Sherpa Fire Joint Information Center
Response Analysis

Contents

Introduction: To JIC or Not to JIC?

On the evening of Wednesday, June 15, 2016 the Sherpa Fire (aka Scherpa, named for the Scherpa Ranch) began to grow and winds intensified, the leadership Office of Emergency Management and the County Executive Office began to discuss the need to open the Emergency Operations Center and a supporting Joint Information Center (JIC).

By 7:30 p.m. the seriousness of the fire was apparent, leading Deputy Public Health Director Susan Klein-Rothschild (as a first on-scene Lead PIO) to open the JIC and begin structuring response efforts. Assistant CEO Terri Maus-Nisich, Communications Manager Gina DePinto and Civic Engagement Coordinator Lael Wageneck assisted in the initial efforts to open the JIC and begin operations.

The purpose of the County's JIC is to coordinate the dissemination of life and property saving information, advise incident/emergency managers regarding public information strategies and to generate confidence that all resources possible are being devoted to fire the fire.

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By virtually any measure, the Sherpa Fire JIC was one of the most successful emergency public information efforts in County history. There are numerous reasons for this which are detailed in later sections; however, four essential steps were taken by the County Executive Office over the past two years which resulted in this success:

- The preparation of a comprehensive Public Information Annex to the County's emergency response plan
- The development of a Public Information Team (PIT) made up of various County employees who assist during emergencies
- The retainer of a communications consulting firm (SAE Communications) which brings extensive public agency emergency response experience and communications planning expertise
- The hiring of a County Communications Manager who is a seasoned communicator and manager

These steps have set the framework for future success during emergencies.

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This report is designed to serve as both a stand-alone analysis of the communications response effort as well as serve as an insert into the "after action" report which follows all major incidents. Documenting response efforts allows for all participants to weigh in on what went well, items for improvement and future training opportunities.

First Night: Lay Foundation for Multi-Day Incident

By late evening field reports were clear: this would be a significant incident, resulting in a great deal of public and media interest.

The initial night shift consisted of the Lead PIO, a social media coordinator, website coordinator and other staff, to initiate JIC operations to:

- Begin structuring an overnight team to gather, verify and disseminate incident information
- Create a system to document incident information and resources on whiteboards in the JIC
- Respond to media inquiries calling into the JIC
- Formalize the immediate JIC organizational structure (a prescribed implementation system from the Federal Emergency Management Agency), and
- Begin a staffing plan for 24/7 operations of two shifts per day (7 a.m. to 7 p.m., and 7 p.m. to 7 a.m.) for the coming several days

JIC Staffing: Pulling from the Public Information Team

The County's Public Information Team (PIT) was formalized approximately 24 months ago and is made up of County employees representing most Departments. The PIT has been meeting regularly, conducting training on a wide array of topics, discussing JIC operations, etc. This preparation is a key reason that the Sherpa Fire JIC was so successful.

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Working through the leadership of the County Executive Office, the purpose of the PIT is threefold:

- Help advise about or carry out communications to employees and residents
- To provide advice/assistance on issues/projects which involve multiple Departments
- To serve in an emergency in the County's Joint Information Center

Generally speaking, anyone who might work in the JIC is a member of the PIT, yet not all JIC workers regularly attend PIT meetings. This is a topic to be addressed by the PIT in the coming weeks/months. *See separate section with follow-up recommendations.*

Benefits of the Sherpa Fire Joint Information Center

The following are benefits of the Sherpa Fire JIC:

- The public and media received an extensive array of life- and property-saving information in a timely manner, including evacuation information
  - Key messages continually reinforced the need for:
    - Firefighter safety
    - Protecting human and animal lives, habitat, critical infrastructure, agriculture and other assets
- All facets of the current response and preparation for future incidents are much more effective if local elected officials, agency employees, agency and community partners, and residents feel they are being kept informed in a timely manner
  - Constant flow of information about national, state and local response helps to build confidence and trust in public agencies
- The JIC allowed a unified message to be presented to the public and the media. The JIC could communicate key fire management issues (e.g., the use of air tankers, Aware and Prepare notification procedures) and address these issues proactively through public information while the fire held the public's attention
- There was little misinformation noted and when it was found it was corrected immediately
- The Sherpa Fire JIC resulted in an efficient and effective response to tremendous interest by local, national and international residents and media

Constant flow of information about national, state and local response helps to build confidence and trust in the County

A Highly Successful Sherpa Fire JIC: Why?

As mentioned above, the Sherpa Fire JIC is considered one of the most successful public information efforts in recent history. There are numerous reasons for this, including but not limited to the following items.

- PIT training resulted in high familiarity of JIC operations, working relationships and familiarity with one another
- Some lessons learned from the May 2016 Refugio Oil Spill were fresh in the minds JIC/County management
- The County's newly appointed Communications Manager brought strong management and communications skills to the JIC Management function, including serving as Lead PIO, and setting a positive and teamwork-oriented working environment
    - o This freed up the Assistant CEO to serve shifts as EOC Director; driver of Board Communications, Intergovernmental Relations, and Internal Communications; and other senior level functions
- The County's communications consulting firm provides a experienced crisis communicator who advised on best practices throughout the fire
- Two experienced JIC leaders served in the JIC Manager position for the bulk of the incident, establishing good systems and proper shift transitions and who constantly drove the development of both incident and non-critical but vital information for media consumption
    - o Examples of the latter include Aware and Prepare registration, County Agricultural Commissioner outreach efforts, fire containment v. control expectations, animal evacuations, air quality information, and more
- Two key Lead PIOs are long-time, senior County managers who took responsibility for a comprehensive staffing plan that continued 24/7 for a full 7 days of JIC operations {the staffing levels ranged from 6-9 during the day and 3-4 during most night shifts}
- County staff asked to serve in the JIC were incredibly generous in their flexibility of assignment given, working relationship, scheduling, etc. The sense of teamwork among all was extraordinary
- The designation of a lead writer for each JIC day shift resulted in a large number of fact sheets and press releases being produced and distributed (beyond incident facts) and allowed for actual writing versus simple dissemination of facts
- A benefit of the County-managed JIC was that the needs of local residents were taken into consideration, addressed and communicated, for example:
    - o Where to take large animals when evacuated
    - o How the Agricultural Commissioner was working with landowners
- A team of technology savvy staffers took social media, the County website and SBCTV to new heights of emergency public information content
- The County website became an extraordinary one-stop repository for all incident information
- Virtually all critical and feature JIC materials were distributed in Spanish, a tremendous accomplishment unmatched by nearly any emergency incident JIC
- A series of press conferences were produced, supported by the Logistics Section of the EOC
    - o These were professionally managed by the JIC leadership, including each overnight shift preparing key messages, talking points, speaker lists, etc.

> The Noozhawk's story, right, was the direct result of a JIC press release.

With Sherpa Fire Nearly Contained, Crews Shift Focus to Control

By Tom Bolton, Noozhawk Executive Editor | @tombol | June 22, 2016 | 7:05 p.m.

As the Sherpa Fire west of Goleta edged toward full containment Wednesday night, firefighters were beginning to shift their focus to completely dousing any hot spots within the burn area.

Sherpa Fire JIC By the Numbers

- Press releases issued from the JIC:
    - 27 English
    - 13 Spanish
- Nearly a dozen incident maps
- 12 fact sheets were produced
- 130 major web content updates
- Scores of Twitter posts (used primarily during the incident v. Facebook)
- Aware & Prepare registrants jumped by 2,901 registrants – a roughly 50% increase
- Web traffic reached 42,000 daily page views during fire vs. normal of 15,000
- Sherpa Fire website link sources:
    - 46% came from web search
    - 27% from links on other websites
    - 21% typed it in directly
    - 5% from Social Media
- 69% of web visitors came from Facebook vs Twitter at 28%
- 60% of visitors to website came from mobile device vs desktop
- Nearly 450 calls were made the 2-1-1 community helpline

Date	Subject	Reach	Clicks	Engagement
6/18	Perimeter Map	1,600	94	12
6/17	Perimeter Map	1,200	45	2
6/20	What firefighters eat	1,100	29	8
6/16	101 closures	699	73	28
6/21	Perimeter Map	627	66	7
6/15	Sign up for Aware and Prepare	385	44	31
6/16	6 a.m. update	315	21	5

> The County's Facebook was used minimally relying more on Twitter – an area of focus for the future. Maps and feature stories were most popular.
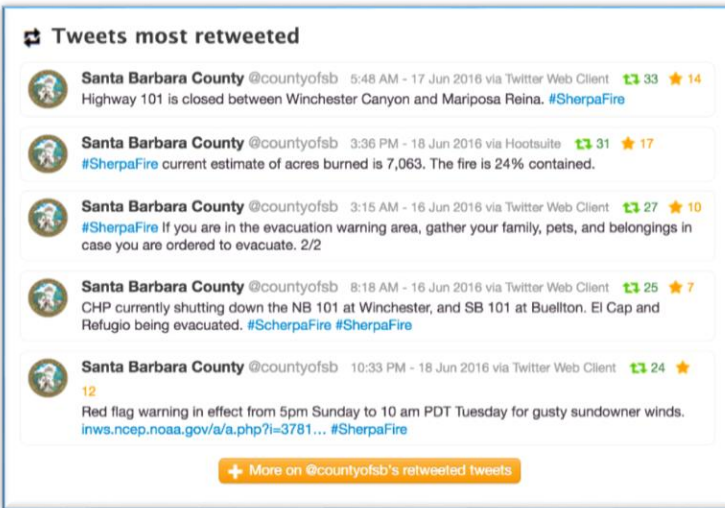
The County's Twitter posts were retweeted – or resent – extensively by individuals and media outlets thus maximizing outreach.

Going Forward: Topics for Discussion, Policy Development, Training, Systems

The Need for Additional Agency Representatives in the JIC
FEMA describes a JIC this way: "The JIC enhances information coordination, reduces misinformation, and maximizes resources by co-locating Public Information Officers (PIOs) as much as possible." By its nature, the "Joint" Information Center should be a place where, at a minimum, PIO representatives from all members of the Unified Command coordinate efforts.

For the Sherpa Fire, it was not until the 4th day that PIOs from CAL FIRE and the U.S. Forest Service assigned JIC liaisons. This proved highly difficult for the JIC team in the early days to a) gather and verify information; b) secure quotes from various incident commanders; and c) define jargon from various information sources. These processes were enhanced greatly by the fire agency PIOs.

Further, the "Joint Information System" envisioned by FEMA would generally have several other types of PIOs/spokespersons/liaisons in the JIC or immediately available, including those from:

- Southern California Edison
- Red Cross
- Earl Warren Showgrounds
- Others as dictated by in the incident

Fire/Sheriff PIOs or Liaisons in JIC?
It would be helpful to evaluate the possibility of including PIOs for the Fire Department and Sheriff's Department in the JIC. It is fully understood that there are staff limitations in each Department's public information functions (e.g., 2 PIOs in Fire and 1 in the SO). Further, it is often critical to have a spokesperson from one or both of these agencies at the ICP media function. However, there is strong benefit to having these agencies represented in the JIC to ensure information coordination and to verify information.

Handling the Media at the Incident Command Post, in the JIC – How to Coordinate
One of the key benefits of a Joint Information Center is the infrastructure required to handle the significant public and media interest in the incident. Examples of this infrastructure include:

- A media phone bank
- Managing a public information call-in center through the 2-1-1 system
- The ability to send press releases to a pre-established media list – more than 600 email addresses of media outlets
- Offloading the cell number for the Fire Department and Sheriff's Department PIOs (this system works well for day-to-day response/smaller incidents but becomes completely unworkable when inundated from media from around the country and the world)
- Translation of nearly all press releases
- Public-use map production and distribution
- Overseeing press conference logistics
- Coordinating sign language translation for press conferences

For the Sherpa Fire the ICP was located at Dos Pueblos High School. It is important to note that for all incidents there is an inherent challenge in ensuring the field PIO function located at an incident command post shares information with the JIC. A Type 1 Wildland Fire Management Team brings an impressive and experienced field/ICP PIO function – they are used to operating independent of a local JIC. For example, it was a few days into the incident before a conference call briefing protocol was established and which included the County's Lead PIO.

Issues Related to Unified Command
Content approval process – Fresh in the minds of the JIC staff were the challenges of content approval during the Refugio Oil Spill. With "only" 3 agencies working in UC this incident worked well. Generally, the content developed by the ICP PIO was considered "approved" for distribution through the JIC, as was information shared from the EOC briefings or ICS Form 209/Incident Status Summary. The JIC Managers tended to repackage the ICP content onto County letterhead. The ICP was asked if this was satisfactory numerous times during the incident with no feedback. The ICP letterhead did adopt a shared letterhead.

JIC Lead PIO to review content? – This is a gray area of UC. In that the EOC and JIC were generally functioning in support of the US Forest Service and CAL FIRE, the JIC Lead PIO was rarely involved in content review/approval. The one instance when this would have been appropriate and yet the ICP refused to allow the Santa Barbara County JIC PIO to review/provide input into a press release was regarding the repopulation of evacuated areas. The Sheriff's Office PIO was not involved in the drafting or review process, either. This resulted in misinformation being distributed by the ICP (use of the 2-1-1) and left the County unable to influence messaging going to its own residents.

ICP media center/phone vs. JIC – Another area of potential challenge was the creation of an incident media/public phone line located at the ICP (about 2-3 days into the incident), which was a duplication of the JIC phone bank. This is a recipe for inconsistent information being released and does not allow for a "single voice" concept of emergency communications.

Press conference content not developed in advance – Each of the speakers at any press conference developed their content in a vacuum from the other agencies/UC PIO/JIC. As a result, information was released at a press conference with no method to share the content beyond the media which were present. This is a significant issue which has plagued other incidents and is driven by the demand for the latest information and lack of communications staffing support. Ideally, the spokespersons prepare their information in advance in writing, allowing the content to be shared after a press conference. During Refugio a workaround was adopted: a JIC staffer was sent to the press conference to "capture" the content, return to the JIC and assist in the preparation of a comprehensive press release. JIC personnel were also able to watch any live press conference and obtain releasable information in this manner.

Use of 211 As Public Call Center: Awesome
For the first time, the County's existing 2-1-1 community helpline was used and promoted extensively as a one-stop place for the public to call for incident information. All approved press releases, fact sheets and maps were sent via email to the helpline staff, and operators were advised to check the County's Sherpa Fire incident page to obtain current and updated information.

The call center reports that 446 calls regarding the Sherpa Fire were received. It would prove helpful to research the ability to learn from the helpful staff any questions or comments received from the public that could be addressed proactively by the JIC.

Appendix A: PIT Team Initial JIC Debrief - What Worked and What to Work On

A regular gathering of the PIT had already been scheduled, ironically, for the week after the conclusion of the Sherpa Fire. The meeting was used to gather input about what worked well and what should be considered for future JIC operations. Below is the current version; it will continue to expand as additional debriefings are held:

Sherpa Fire JIC Plus Delta – PIT Mtg Debrief, June 28, 2016

Purpose of a Plus/Delta (+/Δ): This evaluation quality tool provides a method for continuous improvement for a team. The +/Δ evaluation can help the team stretch itself to even higher levels of performance.

| +	Δ
• Good team, good cooperation, proactive, people really jumped in to help where they could • Collaborative environment • Good planning, supportive, organized • Cross training occurred; staff experienced different and new tasks but more can be done • Took turns answering calls • Creative story mining to "feed the beast" and anticipate media/public interest in various angles • Good leadership • Serendipitous to get email before fire started inquiring about PIT members' summer schedules • Media phone line to JIC helped decrease calls to Fire PIO Dave Zaniboni • Great teamwork to quickly catch and correct media errors on social media and live news • Communication between fire and JIC was good. Transition from SBC Fire to Type 2 Team (Raj) > Type 1 Team with Frank. > James (PIO) • Good move to have National Weather Service and APCD at press conferences • Sheriff and Fire comments at press conference were good. Good messaging. Logistics Section was awesome. Good job setting time of press conferences • Everyone did well staying in their lane and communicating between agencies • Good to keep a small amount of press conferences • Good use of 211 – good communication between 211 and JIC • Helpful to have CalFire PIO in the JIC • "Writer" position in JIC worked well, continue to use • Worked well to run press releases through Operations Section/expert staff for fact checking, terminology, clarification and approval, such as Fire/Sheriff	• Prepare uniform process for shift change/transition. Process needs clarity; set reasonable expectations. • Develop brief backgrounder report to know what people's talents are. • Develop process improvements for updating 2-11 • Create JIC resource binders to stay in JIC • Upload media lists to Meltwater; maintain media and staffing contact lists and save in shared drive • Create LOGIN/PASSWORD master file with all computer, software, apps and social media login • Add photo and video apps to repertoire; not enough original graphics, images, video • Develop Infographic template for traditional and social media friendly content • Conduct mini trainings for non-PIO staff in social media, media relations and PIO/JIC operations • Update/check JIC supplies quarterly • Develop protocol to ensure team members working remotely are kept informed • Incorporate advance media training to prepare JIC staff for pushy, demanding, controversial or sneaky media. Yes, it happens! • Cross train staff to perform in different roles • Schedule social media training for different levels of expertise, in general and in emergency response • PIT members to submit 2-3 colleagues who have a skill set or interest in helping out in the JIC. • Initiate a robust recruitment program for PIT and all communications needs. Communicate DSW status importance. • Train department webmasters to help staff web services. Only three employees available for 24/7 coverage who generated more than 130 major content updates and many smaller updates. • Design incident webpage templates that complement County branding for fire, flood and earthquake • Host the website at multiple, redundant offsite locations using the Amazon cloud (target date: Q3 2017)

- Maintain employee contact list with cell numbers
- Consider one person in charge of staffing all shifts
- Initiate process to ensure overall information sharing
- Promote and brand Aware & Prepare – ongoing
- Incorporate Aware & Prepare messaging in talking points, message framework for all emergency messaging and in prescripted messages.
- Educate employees about the EOC and emergency management with new video, story & photos
- Research equipment/process improvements for ICP/JIC phone briefings; allow more JIC staff to hear the briefings
- Enhance JIC operations by having the Writer accompany Lead PIO in major briefings and take notes to be taken back to JIC staff while Lead PIO is tied up in Management Section briefings/meetings
- Lead PIO to spend more time in Management Section
- Incorporate into process: Lead PIO to run press releases through Operations and Management sections for fact checking, terminology, clarification and approvals
- Maintain contacts and contracts for translators and ASL
- Consider Spanish population for emergency alerts, press materials, fact sheets and 2-11.
- Be prepared for Spanish-language media needs from the JIC and at press conferences -develop list of Spanish speakers in advance and incident-specific
- See something, say something – JIC/EOC staff more alert for people who may not belong
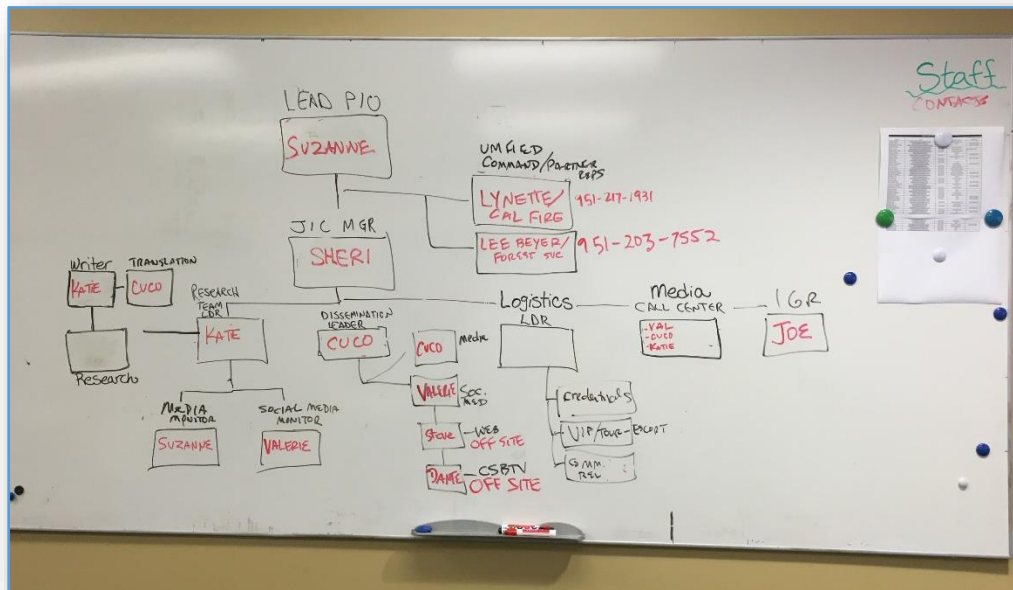
Appendix B: How a JIC Works

Typical full-scale JIC organization chart (FEMA):
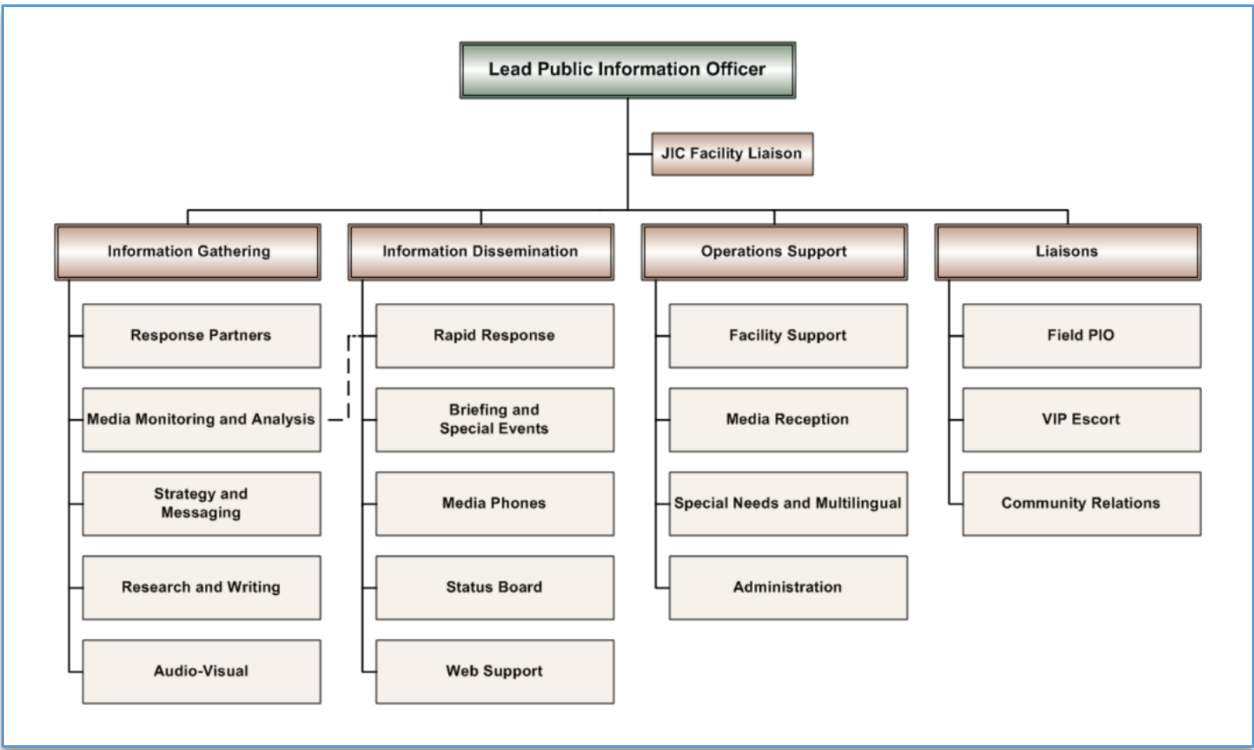
Santa Barbara County Public Information Annex:
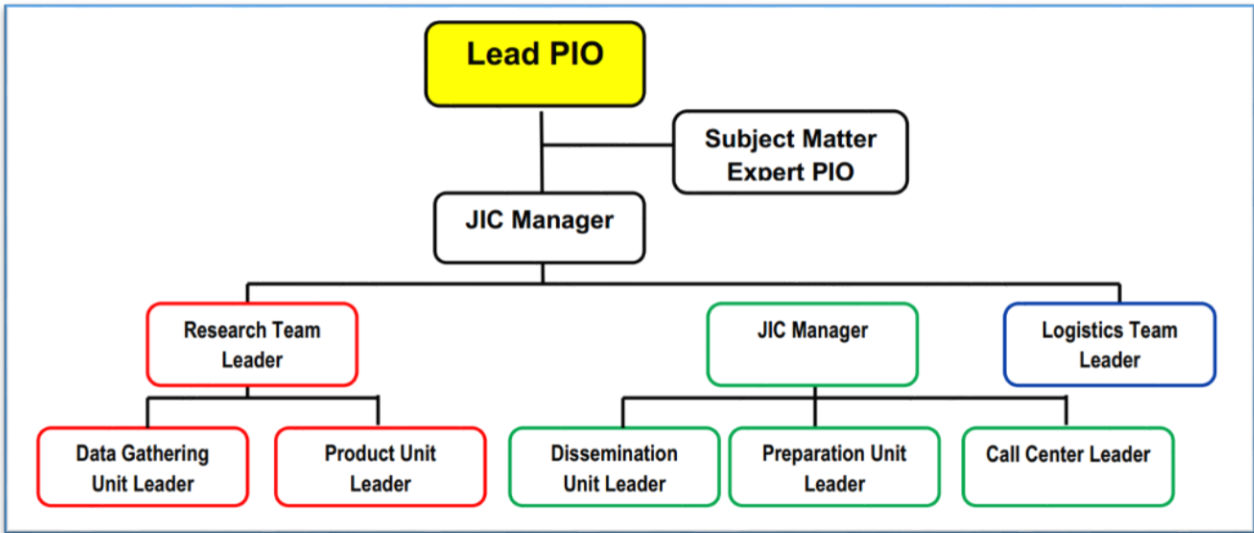
Sherpa Fire JIC organization chart:

Specific responsibilities of the JIC and its leadership include the following:

Step 1: Gathering Information

The first step in the process of getting information to the public during an incident is information gathering. Information is collected from:

- Field PIOs, who report to the JIC what they are observing and hearing in the field from the news media and the public.
- Field Command, a source of ongoing, official information on the response effort.
- Public Inquiry Center – aka 2-1-1, a valuable source of information on the public's concerns and any misunderstandings or rumors that are surfacing. Note this practice was not observed during Sherpa and could be pursued for future indidents.
- Media monitoring, which is used to assess the accuracy and content of news media reports. It also helps to identify trends and breaking issues.
- News media, a valuable source of developing information and current issues.

Step 2: Verifying Information

The next step in the process is to verify the accuracy of the information that has been collected, by consulting:

- Other PIOs in the JIC. Comparing notes—especially with the Lead PIO and PIOs who are liaisons to the various program areas—is one way to verify the accuracy of information.
- EOC sources, including program leads, who should be asked to confirm information.

- PIOs in the field. Field PIOs are a valuable source for making sure what is reported to the EOC rings true with what they are learning from the news media and people in the field.

Step 3: Coordinating Information

The next step in the process is to coordinate with other PIOs who are part of the JIS. These PIOs include both those represented in the JIC and those working from another location. Coordinating information involves:

- Establishing key message(s) by prioritizing information to get out to the public. The mission remains getting the right information to the right people at the right time so they can make the right decisions.
- Obtaining approval/clearance from those in authority to ensure that the information is accurate, complete, and current. The approval process should be streamlined, however, to ensure that the information is released in a timely manner. This streamlined process should be addressed during planning and preparation.

Step 4: Disseminating Information

The next step in the process is to disseminate the information to the public. This step involves:

- Using multiple methods. In an emergency the media continues to be a primary means of getting information to the public. Social media, informational kiosks, County website, SBCTV page scroll and rebroadcast of press conferences, and other tools all must be used.
- Monitoring the media. Media monitoring is invaluable for ensuring that messages are understood by the news media and reported accurately and completely to the public. Address important inaccuracies before they are reported incorrectly a second time.

Appendix C: JIC Photos