

# Washington State Fire Service PIO Best Practice Guide



*Honoring Their Sacrifice/Upholding Our Tradition*

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## **Purpose Statement**

The Public Information Officer (PIO) plays an integral role in the planning and execution of a line of duty death (LODD) memorial service. The purpose of this PIO Guide is to provide PIOs with best practices and examples they can reference, should they ever assist with a LODD memorial service.

When it comes to a LODD memorial service, the most important goal of the planning committee and the department is to meet the family's wishes. The role of the PIO is to coordinate the release information about the procession, memorial service and fallen firefighter that the family and fire department would like to share. During the memorial/funeral service the PIO will be responsible for the media and the medias access to the family.

## **Communications**

- If a LODD memorial service is open to the public then the PIO will want to begin promoting the service as soon as the time, date and location are selected.
- Be sure to share your promotional plan with the family liaison and members of the planning committee so there is not a duplication of efforts.
- The PIO should be in constant communication with the department's union or volunteer association so consistent and appropriate information goes out.
- All decisions concerning PIOs must be approved by the Chief and the family.
- All PIOs must be flexible and willing to take on any tasks that need to be done, especially the day of the service.
- It is highly recommended that outside PIOs are brought in for support, to provide information, and to be ready to shoulder the load the day of the service in case the internal PIO is unable to do so.

## **Connect with the Family through the Family Liaison**

The first step you should take is contacting the family liaison to request some time to talk with the family or pass along questions for the liaison to share with the family. Answers to these questions will tell you what the family's wishes are and will guide you in what information you will communicate to the public. The following are samples of questions to consider asking the family.

- Can the service be livestreamed so those who cannot attend can watch online?
- Is anyone from the family interested in being a spokesperson and/or having interviews with the media?
- If the service is open to the public are media permitted to attend?
- If media cannot attend, is it okay if they stage in the parking lot?
- Does the family have a preference as to who the department spokesperson is?
- Is the family ok with photography during the procession and service?
- Is there a donation page set up for the family that people can contribute to?
- Is there any information the family does not want shared?

## **Family Statement**

Ask the family to prepare a statement about their loved one. The statement can be of any length but should include biographical information about the fallen responder as well as quotes from family members. You can also request photos. The statement will give you valuable information about the responder that you can share with the media and public. Make it clear to the family that whatever information is provided in the statement will be released to the public.

## **Department Statement**

Work closely with your chiefs to develop talking points on behalf of the department (approved by the family of course). Statement may include thanking the community for support, sharing what the member has done or meant to the organization, and how the organization is transitioning moving forward.

## **Media Releases**

A media release needs to be sent out directly following the death, especially if the fatality was combat related and a medical examiner's report is necessary to determine the cause of death. The release should include basic information about the fallen responder and can end with "more to follow."

A second release that focuses specifically on service and procession details will need to go out 5-10 days prior to the service. The release should include time, date and location, whether or not the service will be livestreamed, ways to help the family, and information about the fallen firefighter.

In the body of the email you send to media, clearly state whether or not media are permitted to attend the service - lay the ground rules early. Media will likely want to film the procession so include a procession route map, and areas where media vans can pull over to film.

## **Donations**

Community members will want to know how they can help. When pushing out information about the fallen responder or service, include links to any donation pages that may be set up for the family.

## **Procession Details**

Processions can cause a major disruption in traffic. Push out information that highlights potential traffic impacts across your communication channels. Contact jurisdictions and organizations whose areas will be impacted and provide them with language that they can share across their channels.

Advertise the procession route and map as well as invite community members to line up along the route. Messaging should include a thank you to the public for their patience and understanding.

## **Media Alert**

The day before the service, push out a media alert to your distribution list that includes a map of the media staging areas and when and where media briefings will be held. The alert can also reiterate procession details and can include the procession map. You can share the family statement with the media as well, either with the alert or the next day during media interviews.

## **Media Briefing and “Day Of” Interviews**

Have PIOs present at your staging locations so that when media arrive, they can be briefed. It is important for a PIO to reiterate what the ground rules are, and to share when and where interviews will take place. It is ideal for interviews to happen before the memorial service as media are unlikely to stick around.

## **Talking Points and Spokesperson**

When a line of duty death occurs, it is important to identify who your department spokesperson will be, and to draft talking points. Media are typically respectful during these times – nevertheless, be prepared to answer the hard questions and be ready to respond to inquiries throughout the entire process. As always, vet the department talking points and statement through the appropriate chain of command and make sure you are only sharing information the family would approve of.

Line of duty deaths can be just as emotionally taxing on a PIO as it can be on crews. If you and other department spokes members are impacted by the line of duty death, it is perfectly appropriate, and common, to have an outside PIO speak on the department’s behalf and serve as the lead.

## **Additional Recommendations**

Twitter has arguably replaced the traditional press release. All updates about the service and procession should be published on your department’s Twitter feed, in addition to your website and other social media platforms like Facebook. Most media outlets will likely be following your Twitter feed already and will retweet your messaging to help spread the word.

Note: Most detailed information still goes out on your website and Facebook page due to no space constraints. Condense information on Twitter and include webpage links so people can learn more. All of your social media posts in general, should link to your website for additional information. Make sure your contact information is listed on the website in case media or community members have questions.

# **PIO Considerations for the Memorial/Funeral**

## **PIO Support**

You will want PIO support the day of the service and you can have as many PIOs present as you need. Consideration for PIO's to be located during the service: one PIO can be located at the procession staging site, two PIO's could manage the venue parking lot (to make sure media does not enter the church unless instructed otherwise) and the department PIO can serve as the spokesperson for media interviews. Make sure all of the PIO's have one another's contact information.

The planning committee, more specifically the venue coordinator, needs to have the contact information and the location each PIO is assigned to. BCC your PIO's on any communications that go out to the media and share your talking points as well as the family statement with them. Communication is always key when managing an incident.

## **Media Staging Area**

During the planning process, it is important to tour the venue where the service will be held to scout out media staging areas. The evening before or morning of the memorial service, you will likely need to arrange for someone to cordon off the media staging area with cones or signs. It is ideal to reserve 3-4 parking spots for media vans.

## **Service Livestreaming**

If the service is going to be livestreamed, work with service venue staff to learn what equipment and information will be needed to ensure things go smoothly. Many venues are able to livestream to a Facebook page with their own software programs and video equipment.

## **Program Creation**

It is common for the department PIO to assist in the creation of the memorial service program. Memorial service programs do not typically include speakers or a timeline due to potential last-minute changes. You may also be responsible for arranging the printing, pickup and distribution of the programs.

## **Photographer and Videographer**

It is important to capture the day. Make sure to use someone with discretion and experience, not just a family friend. Use venue video equipment whenever possible. Photographers and videographers need to coordinate with the venue and service coordinators before the start of the service.

## **Create a Communications Plan**

As you can see, there is an abundance of information that will need to be created and released. It is wise to create a communications plan early on in the planning process to keep track of all the moving pieces.

Lastly, do not forget about internal communications. Whatever information you publish should also be shared internally with agency staff.

## Family Statement Sample

This sample Family Statement has been provided by the Bothell Fire Department and the Kirk Robinson Family

Kirk Dean Robinson was born June 29, 1977 to Gary and Lori Robinson. From an early age, community service was a central focus of Kirk's life. Throughout high school and well into adulthood, Kirk and his older brother Clay were deeply involved with the Mercer Island Presbyterian Church. Kirk frequently went on missions to Mexico and built hundreds of houses for families in need.

In 1995, Kirk graduated from Mercer Island High School and headed off to Westmont College in Santa Barbara, CA to study kinesiology and sports medicine. He made many lifelong friends while away at school where he was a dorm counselor and first fell in love with surfing.

When Kirk returned to Seattle he knew he wanted to help people and live an active lifestyle and decided to pursue a career in firefighting. In 1999, Kirk joined the Mercer Island Auxiliary Fire Department. Then, at age 21, he accepted an offer to join the Bothell Fire Department.

Kirk's infectious personality, tireless work ethic, and classic good looks quickly made him a favorite among his peers. Before long, Kirk was a member of the Technical and Water Rescue Teams, was on the Honor Guard and became a CBT instructor. In 2001, Kirk assisted with the 9/11 response effort at ground zero and in 2005, deployed to Hurricane Katrina to provide aid to those whose lives were devastated by the disaster. Each year, Kirk participated in the Columbia Stair Climb to raise funds for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society.

Kirk was always among the first to help with Bothell Fire Department events. Getting to drive the department's historic Model A Fire Engine in the 4th of July Parade each year was a particular favorite of Kirk's, and a role perfectly suited for him and his contagious smile. In October of 2017, Kirk was promoted to Lieutenant, a testament to his dedication to the community and department.

Kirk touched countless lives over his lifetime. He was omnipresent in every community he was part of and will forever be remembered for his compassion and relentless drive to make a difference in peoples' lives.

**Note: the statement may need to be edited prior to publication. If you choose to make edits, share the revised version with the family to make sure they approve.**

**The statement can be used in any and all of your language such as press releases, program copy, social media posts, website content and so forth.**

## Media Release Sample

This sample Media Release has been provided by the Bothell Fire Department and the Kirk Robinson Family

Media partner,

Below are the details for the Line of Duty Death Memorial Service honoring fallen Bothell Firefighter, Lt. Kirk Robinson. The Robinson family has requested that media do not attend the service. We ask that you please respect the family's wishes. That said, media are welcome to stage in the parking lot. A map of the staging areas is attached.

### **MEDIA RELEASE**

KING COUNTY, WA – On Thursday, October 24, friends, family and loved ones will come together to honor the life of Lt. Kirk Robinson. Lt. Robinson passed away on Friday, October 4, after a heroic two-year-long battle with cancer. Lt. Robinson was a member of the Bothell Fire Department for over 18 years.

Memorial Service Details

Date: Thursday, October 24

Time: 1- 4 p.m.

Location: Overlake Christian Church

9900 Willows Rd. NE, Redmond, WA

The memorial service will be livestreamed on the Bothell Fire [Department Facebook page](#).

At 11:05 a.m., a memorial procession will begin. 29 fire department apparatus and 50 police motor vehicles will escort the casket from Pop Keeney Stadium located at 9809 NE 188th St in Bothell to Overlake Christian Church in Redmond. Units will leave the stadium and head east onto 185th past Station 42, and proceed onto I405 S. The motorcade will exit off 124th to Willows Rd and will arrive at Overlake Christian Church at approximately 11:55 a.m.

Lt. Robinson began his career with the Bothell Fire Department (BFD) in April of 2001. Kirk was deeply passionate about helping others and during his tenure, he served on the Technical and Water Rescue Teams, Honor Guard, and was a CBT Instructor. In 2001, he assisted with the 9/11 response effort at ground zero, and in 2005, deployed to Hurricane Katrina to provide aid to those impacted by the disaster.

Each year, Lt. Robinson participated in the Columbia Stair Climb to raise funds for the Leukemia and Lymphoma Society, and he was always among the first to help with department activities like holiday parties and the annual 4th of July Pancake Breakfast. In October of 2017, firefighter Robinson was promoted to Lieutenant, a testament to his devotion to the community and department. Lt. Robinson touched every life he came across. He was a beloved member of Bothell Fire Department and will be forever be remembered for his compassion and drive to make a difference.

If you are interested in helping the Robinson family during this difficult time, donations can be made through the Kirk Robinson Cancer Battle Go Fund Me Page: <https://bit.ly/2OmFfiO>.

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