



SPUR Meeting Notes: Partnerships with Media and Public Communication

July 2024

Meeting Summary

Educating the media about suicide reporting is the top priority to get the right information to the public in a respectful way. It is important to establish procedures for handling incidents and the language that is used to communicate with the public.

Addressing mental health and suicide-related deaths on the railway in the media is considerably more complex than handling other types of accidental fatalities and suicides. These incidents directly affect the traveling public, for example, resulting in delays, and in some cases a need for rail safety education. Care must be taken to communicate these impacts accurately without inadvertently highlighting the rail system as a potential means for suicide, especially to vulnerable individuals.

Key Takeaways

- Building and maintaining relationships with Public Information Officers (PIOs) in police departments is crucial for keeping them informed about railroad operations and ensuring consistent messaging to the media. These relationships are critical because PIOs frequently coordinate with the media and engage with the community following an incident.
- Regular meetings with the media, such as on a quarterly basis, provide agencies with valuable opportunities to discuss and promote safe and responsible messaging related to rail, given the high turnover in media personnel.
- Sharing studies with the media on the consequences of irresponsible reporting, such as the potential for copycat incidents, can be highly informative if they are unaware of this issue. Additionally, offering media access to coverage of agency events provides insight into how such incidents are managed. When questions or discrepancies arise around whether incidents are the result of accidental or intentional acts of suicide, presenting video footage to the media can serve as valuable educational material.
 - It is important to remember when speaking with media outlets that directly addressing suicide is helpful. Avoiding directly discussing suicide can be harmful by perpetuating a culture of silence, which may undermine prevention efforts and hinder open conversations about mental health and suicide awareness.
- If appropriate, collaborating with the media off the record to provide essential information such as delay estimates and approximate locations can significantly strengthen relationships with media outlets.
- Collaborating with local stakeholders, mental health organizations, and suicide prevention groups to get their recommendations on the language used in messaging can be valuable.

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