
Annex R to Emergency Support Function #15 External Affairs

Digital and Social Media

References:

- A. National Response Framework (NRF)
- B. National Incident Management System (NIMS)

1.0 Purpose

This annex outlines the plan for Federal departments and agencies to use digital, social, web-based and other interactive communications with the public during incidents requiring a coordinated Federal response.

2.0 Concept of Operations

Official websites, blogs, photos, videos, social media sites, text messages (SMS), and smartphone applications are effective tools to advise and inform the public if used in a coordinated, strategic, and timely manner, and should be used in concert with other non-digital communication channels.

2.1 As digital and technology solutions continue to grow and evolve, the concepts, principles, and guidelines in this Annex should carry over to any digital communication channel.

2.2 All content, messaging, and communication channels should be accessible to populations with access & functional needs and populations with Limited English Proficiency (LEP), and should be coordinated and thoroughly aligned with Products and Planning and Joint Information Center appropriately. The Digital Communications Specialist sits in the Media Relations Unit in the JIC.

3.0 Digital Communications Channels

Once the ESF-15 Operations Director is identified, the respective agency and their communication channels are the lead.

3.1 USA.gov

For prolonged national level incidents or incidents where multiple Federal departments are involved, the primary portal website will be USA.gov, operated by the General Services Administration (GSA). This site will serve as a portal to the lead agency and other agencies that are communicating incident specific information. The following is not meant to provide an exclusive list of channels, and the focus should be on the underlying principles and guidelines:

3.2 Department and Agency Websites

Agencies should follow these guidelines for the best way to support the response and recovery efforts:

3.2.1 Ensure your website and blog are up to date with the latest information regarding the incident.

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- 3.2.2** Stay within agency mission lanes when commenting or creating content about the incident.
 - 3.2.3** Ensure that information being provided is accessible and in the proper format.
 - 3.2.4** Cross-link to other agencies' content that would be beneficial for your audience.
 - 3.2.5** In some instances, it may be relevant that multiple agencies stand up pages specific to the disaster, utilizing the same word/keyword (E.g. energy.gov/sandy or treasury.gov/sandy)

3.3 Department and Agency Social Media Sites

Agencies should always use pre-established accounts during an incident because the account already has an established base of users and level of trust with social media users.

- 3.3.1** The lead agency's social media accounts shall provide information and amplify information being provided by other agencies. Other agencies shall provide mission specific information and point back to the lead agency accounts or, if applicable, the incident specific account.
- 3.3.2** Before launching new accounts for a particular incident, answer the following questions:
 - Will the response and/or the recovery be prolonged?
 - Will there be confusion between this new account and existing accounts?
 - Who will manage the new account after the incident?
 - Is there a specific regional or language social media site or network that represents the audience impacted by the incident?
- 3.3.3** Agencies should follow these guidelines for the best way to support the response and recovery efforts and engage audiences:
 - Ensure your social media sites have up to date messages regarding the incident.
 - Stay within your agency's mission lanes when commenting or creating content about the incident.
 - Respond to questions or inquiries from social media users or direct them to the appropriate agency.
 - Ensure that information being provided is accessible and in the proper format.
 - Cross-link to other agencies' social media sites that are involved with the incident.

4.0 Messaging and Distribution

As noted in concept of operations, content and messaging should be coordinated and thoroughly aligned with Products and Planning and Joint Information Center appropriately. Posting important, accurate, and timely content is the most important component of any Web and social media operation. When it comes to digital communication channels, agencies should follow these guidelines for the best way to support the response and recovery efforts and engage audiences:

- 4.1** As with all messaging during a Federal response, content should be actionable information to promote public safety and should include “asks” to the public to rebroadcast the content and share it with others who they know may be affected by the incident. It should be encouraged to share the content thru both social media channels and non-social media channels.
- 4.2** Core content and messages should be posted on the agency’s website or blog and the social media channels; content posting should not be restrictive to only one social media site or digital communication channel, and as required by law, content and messages must be provided in accessible formats.
- 4.3** The preferred content on social media sites are updates that are easy to read and comprehend in an easily digestible format, preferably with actionable public safety information.
- 4.4** All Federal, State, Tribal, and local partners should amplify messaging on their accounts as appropriate. All private sector entities, including but not limited to, associations, businesses, non-profits, and educational institutions, should also amplify messages through their channels, as they may have followers that are impacted by the incident.

5.0 Social Media Monitoring and Reporting for Situational Awareness

Monitoring publicly available content across online channels is as important as posting information, and agency policies and procedures should be followed as it relates to monitoring social media. During an incident,

ESF #15 should use publicly available social media sites for situational awareness, and should search on appropriate keywords, hash-tags, and other search terms on digital channels to find information for situational awareness.

The Department does not endorse any non-government websites, companies or applications. The concepts presented in this annex are applicable for any social media site or digital communication platform.

- 5.1** All responding agencies should follow their agencies’ rules, policies, and procedures as to what capacity they are authorized to use approved applications and platforms.

6.0 Products and Planning and Joint Information Centers

The Digital Communications Specialist should monitor for messages sent from the public

directly to the agency social media accounts. If incorrect information is discovered the specialist should notify the AEPP so corrected information can be incorporated into the communications plan.

7.0 Technology Volunteers

When appropriate, agencies should utilize technology volunteers as support and follow agency policies and procedures. Copyrighted content and the public's right to privacy should be adhered to at all times.

8.0 Reporting

Agencies should ensure that any and all reports follow their agencies' legal, privacy, and records management rules and appropriate Standard Operating Procedures, and should always take into account copyrighted content and the public's right to privacy.

Stafford Act Case Study: Hurricane Sandy 2012

- FEMA was designated as the ESF #15 lead for Hurricane Sandy, and was responsible for coordinating the External Affairs for the federal response.
- Staff from multiple FEMA regional offices, as well as DHS Headquarters, coordinated with FEMA HQ External Affairs on web and social media outreach at FEMA Headquarters and eventually at Joint Field Offices in New York, New Jersey and Connecticut. At the height of the storm, more than 15 staff members were supporting the social media operation. This surge support, and the ability of FEMA digital staff to work from anywhere there was an internet connection, was critical in FEMA's digital response to this disaster.
- The social media team worked across ESF #15 to develop and write social media content, and to manage the FEMA social media accounts – including the newly established Facebook and Twitter accounts that provided specific updates about Sandy response and recovery.
- Additionally, the team used social media for situational awareness including information about social media discussions on power outages, volunteering and donations, and sentiment about the response efforts, that was shared with Department, ESF #15, and interagency leadership, as well as the National Response Coordination Center, Joint Field Offices, and other important partners.

Hurricane Sandy Rumor Control

- After Sandy made landfall, the web and social media team found that a large amount of misinformation was circulating on social media, related to FEMA and the state's role in the response. In order to ensure an effective external affairs operation, and in coordination with the other aspects of ESF #15 including the media outreach team, FEMA began a Rumor Control initiative.
- A page on fema.gov and m.fema.gov (FEMA's mobile site) was created. When a rumor was identified, the social media team worked with ESF #15 staff to track down additional information and gather the correct information. These details were then added to the Rumor Control page, providing clear language about the misinformation and resources where people could find correct information for each rumor.
- Rumor Control messages were shared widely by FEMA's social media accounts, as well as by other responding agencies. The social media team shared this information with the interagency through the NICCL, and collaborated with state and local partners to share these messages and expand their reach.