



INTERNATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF FIRE FIGHTERS

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

March 29, 2026

**AN
UNEXPECTED
EVENT**

4 current, former Nev. FFs under investigation in overdose death

Court documents revealed the North Las Vegas firefighters participated in “narcotics trafficking activities” that led to the death of one of the firefighter’s spouses

Police and Firefighter Unions Take Legal Action Against Boston Vaccine Mandate

A fire engulfed a Massachusetts assisted-living facility, killing 10 people. Here’s what we know

City drops legal fight over Salem firefighter’s 2019 cancer death



WHAT'S A CRISIS?

Disrupts normal operations

Threatens the well-being of members

Causes major media/government scrutiny

Jeopardizes the public image of the Local or the IAFF

Has negative impact on the Union's ability to do normal business.



CAUSES

External Forces

- Political
- Community
- Natural disaster

Internal Forces

- Union member issue
- Union officer issue



THREE FORMS

IMMEDIATE SURPRISE

LODD

Member critically injured

Member arrested

Change in leadership

Rumors and gossip

Grievances and discipline



EMERGING THREAT

Federal Funding Changes

City Bankruptcy

Growing PTSD issue

Cancer - PFAS

Vaccine Mandate



SUSTAINED ATTACK

Pension attack

Budget reductions

Bad relationship with elected officials

Station closures



PREDICTABLE

VS.

UNPREDICTABLE

- Political events and elections
- Financial and budget issues
- Labor management conflict
- Internal incidents
- Mediation and arbitration

- LODD
- Off-duty incidents
- Litigation
- Grievances and discipline
- Rumors and gossip



**CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS IS TO
COMMUNICATIONS AS RIT OPERATIONS
ARE TO FIRE GROUND OPERATIONS**

BE PREPARED

BEFORE THE CRISIS

CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

BEFORE THE CRISIS

INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

- Complete membership list with email and cell phone numbers
- Compile a list of friends/allies/community organizations with contact info
- Communication (who/what medium – email/phone/in-person)
 - Membership
 - Administration
 - DVP
 - IAFF
 - Elected Officials


BRAND BUILDING

- Build and maintain social media presence
- Collect photos/video of members in action
- Develop community outreach opportunities

COMMUNICATION RESOURCES

- Designate a Communications Director
- Develop relationships with local media
- Identify a spokesperson and complete media training
- Rehearse tough questions

**CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS is to COMMUNICATIONS
as RIT OPERATIONS are to FIRE GROUND OPERATIONS**



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Have a complete membership list with email and cell phone #s



Identify issues of concern



Compile a list of community organizations with contact info



Understand your resources



Make friends and allies that care about your issues



BEFORE THE CRISIS



Collect photos/video of members in action



Establish internal communications channels – emails, text



ID community outreach opportunities



Remember the stories and have a database of them ready



Build a robust social media presence



BEFORE THE CRISIS



ID a spokesperson and give them media training



Designate a Communications Director to push out internal and external communications



Rehearse tough questions



Develop relationships with media and keep contact info in a list



MAKE A PLAN

WHY?



Keep everyone on message



Ensure accurate, timely, and consistent information



Eliminate rumors and misinformation to protect Local's reputation



Protect the Local union and members



Maintain relationships with the community



Identify roles and responsibilities ahead of time



Provide rules and framework for decision-making.



STRATEGIC COMMUNICATIONS PROCESS



MANAGE THE CRISIS

BASIC GUIDELINES



Be Calm

The story will either kill you or it won't, but panicking won't help.



Be Professional

Reputations are made on first impressions.



Be Prepared

Develop communications and relationships before you need them.



THE RESPONSE



**EXPECTATIONS OF
LEADERSHIP**



**USE AN APPROPRIATE
TONE**



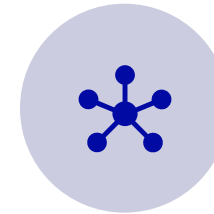
**SPEAK IN ONE
ORGANIZATIONAL
“VOICE” AND
DEMONSTRATE UNITY**



**UTILIZE
COMMUNICATIONS
CHANNELS**



**UPDATE CONTACT
LISTS AND ENGAGE AS
NEEDED**



**MAINTAIN A
CENTRALIZED
CONTROL OF
RESPONSE**



MUST DEMONSTRATE

What happened

What you are doing to address the situation

Likely effectiveness of such steps

Prevention of future incidents



THE RESPONSE

9 STEPS OF A CRISIS RESPONSE

CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

9 STEPS OF A CRISIS RESPONSE

1. Verify the situation
2. Notifications
3. Conduct assessment and activate the plan
4. Organize assignments
5. Prepare information and get approvals
6. Release information to relevant parties
7. Obtain feedback and conduct evaluation
8. Conduct public education (regain trust)
9. Monitor and evaluate plan effectiveness

Verify situation

Notify

Conduct
assessment
(Activate the
crisis plan)

Organize
assignments

Prepare info
and get
approvals

Release info to
relevant parties

Obtain
feedback and
conduct crisis
evaluation

Conduct public
education

Monitor events



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STEP 1 – VERIFY THE SITUATION

Ask - Is this really happening? Is this a crisis?

What is the real problem?

Know the facts before proceeding



STEP 2 - NOTIFICATION



Notify the people who need to know quickly



Executive board, IAFF DVP, Crisis team, Strategic Campaigns team, IAFF Communications team



Chief or Administration



STEP 3 – ASSESS AND ACTIVATE THE PLAN

Collect a summary and timeline of the facts

Obtain a legal understanding of the implications

ID issues and who is affected

Determine your audience and tailor messages to each group



STEP 4 – ORGANIZE ASSIGNMENTS



Make clear what responsibilities are assigned to each person



Provide a path for information to flow between assignments



Let all stakeholders know who is responsible for what



STEP 5 – PREPARE COMPONENTS AND OBTAIN APPROVALS



Prepare all materials needed



Review all materials - proofread



Work with a team to create messages



Obtain authorization for all statements



“

West Metro Fire Rescue was contacted by the Castle Rock Police Department regarding an ongoing investigation involving one of our firefighters. Law enforcement is handling the matter. Due to the serious nature of the allegations, the firefighter was placed on suspension without pay while the investigation continues.

West Metro has been and will continue to cooperate fully with authorities from Castle Rock Police. The allegations involved in this matter do not reflect the values of West Metro Fire Rescue, nor have they impacted our crews' daily work.”

— **DEPARTMENT STATEMENT**



MESSAGING

When mistakes have been made, admit it up front.

Do whatever is possible to re-establish credibility.

It's not the crime, it's the cover-up.

Your lawyer should review statements. Not create them.

A fire fighter should deliver the message.





IF ASKED FOR A COMMENT ABOUT ANY ARREST/CHARGES:

We are aware of these serious allegations. The matter is currently under investigation by the proper criminal and administrative authorities. It is important to note that this is not reflective of the members of this department and the fine work West Metro Firefighters do every day to protect this community.

IF ASKED IF THE UNION IS DEFENDING THE MEMBER:

The West Metro Firefighters Association is simply ensuring that the disciplinary procedures put in place by the West Metro Fire Protection District are followed.

— STATEMENT FROM LOCAL 1309





DEPARTMENT STATEMENT:

West Metro Fire Rescue was contacted by the Castle Rock Police Department regarding an ongoing investigation involving one of our firefighters. Law enforcement is handling the matter. Due to the serious nature of the allegations, the firefighter was placed on suspension without pay while the investigation continues.

West Metro has been and will continue to cooperate fully with authorities from Castle Rock Police. The allegations involved in this matter do not reflect the values of West Metro Fire Rescue, nor have they impacted our crews' daily work.

LOCAL STATEMENT:

We are aware of these serious allegations. The matter is currently under investigation by the proper criminal and administrative authorities. It is important to note that this is not reflective of the members of this department and the fine work West Metro Firefighters do every day to protect this community.



STEP 6 – RELEASE INFORMATION TO RELEVANT PARTIES

- Do not adlib or wing it
- Centralize information flow to each audience
 - Members should receive information to control spreading – email, texts, internal Facebook group
 - Media with statements
 - Elected officials – face-to-face, emails
- Resist combative instincts
- Be transparent



LOCAL 1309 INTERNAL STATEMENT

STATEMENT ABOUT THE ARREST/CHARGES:

Brothers and Sisters,

One of our members has been arrested and charged with a serious crime. Undoubtedly, you have seen stories and reports from local media outlets and on social media. Local 1309's Executive Board is aware of these allegations and is fulfilling our duty to ensure the Department follows the disciplinary procedures in place. Let me be clear: Despite what you may hear from some of those who seek to tear down or discredit our union, we do not represent members or provide legal advice in criminal court.

We know that these allegations do not reflect on the members of this Department and the fine work we do every day to protect our community.

This is a difficult time for every member of Local 1309, and now is the time for us to come together and support each other. In the coming days and weeks, you are likely to see stories in the media and on social media and face questions from friends, family, and colleagues. I ask you to stay strong, be patient, and respect the process in place as we move forward.

If you encounter or see personal attacks on our Department, our Local, or our members, please refrain from engaging in person or on social media with those determined to tear us down.

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to reach out.



MEDIA AND CRISIS

Reporters want a front seat to the action and all info now.

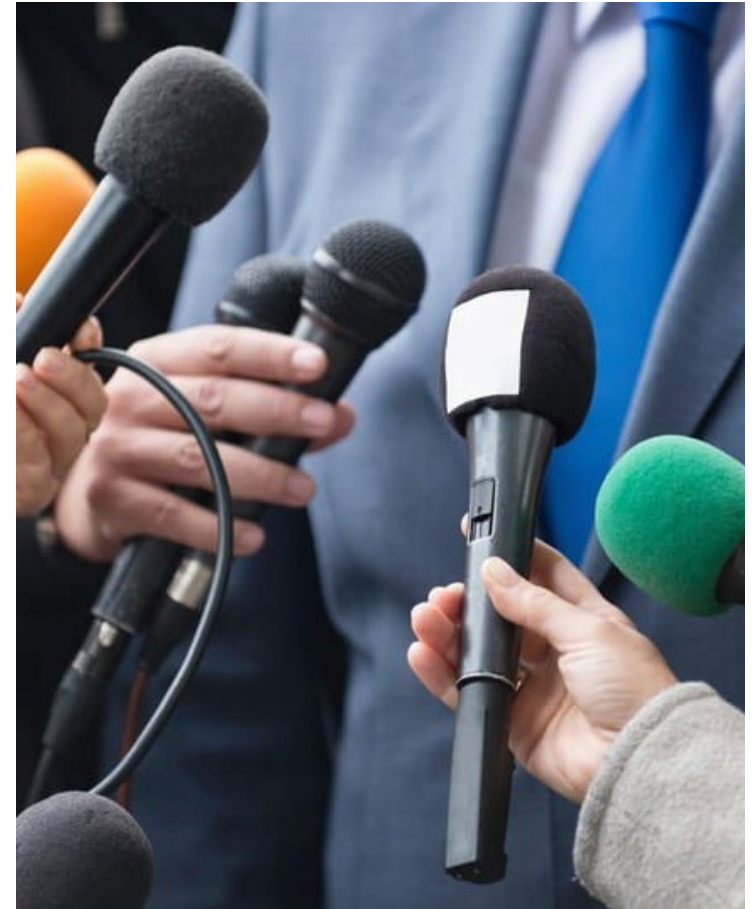
Preparation will save relationships.

If you don't have the facts, tell them the process.

Reality Check: 70,000 media outlets in U.S. Media cover the news 24/7.

They are going to tell the story whether you help or not.

Know what they are going to ask



MEDIA QUESTIONS

- What happened?
- Who is in charge?
- Has this been contained?
- Are victims being helped?
- What can we expect?
- What should we do?
- Why did this happen?
- Did you have forewarning?



MUST

- Be short
- Be relevant
- Give positive action steps
- Be repeated
- Show empathy
- Be transparent
- Be available

MUST NOT

- Use jargon
- Be judgmental
- Make promises that can't be kept
- Be funny



AVOID “NO COMMENT”

- I can't really talk about that now, but what I can tell you is...
- It's a bit too early to discuss that.....
- That deals with one aspect of the issue.....the real matter is
- It is a matter under review and when we have the facts.....

Deflect and bridge to ensure you control the message.

Deflect: ““It would be improper for me to speak on a private legal matter.”

then

Bridge: ““However, I think it is important to remind the public that this situation in no way hinders the great work our fire fighters do for this community every day.”



PRESS CONFERENCES



Determine in advance who will answer questions about specific subject matters

Assume that every mic is “live” the entire time

Ask if you are sitting or standing

Don't have “hangers on” from your organization circling the room

Don't be visible to the media/public while waiting to begin the press conference




PREPARE FOR FOLLOW UP QUESTIONS

Any arrests or charges?



Other members named in the investigation?



Is the Union defending the member?



How deep does this go?



SPOKESPERSON

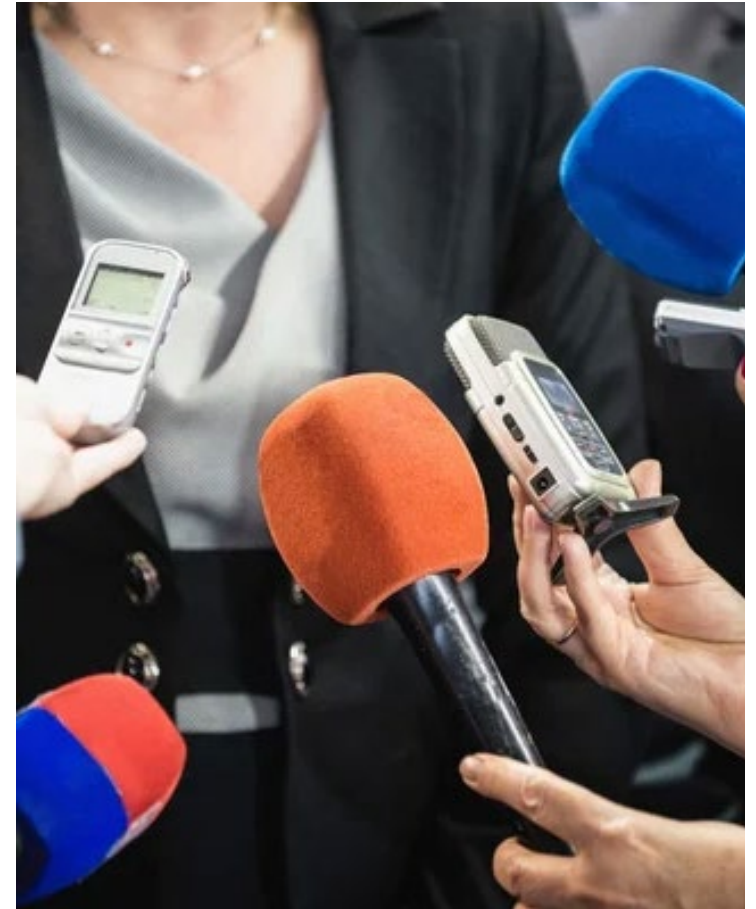
One individual should be designated as the primary spokesperson to represent the local, make official statements, and answer media questions throughout the crisis.

In some cases, it is recommended that the media spokesperson not be a member or elected leader or your attorney.

A backup to the designated spokesperson should also be identified to fill the position if the primary spokesperson is unavailable.

Stay within the scope of responsibility, tell the truth, follow up, expect criticism

Designate a media coordinator to work with media “off-camera” to arrange interviews and give factual background



STEP 7 – OBTAIN FEEDBACK AND CONDUCT EVALUATION

✓ Obtain feedback on an ongoing basis

👥 Listen to members and influencers

🔍 Ask trusted sources

📰 Pay attention to news coverage

💬 Look at comments and feedback for trends

👍 Be honest with yourself



STEP 8 – CONDUCT PUBLIC EDUCATION (REGAIN TRUST)



STEP 9 – MONITOR AND EVALUATE EFFECTIVENESS



Monitor events



Evaluate your strategic communications plan and its effectiveness



CASE STUDIES

A fire engulfed a Massachusetts assisted-living facility, killing 10 people. Here's what we know

City drops legal fight over Salem firefighter's 2019 cancer death





A fire engulfed a Massachusetts assisted-living facility, killing 10 people. Here's what we know
— CNN

Fall River fire department to meet staffing standards. Union has more safety goals in mind

— The Herald

Fire that killed 10 at an assisted living facility prompts Massachusetts to enact safety reforms
— AP News



COMMUNICATION CRISIS CASE STUDY



- 2025 Fall River Assisted Living Facility Fire
- A Firefighters Union Perspective; Using a crisis to improve safety for your local and the community you serve

INCIDENT OVERVIEW

- July 13, 2025 fire at a Fall River, Massachusetts assisted living facility
- Vulnerable population: elderly and mobility-impaired residents
- Rapid fire spread and complex rescue conditions led to 10 fatalities and 70 injured (including 6 Fire Fighters)
- Tragic loss of life highlighted systemic gaps



RESPONSE AND HOW ADEQUATE STAFFING COULD HAVE IMPACTED OUTCOME

33 fire fighters arrived within the first 15 minutes (far below the recommended 42) per NFPA 1710

FRFD had a staffing level of 3 FFs per apparatus

Nearly 30 off duty FR fire fighters responded to the fire

Dedicated fire fighters for rescue operations

Separate personnel for fire suppression

Clearer radio traffic and accountability

Faster, more informed command decisions

Presents a better opportunity for FFs to rehab



IMPROVED LIFE SAFETY THROUGH PROPER STAFFING

The ability to dedicate FFs to rescue efforts and others to concentrate on fire suppression efforts

Faster room-to-room searches

Quicker evacuation of non-ambulatory residents

Reduced fire fighter fatigue and errors

Increased survival rates in high-risk occupancies



UNION MESSAGE TO THE PUBLIC

Tragedies like Fall River should not be repeated

This is not about pay — it's about safety

Fire fighters want to arrive fully staffed and equipped to protect the community

The community expects and deserves the best chance of survival

NFPA Standards don't guarantee success – but failing below them almost always guarantees failure



MESSAGE TO CITY LEADERS



Ignoring staffing warnings puts lives at risk



Staffing is a proactive investment, not a cost



Lawsuits, fatalities, and public trust losses cost more



National standards exist for a reason



IAFF/ PFFM CALL TO ACTION

The PFFM, with assistance of the IAFF SC team, took a deep dive into Fall River's budget as well as the budget of the Massachusetts Department of Fire Services (\$45 million plus)

Identified Massachusetts IAFF locals that were operating below NFPA Standards
Mass average is 2.5 FFs on an Engine and 2 FFs on a Ladder

Began crafting legislation that would increase minimum staffing levels across Massachusetts that would be in line with national standards

Prioritized high-risk occupancies like assisted living (applicable to schools, nursing homes, group homes, schools, etc.)



WHAT HAS CHANGED?



The day after the fire, IAFF GP Kelly and PFFM President McKinnon, held a press conference calling attention to the tragedy and how the proper staffing levels would have saved lives.



Within a few days, the Mayor of Fall River agrees to increase staffing to NFPA standards using overtime through a \$1.2 million dollar grant from the Commonwealth of Massachusetts



Governor Healey orders an emergency review of the fire safety protocols of the 273 assisted-living homes in Massachusetts



Working through the legislation to create changes – The State began enacting reforms in January 2026



CONSIDERATIONS

You can be assured that there will be people who will call you out on the use of a tragedy like this.

That's why it's crucial to have facts. NFPA standards and IAFF GIS reports can be useful tools to help create and verify your message

Stay on message – including the families of the victims, can increase your credibility and solidify your objectives



“

City drops legal fight over Salem firefighters' 2019 cancer death”

— Salem Reporter



For Immediate Release
September 24, 2023

Contact: Ryan Heffernan
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City of Salem Continues to Fight Widow of Fallen Fire Fighter

IAFF General President Calls Out City Council for “Cowardly” Appeal to Oregon Supreme Court

Salem, OR – Last week, Salem firefighters escorted Tina Stadel to Colorado Springs, Colorado, to honor her husband, Firefighter Maurice “Mo” Stadel, at the International Association of Fire Fighters’ Fallen Fire Fighter Memorial. Salem City Council chose that moment, however, to appeal the Oregon Appellate Court’s decision recognizing Stadel’s death as an Oregon Line of Duty Death. Firefighter Stadel died of occupational cancer in 2019 after more than 28 years serving the citizens of Salem.

“I am disgusted with the cowardly actions of the Salem City Council,” said Edward Kelly, General President of the International Association of Fire Fighters. “Cowardly, because there was no indication of an intent to fight the Oregon Appellate Court decision for nearly two years. Cowardly, because the decision was announced on the final day the City of Salem had to appeal. Cowardly, because that notification was given as Salem Firefighters were escorting Mo’s widow, Tina, to the hallowed grounds of our IAFF Fallen Fire Fighter Memorial to honor his memory.”

Oregon legislators overwhelmingly passed firefighter presumptive cancer legislation in 2009 that covers the same type of cancer that took Firefighter Stadel’s life. When Stadel died in 2019, the city of Salem denied his widow’s death benefit claims, fighting her all the way to the Oregon Appellate Court. The court recognized her husband’s death as due to occupational cancer, and Firefighter Stadel’s death was classified as an Oregon Line of Duty death in 2021. However, nearly two years later, Salem City Council chose to continue the fight against Tina Stadel by notifying her of their intent to appeal to the Oregon Supreme Court.

“We vow to bring the full power and resources of the International Association of Fire Fighters to this fight and ensure Mo’s memory,” said Kelly. “We will not rest until Tina Stadel receives the benefits she deserves.”

On Monday, Salem Firefighters, along with firefighters from across Oregon, will picket ahead of the Salem City Council Meeting, urging city officials to do the right thing and withdraw the notice of intent to appeal to the Oregon Supreme Court.

###

IAFF PRESS RELEASE



GP ED KELLY STATEMENT





THANK YOU!
ANY QUESTIONS?



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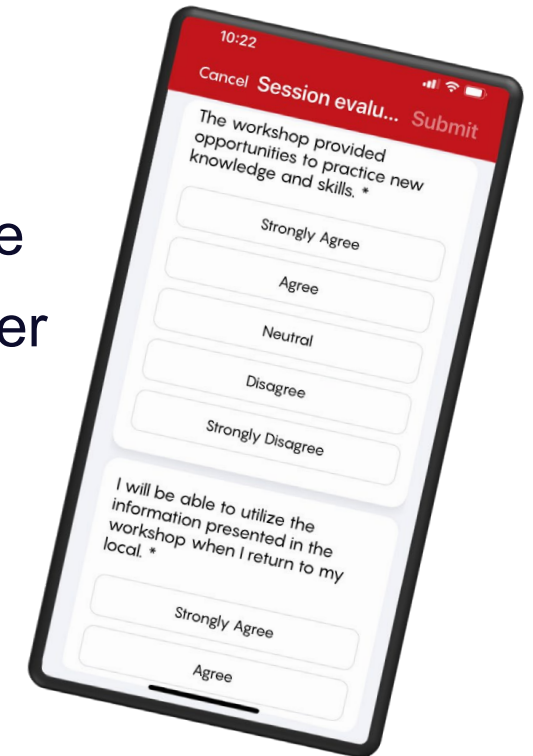


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EVALUATION AND WIN AN IPAD!

- **Submit your workshop and overall evaluations to be automatically entered in two drawings for a new iPad!**
- **Complete your evaluations using the IAFF app:**
 1. Download the IAFF app and sign in with your iaff.org username
 2. Tap the 2026 Strive for Excellence Summit event image to enter the event's dashboard
 3. Tap "Sessions" and tap on the workshops you attended
 4. Tap "Evaluation" and complete the evaluation
 5. Tap "Submit"



For the event's overall evaluation, follow steps 1 and 2, then tap "Event Evaluation" located in the event's Dashboard.

