

STATE OF OREGON AFTER-ACTION REVIEW OF THE JOINT INFORMATION CENTER AND COMMUNICATIONS IN THE COVID-19 RESPONSE



Executive Summary

This after-action review (AAR) focuses on efforts by the State of Oregon to coordinate public information and the effectiveness of Joint Information Center (JIC) operations related to the COVID-19 response beginning in January 2020 through May 31, 2020. The AAR identifies areas of success and opportunities for improvement for Oregon to take proactive action in helping the state better prepare to respond to any event.

Methodology

Information was collected from individuals and organizations identified as stakeholders by the State Resilience Officer. Data gathering methods included a series of online surveys, specific to each stakeholder group that was surveyed, as well as interviews with individuals, and review of documentation related to the event. These documents included but were not limited to situation reports, after-action reports, articles, incident action plans, and executive orders.

Preparedness

Oregon's Emergency Operations Plan (EOP) outlines the framework to provide accurate, coordinated, and timely information in Emergency Support Function (ESF) 14. The Office of Emergency Management (OEM) and the Governor's Office are Primary Agencies for ESF 14, and the Lead Public Information Officer (PIO) Agency is the state agency with the mission that is most closely aligned to the incident. For the COVID-19 response, that responsibility falls to Oregon Health Authority (OHA). ESF 14 also outlines the role of the JIC as a central location that provides a single point for information dissemination.

As the Lead PIO Agency, OHA relies on the ESF 8 External Affairs Annex that outlines the public information responsibilities, including the activation of a JIC any time the OHA Agency Operations Center is activated for a response. The plan also notes that when the Governor activates the state Emergency Coordination Center (ECC), all public information is coordinated with OEM, the Governor's Communication Director, and other state, federal, and local agencies,

as appropriate. Additional OHA infectious disease incident plans call for a detailed, event-specific communication plans to be developed based on the circumstances of the particular incident.

Response

The State of Oregon reacted quickly in response to the threat of COVID-19. With the activation of the OHA Incident Management Team (IMT) on January 21 to prepare for and respond to COVID-19, public information and risk communication work was initiated. Beginning JIC efforts focused on preparedness to allow for a quick scale-up if COVID-19 spread to Oregon. Efforts escalated quickly at the end of February when the first case in Oregon was reported and a JIC was established through the OHA Agency Operations Center (AOC). OHA engaged with the Governor’s Office on COVID-19 messaging.

The activation of the Emergency Coordination Center on March 9, led to a JIC standing up at the ECC in Salem. Efforts to integrate JIC operations at one location in Salem began around March 15, but a significant amount of public information continued to be executed at OHA in Portland. In late April, the entire ECC operations, including the JIC, moved to a larger space at the Department of Public Safety Standards and Training (DPSST).

Findings

The federal National Response Framework defines 31 core capabilities that in general must be accomplished in incident response. Observations on Oregon’s Communication efforts can be organized into these core capabilities: Planning, Public Information and Warning, Operational Coordination, and Operational Communications.

Areas of Success

<p>Preparedness</p>	<p>Communications Plans Exist—The High Impact Pathogen Plan of Operations (HIPPO), ESF 8 Base Plan External Affairs Annex and the state’s Emergency Operations Plan ESF 14 all outline public information and communication plans with Joint Information Center activation triggers, communication strategies, and roles and responsibilities.</p>
<p>Public Information and Warning</p>	<p>Translated and Interpreted Messaging—OHA has established mechanisms to facilitate translation of materials into multiple languages. This is a standard practice, so it was not a unique task to ensure materials were available in different languages. Consistently having a sign language interpreter at broadcast events supported communication to those who are deaf or hearing impaired.</p>
<p>Operational Coordination</p>	<p>Governor’s Office and OHA JIC Collaboration—The Governor’s Office and OHA collaborated closely on the COVID-19 response. This close relationship facilitated effective communication about the Governor’s decisions and public health protective measures.</p>

Areas of Improvement

<p>Preparedness</p>	<p>Planning Coordination Gaps—The HIPPO does not identify linkages to the enterprise response systems. As a result, the public health division’s response to COVID-19 was fast, intense, and expansive, but had siloed communications operations.</p> <p>Planning with Community Stakeholders—There was not a strategic plan for equitable communication. Advance work needs to be done to define the approaches to reach Black, Indigenous, and Persons of Color (BIPOC) communities, those without internet access, those with literacy limitations, and people with access and functional needs.</p> <p>Training—JIC operations were staffed through an ‘all-call’ across state agencies and the resulting team was very diverse and very talented, but inexperienced in JIC operations and lacking knowledge of the Incident Command System.</p> <p>Dedicated JIC—There is no dedicated space to support and sustain JIC operations at the ECC. JIC operations were set up in any available space and were disrupted on different occasions with moves to different locations, negatively affecting communications effectiveness.</p>
<p>Public Information and Warning</p>	<p>Timely Translations—There was a noted delay in getting useful translated information to immigrant and refugee communities and communities of color.</p> <p>Delivering Messages Effectively—Communication efforts need to be more than digital outreach through dominant culture media and technology systems.</p>
<p>Operational Coordination</p>	<p>Adherence to ICS—JIC operations at OHA and the ECC were not established following ICS structures and processes, even though it is the designated structure according to the State EOP.</p> <p>Organizational Chart—Not adhering to the command structure slowed communication, created opportunity for duplication of effort, and lost unity of effort.</p>
<p>Operational Communication</p>	<p>Stakeholder Analysis—Information was distributed to various stakeholders at drastically different intervals.</p> <p>Inconsistent Media Engagement—There were perceived and real disparities in how various media outlets were treated.</p>

Opportunities and Recommendations

The State of Oregon’s management of the communication during the COVID-19 response revealed opportunities and recommendations for the state to pursue further. These include:

- Engage communications personnel from OEM and ESF agencies to evaluate linkages between agency-specific communications plans. Update plans to reflect the intersection of the communication operations and delineate pathways for coordination, including responsible parties.

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- The equity and inclusion processes that developed and grew throughout this response should be captured and incorporated into plans and templates to expand future equitable communication efforts.
- Consider incorporating equity and inclusion roles into JIC operations to facilitate information coordination with vulnerable populations.
- The linkage between the Governor’s Office, the incident Lead Agency, and OEM needs to be clarified and transition planning for a hand-off from agency-led communication to an enterprise-led communication should be developed. Plan, train, and then practice, practice, practice.
- Agency Communications Directors should not be assigned the JIC Lead PIO role. Agency Communications Directors have agency-specific communications to execute and cannot split their focus and execute both roles well. Agencies need to evaluate their JIC staffing strategies to identify appropriately skilled communicators for JIC roles.
- Conduct ICS training for agency leadership to solidify understanding that when agency staff are assigned to the JIC, their focus is 100 percent on the incident communications work. Agency roles need to be backfilled to support internal agency efforts.
- Consider holding a state-wide public information officer training to learn the JIC system and what each agency needs to bring to the table to make incident communication work well.
- Preposition and establish contracts, processes and policies to support language access (e.g., translation, sign language interpretation, and alternate formats) as soon as possible.
- Plan to quickly establish community liaison groups ahead of or at the beginning of an incident to help identify what the important needs of the community are and what the effective ways to communicate are.
- The state needs to invest in resources and services that enable more equitable communications. This investment could include in-house staff with demonstrated experience around equitable communications like language access and alternate formats.
- Establish metrics for translated materials, based on language, media format.
- Work to identify the communication channels favored by BIPOC and vulnerable communities.