance of relaying common emergency messages and will coordinate with other jurisdictions and organizations to ensure consistent information is disseminated.

5. Public Information Officers (PIOs) collect and maintain a file of fact sheets, instructions and procedures, and other readily available pre-scripted information on a wide range of topics to support the rapid dissemination of public information. Pre-scripted information is verified regularly to ensure that it is current and accurate.

6. Many disasters can occur rapidly, hampering the ability of response organizations and local government to provide comprehensive information to everyone impacted at the onset. For this reason, it is important to ensure the public is aware of potential hazards and know the appropriate protective efforts before a disaster occurs.

7. The media assists in disseminating emergency public information to the public.

8. A disaster may have negative impacts on the existing communication infrastructure or systems requiring the use of alternative methods to provide information to the public.

9. Disasters may impact individuals' ability to receive public information due to displacements or limited access to television, phones, newspapers, the Internet, social networks, etc.

10. A disaster may create a significant demand for information from a wide variety of sources, which may exceed local capabilities. Some situations may require the provision of enhanced or supplemental public information resources.

11. Rumors or misinformation may be spread before, during, and after a disaster. This can cause unnecessary distress among the public, provoke counterproductive public actions, and impede response and recovery efforts.

12. The interest generated by a disaster may lead to requests for information or visits from a variety of public officials, dignitaries, or VIPs. Such requests will require coordination and resources.

13. All equipment and systems relied upon to notify/inform the public are operational and tested regularly.

14. All PIOs will have basic PIO training and receive training on relevant plans and procedures specific to the emergency public information function.

III. **CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS**

A. **General**

1. Emergency public information activities are coordinated through a framework for organizing, integrating, and coordinating the delivery of public information, also known as a Joint Information System (JIS).

2. The County Manager's Office and Public Information Officer, will maintain a list of PIOs to support the County in an emergency or disaster. This group will work together as a Local Information Team (LIT) and meet regularly to maintain coordination.

3. PIOs should establish and maintain a solid working relationship with the media. Additionally, the media should be involved with public information planning, training, and exercises when

     appropriate. PIOs will maintain a current media directory with points of contact and programming information for radio, television, newspaper, and other media outlets.

4. Radio, television, print and online media, NOAA All-hazard radios, emergency notification systems/HyperReach utilization (phone, text, email, TTY/TTD, etc.), fliers, posters, brochures, information kiosks, social media, and the Alexander County website are all established methods for providing information to the public. The use of a particular medium(s) will be situational dependent, based upon the urgency of the information and the intended audience.

5. Public communication methods will consider the whole community approach ensuring historically marginalized populations are also served.
   a. Economically disadvantaged
   b. Limited language proficiency
   c. People with disabilities- physical, mental, cognitive or sensory
   d. Age vulnerable (under 5/over 65)
   e. Culturally/geographically isolated

6. When disasters impact power or communications capabilities, other means of communication may be required to provide public information to the community. Some of these may include public address systems and door-to-door sweeps from law enforcement or other volunteer organizations, neighborhood watch groups, libraries, central public areas, and faith-based organizations.

7. Organizations responsible for providing emergency notifications/public information are responsible for maintaining the capability to do so. Specific planning efforts may include developing and maintaining the plans, procedures, checklists, contact lists, and other materials needed to implement the public information function.

8. Alexander County Government will coordinate notifying and informing the public regarding emergencies and disasters. Each organization will notify and provide information to the public (before, during, and after disasters) according to their plans and procedures.

9. In smaller, more routine emergencies, notification and public information activities can usually be handled by an Incident Commander (IC) and/or a single organization's PIO.

10. In larger or more unique disasters, organizations involved in the response will coordinate their notification and/or public information efforts.

11. In situations when the Alexander EOC is activated, the Joint Information System Team will automatically be activated.

12. The EOC Director is responsible for designating the PIO when the EOC is activated. The PIO will be responsible for the overall coordination of public information activities for Alexander County. The PIO will lead the Joint Information System Team in the JIC and support the EOC Director.

13. The mission of the Joint Information System Team is to ensure the provision and coordination of accurate, consistent, and timely information to meet the needs generated by disasters affecting Alexander County. Through a coordinated effort, the following information will be disseminated to the public:
    a. The risk of hazards and appropriate preparedness actions
    b. Emergency status information
    c. Lifesaving or health preservation instructions

   d. Disaster assistance and recovery information

   e. Information in response to public or media inquiry

   f. Information to resolve any conflicting information or to dispel rumors

   g. Donations management assistance from external groups

14. When deemed appropriate, the PIO will establish a JIC. The JIC provides an expanded capability with liaisons to work closely with public information representatives of various departments, agencies, nongovernmental organizations, organizational districts, government officials from local jurisdictions, and state and federal governments.

15. All individuals/organizations involved in disaster response should collect and record information on the utilization of labor, materials, equipment, and disaster-related costs.

B. **Specific - Joint Information Center (JIC)**

1. Once a JIC is activated, all emergency public information activities, including media inquiries, should be coordinated through the JIC. The JIC will become the central coordination point for all emergency public information and external communication activities. To the extent possible, the JIC will be staffed with PIOs from all agencies and organizations involved in the disaster response.

2. The purpose of a JIC is to:

   a. Gather and coordinate information and serve as the "hub" for the release of timely, accurate, consistent, and useful disaster-related information.

   b. Allow all involved organizations to speak from "one sheet of paper" providing consistent messages to the public.

   c. Enable the agency representatives to concentrate on emergency decision-making and refer all media and public inquiries to the JIC.

   d. Ensure the ability exists to answer direct inquiries from the public.

   e. Ensure the ability exists to answer direct inquiries from the news media via the JIC.

   f. Monitor media coverage to verify the accuracy of information being disseminated.

   g. Be proactive in responding to the disaster-related information needs of all audiences.

   h. Develop and implement a comprehensive public information strategy to gain and maintain public trust and confidence.

3. The JIC will, in most cases, be located in close proximity to the EOC; however, it may be located anywhere to support emergency information activities. The JIC must be located in a location suitable to maintain contact with decision-makers and/or the EOC via telephone, radio, the Internet, and/or face-to-face communications.

4. The JIC is designed to be flexible to accommodate the unique requirements of any emergency or disaster situation and its structure and staffing will be customized for each response.

5. While the number of departments and agencies involved and the quantity of information to be disseminated will vary greatly, the function of the JIC remains essentially the same. At a minimum, the following functions should be performed regardless of these variables:

   a. Develop a capability to rapidly release accurate emergency instructions and information to the public.

   b. Coordinate periodic media briefings throughout an emergency or disaster as appropriate. A media briefing center may be established as determined by the incident.

          These locations must be available on short notice and be logistically suitable for conducting media briefings.

    c. Receive inquiries from the media and the public concerning an emergency and respond with official information or relay inquiries to the appropriate function.

    d. Obtain reports or situation summaries from agency representatives of all response organization elements to maintain situational awareness.

    e. Prepare news releases, key messages, and talking points.

    f. Develop and maintain an emergency online presence for the County to provide emergency information to the media and public.

    g. Deploy information officers into the field as appropriate.

    h. Conduct situation briefings for visitors, media, other government agencies, representatives, or other affected parties.

    i. Conduct tours for VIPs and elected officials, as appropriate.

    j. Arrange interviews with key personnel, when requested by the media or the PIO.

6. Some information may be defined as "Specialized Information Protocols" which may require a different level of approval and dissemination processes. Some examples of these are:

    a. Information on restricted areas, as well as the process for reentry into an area after it has been declared safe, will be obtained from the appropriate agency, coordinated with the EOC Director's staff, and disseminated immediately to the media and the public.

    b. Information on any federal, state, or local disaster assistance that might be available will be obtained from the agency offering the assistance. In some cases, this information may be given directly to the media and public. In other cases, a telephone number will be provided for obtaining additional information.

    c. Information on the number of fatalities, injured, and missing will be obtained from the appropriate agency, coordinated with the EOC Director's staff, and disseminated to the media and the public as appropriate. The identity of victims will be released only after confirmation of proper next-of-kin notification.

7. PIOs working in the JIC retain the autonomy to represent the public information needs of their respective agencies while working closely with Public Information Function representatives and JIC partners to ensure consistent information is being disseminated promptly by all agencies.

8. Designated departmental PIOs may be asked to staff various JIC functions regardless of the level of involvement of their respective departments. This will ensure an adequate number of PIOs are available to support emergency information activities.

## IV. ORGANIZATION AND ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITIES

A. Organization.

1. The Public Information Officer is part of the governing body of Alexander County reporting to the County Manager.

2. The Public Information Officer will be the lead PIO of the JIC and LIT following the continuity of government below.

B. Responsibilities:

1. Emergency Management Coordinator

    a. Coordinate and assist with public information and educational programs

b. Coordinate and assist with maintaining a working relationship with the media
c. Ensures the implementation of all public information activities.
d. Coordinate and assist the PIO in disseminating accurate and timely public information during emergencies.

2. Public Information Officer
   a. Prepare SOPs for the coordination of public information during emergencies.
   b. Prepare and maintain a current internal notification/recall roster of staff to manage the EOC Media Center.
   c. Maintain working relationships with the media and a current list of radio stations, television stations, and newspapers to be used for public information releases.
   d. Establish procedures for the flow of information to the public in a disaster, which shall include the Emergency Broadcast System (EBS).
   e. Arrange points of contact for releases of public information in an emergency and for briefings to media representatives when appropriate.
   f. Assist in the preparation and review of Emergency Public Information (EPI) Materials for all hazards affecting the County.
   g. Report to the EOC upon activation and coordinate the release of disaster-related information with local agencies and State and Federal governments.
   h. Clear information with the chief executive before release to the media.
   i. Prepare and distribute pre-scripted EPI materials to the media (newspaper, radio, television, etc).
   j. Ensure that EPI materials for visually impaired and non-English speaking groups are disseminated.
   k. Ensure that all sources of information being received are authenticated and verified for accuracy.
   l. Assist in handling inquiries and informing families about places of contact for missing relatives, continued emergency services, restricted areas, etc.
   m. Prepare and release announcements urging residents to share homes with evacuees when appropriate.

3. PEG Channel Operator/Social Media Coordinator/Web Master
   a. Provide backup to the county PIO during his/her absence or relief during twenty-four-hour operations
   b. Maintain the website and social media channels for consistent and unified messaging.

## V. DIRECTION AND CONTROL

A. General - The Public Information Officer is responsible for all news releases and public information disseminated at the County level. In times of emergency, the PIO will operate from the EOC if appropriate.

B. Educational and Public Information Programs - The PIO will provide the media with information on new developments affecting Emergency Management. The PIO also will utilize other types of information, media, and programs on Emergency Management for public education

VI. **CONTINUITY OF GOVERNMENT**
   A. The line of succession is:
      1. Public Information Officer
      2. PEG Channel Operator/Social Media Coordinator/Web Master
      3. Emergency Management Coordinator

VII. **ADMINISTRATION AND LOGISTICS**
   A. Media organizations - A list of media organizations involved in local Emergency Management programs will be maintained by the Public Information Officer and Local Information Team.
   B. Publications - Publications dealing with various aspects of Emergency Management are available from various sources and can be requested as needed and before community events.
   C. Pre-scripted news releases for natural and technological hazards may be prepared by the Public Information Officer and Local Information Team.
   D. Accounting procedures to recover costs incurred for emergency operations will established by the County Finance Officer.

VIII. **PLAN REVIEW AND MAINTENANCE**
   The Public Information Officer, Local Information Team, and Emergency Management Coordinator will review and update the following annex on an annual basis or as needed after an event or exercise.

IX. **AUTHORITIES AND REFERENCES**
   A. Alexander County Emergency Management Ordinance
   B. Alexander County Emergency Operations Plan
   C. Community Emergency Risk Communications Plan
   D. North Carolina GS 166A