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Chapter one of the course text titled, ‘Introduction to Emergency Management’ discusses the history and current status of emergency management. Authors Brenda D. Phillips, David M. Neal, and Gary R. Webb pull apart and analyze the various federal, state, and local agencies who play a role in managing emergencies that occur in the United States. In section 1.5.1 of chapter one, the authors highlight how all disasters are local and that the first line of defense in dealing with disasters are the government workers. State government entities often work with local governments in both the initial incident phase and post-disaster recovery period. They also help to secure mitigation funding. The authors go on to state people often think of emergency response organizations (such as fire, police, and emergency medical services) as having primary responsibility for preparing for, responding to, recovering from, and mitigating disasters (Phillips, pg. 20). While it is posited that these entities are just a few of the public-sector agencies that act during disasters, they tend to be the most visible due to their primary focus, availability, and proximity to the disaster. These groups tend to make up the initial unified command and most recognizable liaison to people residing and working in the area where the disaster occurred.

To illustrate, this paper highlights the leadership of Oakland Police Officer Johnna Watson as it relates to her role in Homeland Security / Emergency Management. Officer Watson currently serves as one of two Public Information Officers for the Oakland Police Department and is currently assigned to the agency’s Media Relations office (City of Oakland California). Little to no information is available on the internet about Officer Watson’s career or her qualifications as a Public Information Officer. However, several videos showing her performing her duties are available on the internet thanks to coverage by news agencies, bloggers, and social media.
I first became acquainted with Officer Watson during her role as Public Information Officer in the Oakland Warehouse Fire that occurred in the early morning hours of December 3, 2016. Nicknamed the “Ghost Ship” warehouse fire, it was considered a disaster by local and county officials due to the enormity of resources required to mitigate, preserve, and investigate the incident. 36 people were killed and local resources had become so overwhelmed that they required the assistance of county officials. While Officer Watson was a member of the Oakland Police Department, she spoke on behalf of a unified group of public officials and local and state government.

Officer Watson was first introduced at the midday press conference where she was assisted by Sheriff’s Sergeant Ray Kelly, Public Information Officer for the Alameda County Sheriff’s Bureau. Her role as a homeland security/emergency management leader was quite evident when she began by explaining the importance of pushing out the message crafted by the unified command to the community. She expressed that many people needed to know if they had lost loved ones in the fire. She did this by asking that the media respond to the media staging area, rather than the location where the grief-stricken families were gathering. In a few words, Officer Watson explained the importance of the media, how the media can be helpful in mitigating the disaster, and asserted control over the large scene. Officer Watson also reached out to individuals who were sharing information on social media. She masterfully made onlookers feel like they were equally important to the investigation. Watson encouraged onlookers and potential witnesses to share their postings with local officials. In essence, she provided a funnel for intelligence that could be used by investigators.

It is not the intent to diminish the role of any other actors within the unified command. However, during the midday press conference, Officer Watson appeared to also lead the
facilitation of questions, re-establish the focus of the media, and coordinate which local authorities were to speak at different points of the press conference. She was calm, intuitive, and prepared. I was most impressed with her ability to steer the media’s onslaught of questions by inserting genuine emotion, plain speech, and practical responses. On several occasions, she reminded the media that a lot of information was unknown. At the time of the midday press conference she made it clear that the incident was not considered a criminal investigation. She also reminded reporters that the focus of all the first responders was to recover victims, identify witnesses, and stabilize the situation. It was apparent she was encouraging the media to not be a hindrance to the first responder’s main objectives. Toward the end of the press conference, Officer Watson reminded reporters that she wanted everyone to be informed and encouraged reporters to share their contact information so that they may receive the most accurate and up to date information from the unified command.

Officer Watson captured my attention again when she used subsequent press conferences as an opportunity to guide the media and onlookers through the rescue efforts. I was especially impressed with the way she predicted the questions that would be asked as different resources arrived to the scene. She explained the presence of drones, dirt movers, cranes, and fire apparatuses. She not explained how these tools were being used in the rescue effort. Watson also reiterated the goals of the first-responders at every level of the rescue efforts as operational periods opened and closed.

As authors Brenda D. Phillips, David M. Neal, and Gary R. Webb eluded to, law enforcement officers are not the only public officials who can serve as Public Information Officers during a major incident or disaster. However, Officer Watson demonstrated the importance of her role as Public Information Officer and why she is a leader in homeland
security/emergency management. Public Information Officers are often the only conduit between emergency management personnel and first responders. It is important to recognize that the public and media can hinder an investigation as their curiosity has the potential to evolve into a distraction for first emergency management leaders. Watson plays a critical role in retaining control by giving clear instructions and keeping people informed. Officer Watson is not the only public official who does well at her job but she is an example of what a good leader in homeland security/emergency management looks like.
References:
