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LESSON LEARNED

Emergency Public Information: Using Social Media to Disseminate Updated Information During Incident Responses

SUMMARY

Public information officers (PIOs) should consider utilizing social media during incidents to disseminate updated information about operations to response personnel as well as to the general public.

DESCRIPTION

On Tuesday, September 29, 2009, at 6:48 a.m. Samoa Standard Time (SST), an earthquake with an 8.1 magnitude struck in the Pacific Ocean approximately 120 miles from the Samoan Islands. The earthquake generated tsunami waves, the first of which struck the American Samoan island of Tutuila at 7:08 a.m. SST. The tsunami flooding resulted in 34 deaths, and 131 people reported to hospitals or clinics with injuries. Thousands of people were left without shelter or food, while more than 46,000 cubic yards of debris were strewn across the islands. Critical infrastructure throughout American Samoa suffered major damage due to tsunami wave inundation. President Barack Obama declared a major disaster (FEMA-1859-DR) on September 29, 2009, which initiated the federal response.

American Samoa is an unincorporated territory of the United States. It has a total land area of 200 square kilometers and a population of approximately 65,000 people. American Samoa is located in the southern Pacific Ocean 2,400 miles from Hilo, Hawaii, and 4,500 miles from San Diego, California.

The federal response began immediately after the earthquake in American Samoa, before the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's Pacific Tsunami Warning Center issued the first tsunami warning for this disaster. Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Region IX activated its Regional Response Coordination Center (RRCC) to level 1 at 6:57 a.m. SST (11:57 a.m. Pacific Daylight Time). The National Response Coordination Center also activated to level 1 with selected emergency support functions. After the tsunami struck, FEMA Region IX worked with American Samoa Governor Togiola Tulafono to submit an expedited request for a major disaster declaration. President Obama issued the declaration (FEMA-1859-DR) hours after the tsunami struck.



Tsunami Debris in a Churchyard

During response operations, the joint field office (JFO) utilized web 2.0 technology by using social media sites such as Twitter and YouTube. Through these sites, the JFO provided

citizens in the U.S. and other countries with timely and accurate information related to disaster preparedness response and recovery. FEMA videographers and photographers documented events such as the shipment of generators to the island, the provision of medical care to hospitals, the installation of tents for tsunami survivors, the retrieval of hazardous materials in Pago Pago Harbor, and the construction of temporary classrooms on the site of damaged schools.

The FEMA Region IX incident management assistance team (IMAT) produced nearly two dozen “webisodes” that were posted on YouTube, government Web sites, news Web sites, and other Internet sites. The webisodes educated audiences in the U.S. and around the world about the progress being made in American Samoa response and recovery operations. In the process, this increased the morale of IMAT and other FEMA personnel. The after-action report stated that the IMAT’s partnership with American Samoa’s media organizations was instrumental in the success of the response.

The [FEMA Media Library page](#) contains webisodes highlighting various milestones during the response to the American Samoa tsunami, including the arrival of new generators from the U.S.

PIOs should consider utilizing social media during incidents to disseminate updated information about operations to response personnel as well as to the general public.

CITATION

Federal Emergency Management Agency. *The American Samoa Earthquake, Tsunami, and Flooding (FEMA-1859-DR) Joint Field Office and Pan-Pacific Regional Response Coordination Center After Action Report/Improvement Plan*. 09 Sep 2010.

DISCLAIMER

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