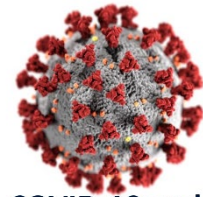




Event Type: Fire Information Office at ICP and Virtual Support on the First Type 1 IMT Deployment in the COVID-19 Era

Location: Sawtooth Fire, Arizona



COVID-19 and Fire Season 2020 Lessons
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PIO Lessons from the First Type 1 IMT Deployment in the COVID-19 Era

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Introduction

For this RLS, our PIOs identified numerous lessons learned and tips and tricks. All of them seemed worthy of sharing.

As Public Information Officers we are part of the wildland fire community because we are committed to public service and living up to our core values of Duty, Respect, and Integrity. Within our ranks we have people with amazing skills, knowledge, and experience.

I'm optimistic that some of the creative solutions to emerging needs that are shared here will help to open the door to new methods for providing timely information in meaningful ways to serve our audiences.

"We are now cruising at a level of two to the power of twenty-five thousand to one against and falling and we will be restoring normality just as soon as we are sure what is normal anyway."

– Douglas Adams, The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy

Narrative

The Sawtooth Fire piloted a hybrid fire onsite/remote/virtual information shop during the June 2020 in Arizona. This was the first Type 1 Incident Management Team deployment during the COVID-19 pandemic. We remain committed to wildland fire readiness and staying true to our core wildland fire leadership values: Duty, Respect, and Integrity.

Our information shop utilized a hybrid organization of a Lead and Deputy onsite at ICP, a virtual Info Liaison who served as a go between to convey information from the leads to field staff and vice versa, a virtual Community Lead, plus three local PIOs working remotely, a virtual Info Center Lead overseeing two virtual trainees, one THSP Virtual Operations Support Team (VOST), as well as a virtual captioner and a virtual sign language interpreter. All but one of our staff were trainees. For three of our folks it was their first ever fire assignment.

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“Whatever the problem, be part of the solution. Don’t just sit around raising questions and pointing out obstacles.”

– Tina Fey

What are the Lessons?

1. Challenge – No current mechanism in ROSS to specify a virtual PIO.

There were challenges with IROC (Interagency Resource Ordering Capability). It was slow and dropped important verbiage from resource orders. Example: Outside of our resources from the local unit, all of our resource orders were name requests, as we ordered PIOs that have been training with us regularly for the past two months to help troubleshoot and resolve challenges working in a virtual environment.

We knew if we ordered blind we would be unlikely to find PIOs with the skills and experience necessary to respond to the first Type 1 wildfire in the COVID-19 environment. Special notes submitted included: Check in virtually by 6/3/20 2000. Anticipate virtual response initially. They need to work at a location with reliable power, phone, and internet. Their work station may move throughout the incident to accommodate this need. Work may performed at home or off-site locations (such as a hotel) as appropriate. Travel to the incident is approved if needed. AOV, Rental or NERV SUV, laptop, cell phone, handheld radio, portable printer, video camera and digital camera authorized. Contact incident PIO Michelle Fidler xxx-xxx-xxxx directly. NWCG Memo of Procedures for Off-Site/Remote Incident Assignments <https://www.nwcg.gov/sites/default/files/memos/eb-m-11->

However, the only special needs on many resource orders only included: Laptop, cell phones, AOV/POV, rental vehicles authorized. Received approval from Forest Duty Officer, answered yes to NMAC COVID-10 checklist. Contact Forest Duty Officer xxx-xxx-xxxx for further questions.

We also received pushback from a GATR who wanted to swap out our name request for a priority trainee, which we understand the sentiment behind, however we were able to clarify a justification as to why we had a specialized need.

We were stretched on workload but were strategic about who we brought on as we knew they could help support our needs. We considered ordering additional folks, but were worried about how long orders would take to be processed, what the odds were of getting folks with the right skillsets when ordering blind through the system, and our capacity to train folks who weren't already up to speed on working virtually in Firenet.

Resolution

Include special instructions and justifications. We know we won't always be able to do name requests. This will require even more special instructions to help find the right resources. One sample justification we used: This is the first time a Type 1 IMT has been assigned to a wildfire in a COVID-19 environment. Other than our IMT PIOs on site, we anticipate our entire PIO shop will be working virtual with a variety of tech tools including Firenet (which recently transitioned to a new platform that most PIOs are unfamiliar with) and virtual updates, media interviews, and online meetings. They will serve in a critical role, supervising all virtual PIO staff and assisting with troubleshooting issues and helping training PIOs on technical skills to be able to function in a virtual environment.

These are not skills covered in NWCG PIO training or taskbooks. Having the ability to bring in a PIO with the specialized skills we need and our trust to work virtually and lead a virtual team is critical as we're not able to provide the oversight required to train a PIO working virtually to provide leadership for our PIO organization in these skills this early in a virtual environment.

They have trained under the team PIOs in the past and are familiar with their expectations and are familiar with the Area Command Wildfire Response Plans and the Southwest IMT COVID-19 PIO best practices covered in a pre-season webinar.

In IMT mobilization negotiations with the host unit on personnel, the IC and host unit agency administrators verbally approved this resource based on a request from the lead PIO to bring them in virtually for their technical skills (Firenet, Inciweb, social media, etc.), advanced video editing skills, and leadership skills to help oversee the virtual PIOs assigned to this incident.

"Instructions and assignments not clear."

– 18 Fire Watch-Out Situations

2. Challenge – Managing chain of command in a virtual environment.

We incorporated a new information liaison role but it wasn't immediately clear to everyone if this position had supervisory responsibility or just information sharing. We made assignments like taking media and public calls, but when the calls didn't come in, we didn't adapt fast enough and left folks feeling unclear on their role.

The lead and deputy struggled with the time involved in addressing all the "just one question" questions from virtual staff individually, and did not have the ability to convey the same information real-time to others, which generally happens in person when folks in the vicinity are able to listen and/or join in on conversations, helping build a common operating picture.

Resolution

We clarified the chain of command and individual roles. Having a clear chain of command organizational chart is key. We had conversations with PIOs who were struggling and made adjustments in our organization.

Under the lead and deputy, we tried adding another layer of oversight, a PIO that can maintain a 30,000-foot view and serve as a go-between to convey important information and taskings from the leads to the virtual staff, help address questions from virtual staff (directed through their section leads – community, virtual office, etc.) and escalate as needed to the lead PIOs at ICP as needed. This was a new role and it was a pivot from our standard operating procedures that proved to be a hard adjustment for all involved.

We will consider having the go-between info liaison PIO located on site or remote nearby in the future. With this

comes the need to consider logistical impacts and how we can support our staff, as well as the need to maintain continuity of operations if one of the leads were to get sick. These are not insurmountable challenges, but new considerations to keep in mind.

It will take time to refine how best to manage virtual operations, but it's essential to build and refine processes to help ensure instructions and assignments are clear and incorporate two-way feedback so we can make real-time adjustments as needed.

Our goal is to focus on the why, not the what. We want to provide leader's intent and then leave it to the team to determine the best way to meet our objectives. Maintaining two-way dialogue and adapting as needed is key. We need to build processes to communicate and close loops to maintain trust with the community.

"If you're feeling helpless, help someone."

– Aung San Suu Kyi

3. Challenge – Supporting the human element within a virtual working environment.

It's stressful to totally shift the way we operate. In a virtual environment you lose the ability to sense tension body language, ums, signs, frantic note taking, etc. It's harder to keep a track on the pulse of the group. We're asking people to use new tech and tools. Not everyone has the same comfort level/familiarity working with Firenet Teams. Folks are working from home, which has both pros and cons.

Some people may be struggling in silence. It's really easy to get distracted during meetings/calls when we are also sitting in front of computers with alerts and other active tasks. If you're not actively listening, you can miss information.

We're asking folks who have never worked together to do so, yet they're isolated. It's a challenge to find ways to mentor and train without being able to work side by side. There is no nuance in chat messages/texts and what you mean and what someone else perceives may be taken personally, even if that wasn't the intent.

Access to documents/accounts doesn't mean you should alter or delete without discussing it first. Several members of our team expressed frustrations with the situation and made comments like, "I don't know if I'm adding any value."

Resolution

We reminded our PIOs we're all here for the same reason: to serve our audiences with Duty, Integrity and Respect. We also emphasized patience with new systems, new working environments, and with each other.

We encouraged PIOs to pick up the phone and talk to each other and to try to see issues from other perspectives. When disagreements occur, focus on the "why" not the "what", ask clarifying questions, and try to resolve issues at the lowest level.

Our virtual info shop staff found it helpful to keep a video chat open all day to help maintain the comradery of a physical info shop. Within our sections, our folks were also able to work together to ensure coverage, while allowing for individuals to take some down time, keep doctor's appointments, etc. We also assigned a PIO to coordinate task book needs, assign trainers, and liaison with the training specialist.

I don't feel that we reached a "resolution" by any means. I'm so proud of our team for tackling the challenges in a new environment with grace and working toward the greater good. All of our folks were there because we value their knowledge, skills, and experience. They all deserve inspiring words of encouragement and reminders about our faith in them. I worry about our cumulative stress and the overall well-being of our staff.

Taking care of our own is key and we will continue to look for ways to help support and mentor our info staff throughout the season. The larger our info shops, the more important it will be to maintain span of control and ensure section leads (community, info shop, etc.) can check in with their folks on a more personal level.

We also anticipate the need to tap into folks who have little to no experience working in the virtual environment and may need to assign a PIO just to help teach/troubleshoot tech issues, etc. We may also bring in a "mentor" PIO

that can not only help coordinate task books, but also take the time to check in on folks one by one and see what we can do to best help support them. We will also look toward better ways to build in processes to ensure check-ins and support.

On our Sawtooth incident, the process for virtual task books was checking in with the training specialist and assigning trainers virtually. Trainees scanned and sent their task book to the trainer. Trainers printed out and signed task books and personnel performance ratings, then scanned and sent them back to the trainee. The cover page and eval page were scanned and sent back to the training specialist (unless the task book is signed off, in which case the entire task book needs to go to the training specialist).

“Start by doing what’s necessary; then do what’s possible; and suddenly you are doing the impossible.”

– Francis of Assisi’

4. Challenge – Bridging the virtual environment and ICP.

One of our PIOs said “It felt like bringing a knife to a gun fight.” Things we are used to weren’t available to us. With the majority of our info section working virtually, there was a need to have a collaborative way to share information and maintain a common operating picture. The incident’s Firenet Teams site was not immediately available, and our need to share information started a full day before we traveled, from the moment we learned we were being mobilized.

Resolution

We discovered that a group Teams chat could work to serve as a “group text” and collaborative workspace to serve as a common operating picture. We were able to add folks without Firenet accounts as guests to the chat, the trick being we had to add them to some sort of Firenet Team first, such as the PIO Toolbox Team. We also experimented with using a OneNote file as a virtual whiteboard which was a success and we will definitely use again. We were able to capture what we would normally post on flipcharts around our info office for quick access to key contacts, confirmed intel, daily tasks, etc. It also served as a place to maintain working files, unit logs, contact logs, etc. Next time we plan to try to preload it with a OneNote Whiteboard template and a 24-hour folder of key forms (Unit Log, Contact Log, General Message Form, Unit Log form, draft map request, draft IAP message, daily update template, etc.) to help us hit the ground running. We were also able to have our virtual staff watch the morning briefing, planning meeting, etc. via Zoom.

“In the rush to return to normal, use this time to consider which parts of normal are worth rushing back to.”

– Dave Hollis

5. Challenge – The Ask.

The expectation outlined at the Sawtooth Fire Inbrief was a virtual community meeting within 48 hours. We were willing to support if needed, but had reservations about going live with unproven tech before we’d had a chance to practice with the current tech/tools available on this incident. We also had concern about potentially alienating our target audience if the live meeting went the way of many of our Zoom calls thus far with connectivity issues, operator error, etc.

There was a concern that some of our key audiences weren’t familiar with online tools and a recommendation that we first help orient them to how to view our fire info on Facebook (no password required, it’s just another website), how to use QR codes, etc. There was also a decline in public interest due to limited fire activity; concern about how prepared we were to answer questions live, having identified some messaging challenges that we recommended working through first; and concern about the challenges with IROC and how long it would take to get resource orders through for a Captioning Access Realtime (CART) captioner through the system.

Resolution

Clarify the why. We asked the agency administrators for clarification on their objectives for the meeting and came to agreement that posting daily updates, maps, short video updates, and feature story video updates on Inciweb, in addition to our virtual trapline, would best meet the immediate need.

We also agreed to test the Zoom to Facebook technology once we had our American Sign Language interpreter and Captioning Access Realtime captioner assigned to the incident to be able to support it.

“It’s a lack of clarity that creates chaos and frustration. Those emotions are poison to any living goal.”

– Steve Maraboli

6. Challenge – It’s unclear in what capacity incident PIOs are authorized to speak on COVID-19 related topics.

It’s unclear in what capacity incident PIOs are authorized to speak COVID-19 related topics, and if not authorized to speak, who to direct questions to. Existing talking points are agency specific and are more geared to overall agency readiness than to individual interagency incident response.

Many existing talking points imply definitives, while field-level mitigations may vary and evolve through the course of the incident. Existing interagency talking points do not address anticipated public/media questions at the incident level.

We received a delegation from four agencies, two of which we actively engaged with the PAOs on as the Sawtooth Fire was burning on their jurisdictions at the time (Forest Service and state). Following Inbrief, both PAOs verbally conveyed the sensitivity regarding COVID-19 messaging. The state conveyed all COVID-19 messaging needed to be approved by the governor’s office. The Forest emphasized the need to be consistent with approved agency COVID-19 messaging and an expectation that questions would be forwarded to the regional office.

At one point in the incident we recognized the immediate need to be able to have talking points available for our PIOs answering the phones and engaging with the community about how to respond to questions about incident personnel with potential exposure, how the incident responds to the situations, detailed follow up questions like which crew?

Where were they working? etc., as well as what specific mitigations were in place on our incident, and what incident personnel were doing to minimize potential impacts on communities, we realized there were significant roadblocks.

However in trying to pull together these messages, we quickly realized existing approved FS talking points did not address our incident specific situation. And the state did not support these messages, as they were not applicable to the situation, and were agency specific. The new interagency talking points on the NIFC PIO bulletin board had some related messages that may be applicable but did not address our anticipated questions on the incident.

Another issue that was highlighted was the SW WFRP BMP says, “Direct all media questions and reactions to the potential exposure to the incident PIO or to the local or state public health official, following all agency protocols and HIPAA regulations to protect personal privacy.” However the local public health officials were not directly engaged, so coordinating messaging or directing questions to them was not a feasible option.

Resolution

We discussed and obtained local PAO approval for basic first message talking points we could use immediately while seeking clarification on approved messages and how to handle COVID-19 related media requests. We did not receive any questions, which was good as we still felt unprepared to respond and unclear on when and who to direct questions to. Our incident wound down and we demobed before we had a chance to follow-up on proposing additional messaging that would have helped us be prepared to respond to questions.

Ultimately, we would have continued to reach out to host unit PAOs on a case by case basis if questions arose to

determine how best to handle each. However, we sincerely hope there will be additional national interagency direction/messages that can be developed to help PIOs be prepared to address public and media questions likely to come up on an incident.

We need responses a PIOF trainee on their first fire assignment can use to respond to public questions while answering the phone, or a PIO providing an on-camera fire update for the media can use if asked questions while being recorded live.

“A good process produces good results.”

– Nick Saban

7. Challenge – Assumptions regarding virtual demob.

We made assumptions about how virtual demob would work based on previous experience, which led to a bottleneck at the end of the incident trying to close everyone out. Part of the issue was a quick ramp-up/ramp down.

Another challenge was while we have done virtual demob for PIOs before we failed to adapt to the scale as instead of one, we had nine folks to demob, all at the same time, and at the same time finance was trying to demob all incident resources.

We also failed to check in with finance throughout the incident and realize they weren't able to monitor emails while they were processing the mass in-person demob and thus we didn't catch errors on timesheets (like inadvertently submitting the same day twice) as we went, which led to more back and forth at the end.

Resolution

Build a process from the beginning of the incident to facilitate virtual demob.

Next time we plan to create an electronic folder for each PIO with their red card, resource order, AD/contract paperwork, taskbook, taskbook eval form, and CTRs. All PIOs will use one standard electronic PDF CTR form to submit their time. We will have them submit it to one consistent point of contact, likely the deputy PIO, via one email address, and label the contents in the subject with their name and contents of the message.

Finance is also considering bringing on more staff to assist with monitoring email throughout the incident as they recognize the impacts on their shop as well, and are also looking for ways to help support virtual operations.

“In the middle of difficulty lies opportunity.”

– Albert Einstein

8. Challenge – Will the setup we had on the Sawtooth Fire work in all situations.

We don't want to be lulled into a false sense of security that the setup we had on this Sawtooth Fire incident will work in all situations. We had an ideal setup. We had two PIOs on site at ICP at a training center that had reliable power, internet, etc. All but one of our PIOs working virtually had reliable power and internet at home. The one PIO with intermittent connectivity adapted, and we were able to find ways for them to help mentor/support/lead the community group rather than commit them to overseeing electronic communications.

Resolution

We recognize the need to learn from our experience and maintain flexibility to adapt in the future. We cannot expect that we can/should do all the things we've always done, in a new way. We should focus on what our objectives are, identify who our key audiences are and how we can best serve them, and facilitate real-time feedback so we can adapt accordingly. The need to locate one or more PIOs virtually or remote to ensure consistent electronic communications will continue to be essential for success.

Virtual staffing adds flexibility. Once ordered, PIOs were available immediately, with no travel required. Working virtually was a full-time commitment. They generally put in the same long hours they would have if they had been working on site. Having folks in different time zones has the potential to work to our advantage in divvying up tasks,

as it may make it easier to support early morning needs like media interviews, posting maps to Inciweb, etc. Within sections, PIOs were able to work together to ensure coverage, while still allowing flexibility for PIOs to keep doctor's appointments, etc. As things wound down, folks were able to scale their hours accordingly, yet were still available to immediately ramp-up their involvement if we picked up new initial attack fires within our area of responsibility, etc.

“Good communication is the bridge between confusion and clarity.”

– Nat Turner

9. Challenge – The demand for real-time information.

There is an expectation of real-time updates throughout the day. This must be balanced with our responsibility to vet information to confirm its accuracy and seek agency approvals for messaging as necessary. We need to recognize it takes time to draft, vet, and post updates, and build that into our processes and manage realistic expectations.

Resolution

Sharing nuggets of information throughout the day. Some of our traditional products like daily updates are cumbersome and there may be more effective ways of providing accurate, timely information. However, we still need to ensure we are reaching all of our key audiences, so there may still be needs to provide a written update to post on information boards, reaching out to local radio stations with updates, etc. The key to this is focusing on our force multipliers like InciWeb, then sharing the same information to ensure audiences have access to the same information regardless of the delivery method—social media, media interviews, community boards, etc.

We shared maps, air quality updates, etc. as they were available. Video updates were an effective tool to help convey important information. We were able to send short video updates from Ops, etc. off site to have a sign language interpreter add in a picture-in-picture box, and ensure they were captioned as they were posted on Facebook.

When new videos were posted, we posted an InciWeb announcement with the link, and tweeted the link as well, to ensure the info was available consistently on all platforms. Ops did a great job of helping tailor the message to the audience, including showing where the fire was in proximity to local communities, explaining jargon, and explaining how our tactics were helping meet our objectives.

We also had success using a FS Zoom IMT account to livestream a video update with our incident personnel onsite, and split screen with an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter working virtually, and a virtual Captioning Access Realtime (CART) captioner captioning the feed live. Our how to/lessons learned are posted in the PIO Toolbox Firenet Team under the Zoom channel for reference.

10. Challenge – Tech tools.

Tech tools. We're learning what works and what doesn't through trial and error. Example: When uploading a video update to Facebook as a draft to be able to share offsite with a sign language interpreter to edit, it automatically compresses videos, which may make it more difficult to see the map. There is also a need for Team Tech to be expanded to include portable video lights and microphones/adaptors capable of plugging into video conferencing system, etc.

Resolution

Test new tech tools to help identify which platforms and equipment to focus on in the future. We had the chance to beta test FirstNet devices such as phones, hotspots, etc. We were able to use the FirstNet devices for streaming morning briefings via Zoom, walkie-talkie like communications with team members, accessing Teams on a mobile device, etc.

FirstNet phones can be used as hotspots and have priority traffic so can grab the connection to stream a community meeting if needed. Their FirstNet indoor cell booster also helped us ensure connectivity inside our office location at ICP. It will be helpful to have the same devices with the same phone numbers to be able to beta test this season.

It was also helpful to have a webcam that could swivel that could be attached to a tripod and connected to a laptop to be used during Zoom meetings. While the iPad we were using to stream morning briefings to Zoom overheated and shut down, a FirstNet phone proved to be more resilient and just as effective in streaming zoom videos.

Using Firenet or other means to transfer files may help maintain higher resolution videos, but this requires the bandwidth to support the transfer. Before recording you can check the video settings on your device. If your device defaults to 4K, lower it to 1080 (and experiment with 720). 1080 will provide sufficient quality at a much lower file size.

Firenet Lessons Learned

Set up the authenticator app. See <https://sites.google.com/a/firenet.gov/www/home/firenet-next-generation/faq> for more details. Our understanding is you have to login at least every 8 hours.

Upon callout, request a Firenet incident account (if one has not already been established, or coordinate with PSC or ITSS to have them request the incident account). Highly recommend requesting this before you leave home as it may take time to get it set up. Whoever initiates the request needs to know the incident number and name, as well as the name, work email, and Firenet email for the PIO, ITSS, and PSC to be able to fill out and submit the request form. <https://sites.google.com/a/firenet.gov/firenet/home/information/incident-accounts-setup>

Email incident.helpdesk@firenet.gov with a list of incident PIO personal Firenet accounts to delegate incident inbox access to. You can only delegate inbox access to Firenet accounts, not guest accounts. (Note: you actually have to email the Helpdesk. Adding the names to the incident tracker spreadsheet in the Incident Team is just for role based accounts.) To open the incident account from the web outlook app, click on your circle user icon in the top right, then click "open another user account" and enter our account. Example: 2020.sawtooth@firenet.gov.

Email incident.helpdesk@firenet.gov with names and Firenet email accounts to be removed from delegation access when someone demobs.

Whoever requests the Firenet account will get an email notification when created, not the other primary contacts on the tracker.

To access a shared mailbox from a mobile device you can use the Outlook app and click on the profile app on the top left then adding a shared mailbox. I had to sign out of my NPS account in the Outlook app first. So now I have my Firenet in the Outlook app and my NPS account in the native iOS app to be able to access both on the same device.

To import contacts to incident email: In excel input contacts into Column A (each contact gets its own box), Box A1 should have the label "E-mail address". Export contacts as an excel CSV file. In outlook, click the "People" icon in the bottom left. (This will open up your contacts. On the top right click "manage" --> "Import contacts" and select the CSV file. All contacts are now in! You can now add the contacts to a group list. At this time you have to add each individual contact to a list. (Time consuming.) There is not a way to add multiple people at once. Limitations: 500 addresses per group with 3600 email limit per hour.

When requesting Firenet accounts for incident PIOs, follow the instructions on <https://sites.google.com/a/firenet.gov/firenet/home/access-to-firenet-environment> but send the request to incident.helpdesk@firenet.gov.

When sponsoring an AD PIO you have to use an agency account, not a Firenet account, and submit their IT certificate of completion. (It's required every year so if they've taken it in the past and their account was deleted due to inactivity they have to retake the test this year. The FS version of the test has the fewest technical issues. They also need to submit the Firenet account request form before you send the email to sponsor them. Be sure to use the Microsoft form. I think they finally changed the link on the Firenet webpage, but several of our folks had to refill it out as they'd completed the old google form.)

Email incident.helpdesk@firenet.gov to request an incident phone number associated with the incident Firenet for Team meetings.

This # can be used as a call-in number for Teams calls. When you create a calendar invite for a Teams meeting and

invite at least one person, it will include the phone number in the calendar entry, along with the link to join the meeting, that can be shared.

Upon callout, we started a group Firenet chat for incident PIOs (similar to a group text) to serve as a common operating space where we could and share info and files included a OneNote "Whiteboard" that served as our virtual flipcharts on the wall with all the normal info you'd reference in a physical info shop, as well as a shared electronic space for unit logs, call logs, etc. This is not tied to the Incident Firenet team. It's just a chat between incident PIOs. You can add PIOs and guests (Sign Language Interpreters), etc. The trick is you have to add guests to a Firenet Team first. This can be the PIO Toolbox Team or your IMT Team or the Incident Team. Then you can add them to a chat.

We used the [OneNote Whiteboard](#) and shared files in this PIO chat and it worked really well (sample PIO Whiteboard OneNote Template available in the [Firenet PIO Toolbox Team](#)). You can click on the phone or webcam icon in the top right of the group chat and it will call everyone in the group which is how we conducted our PIO meetings. Some PIOs working virtually had a chat group for their "section" and kept the video call open all day long which helped maintain the camaraderie of a fire info office environment. My understanding is you can only add 20 people in a Teams chat. More than that, you may need to move over to the Incident Team.

It seems there's no way to sign out the desktop app on an agency laptop when you have an O365 agency email, and into the Firenet email via the desktop Teams app. If you need to initiate a Team live event, you would need to use a rental laptop.

We requested a Google Voice type beta Firenet phone number. Firenet is still testing how this works. We didn't use it during the assignment as it didn't work as planned but Firenet is looking into it more and it might be an option in the future for Type 1 or 2 IMT fires in the future. By the end of the incident we were able to test it. From the Teams app, if you click on the phone icon I could make outgoing calls from my Teams app on my laptop or cell. The nice part is the caller ID showed the "incident" phone number.

When I tried calling the number I was able to answer it from my Teams app on my laptop or cell. When I tested letting it ring and go to voicemail, the message was "INSERT NAME is currently unavailable. Please leave a message after the message." The voicemail went to my personal Firenet email. I don't know if there's a way for the number to ring to other PIOs, for other PIOs to access the voicemail, or for other PIOs to be able to use the number to send outgoing calls. Firenet is looking into its potential functionality further.

UPDATE: if you click on the "Calls" phone icon on the left side of Teams you can view your number. If you click on your profile pic in the top right, then click settings, then calls there are options to choose where the call rings or forwards and configure voicemail. So far it seems you can only choose to forward to one cell at a time and the voicemail then goes to that cell's voicemail. But you can choose to forward to a call group which looks like it could include numerous PIO Firenet accounts and it would ring on their laptops, and you can choose to ring all at once or set an order.

I need to test it more but it seems the voicemails only go to my personal Firenet account though which isn't great, but maybe I'm missing something. I think the PIOs may be able to return calls via the keypad on their laptop to have the caller ID be the incident number. But I haven't had a chance to test this with other folks to be able to confirm if/how this works. Also, It doesn't seem to ring on my mobile, just my laptop. However, I can make outgoing calls via the Teams app, so not sure if I'm missing something.

11. Challenge – Adapting to a new ICP environment.

Fire "camp" looks different this year. There are fewer personnel, spread out more, working in more locations. In our case we had two PIOs on site, who shared one large classroom. We were lucky that our room had internet, big screen TVs, a fridge and sinks—luxuries we don't anticipate on most assignments. We stayed in hotels on this assignment. We need to be able to become self-sufficient, at least for the first three days, including having food, water, and COVID-19 PPE.

Resolution

The top 10 things that came in handy that I'll pack again:

1. Power strip to plug in all my tech.
2. Portable cell charger/battery backup. (I was using my devices so much I drained my battery multiple times a day.)
3. Headphones. (I don't want to hold a potentially germy phone up to my face and some conversations should not be broadcast on speakerphone.)
4. A tripod with a selfie stick (easy way to add height and hold a cell phone) and/or iPad mount.
5. An external mic with a windscreen for an iPhone to use in outdoor spaces when an AV system isn't available.
6. A UV bag to disinfect techie stuff like cell phones, earbuds, etc.
7. A personal thermometer and spare batteries.
8. A second computer monitor.
9. An easy-on face covering to always have in your pocket for quick access and tie-on masks for longer wear, as well as multiple ones if wearing cloth face coverings to be able to swap them out.
10. A pocket bottle of hand sanitizer.

"Be clear about your goal but be flexible about the process of achieving it."

– Brian Tracy

12. Challenge – Serving local communities while incorporating COVID-19 mitigations.

Online communications were an important piece of our outreach but we can't rely on one method. We anticipated media coverage would help reach local communities, but due to other current events, we didn't garner as much TV coverage and we'd originally anticipated. We heard from the community their frustrations that the media wasn't providing more information about the fire.

We conducted phone interviews with local radio stations but also determined it was important to maintain a trapline in the local community. However, we looked for ways to adapt it while ensuring COVID-19 mitigations.

Resolution

An electronic or virtual trapline will never be as effective as direct person to person communication. However, in this COVID-19 environment, information can be posted to reach the public while minimizing exposure to incident personnel.

The idea is to identify key locations such as post offices, grocery stores, restaurants, the usual trapline locations. This information may be available from a past fire with all the info you need. If not, you can search the multiple internet tools or tap into local knowledge and find phone numbers to the best spots. Call the location and ask to speak to a manager. Identify yourself as a PIO on the fire and ask if they would be interested in being on your fire info email list. Then ask if they would mind printing and posting your daily updates, or at least post a one time "Fire Information Flyer" with a QR code to your Inciweb page and the fire information phone number.

If you are unsuccessful building the virtual trapline by phone, you might need to do a one-time physical visit, incorporating COVID-19 mitigations. The physical approach may also involve posting sandwich boards where other means of communication are not available. Using local agency PIOs greatly enhances knowledge of the key spots and they often know of key members of the community that are integral to spreading the word.

On our Sawtooth Fire incident, two local Forest PIOs helped post a one-time trapline with a one-page flyer with the incident website, email, phone numbers, social media links over two days in local communities. They requested phone numbers/emails to be able to help provide future updates with about 50% success.

Trapline locations were included on the daily update email distribution list and PIOs periodically checked in with key locations virtually via phone to help ensure two-way feedback opportunities. One info board was maintained with physical updates in an area where virtual opportunities were not deemed to be adequate to serve audience needs. PIOs went back and removed the one-page flyers in the community at the conclusion of the incident.

“Determine your priorities and focus on them.”

– Eileen McDargh

13. Challenge – Managing Expectations.

We were the first Type 1 Incident Management Team assigned to a wildfire during the COVID-19 pandemic. We received A LOT of requests for lessons learned, that started even before we in-briefed, and continued on. We want to do our best to share what we learned. It was a huge learning curve, but a valuable experience that we hope will help set us up for success in the future.

We only scratched the surface. We know other teams will be facing challenges we haven’t yet had to deal with and we look forward to learning from their experiences. But I recommend giving them space to deal with the incident at hand. In the time it took to respond to the individual requests for lessons learned, we could have consolidated our notes and passed them on. Instead, we only were able to provide half-answers as we were still learning, and it’s taken two days since we’ve returned from the assignment to compile these notes into a presentable format.

That’s on me. I’ll be the first to admit that I’m still trying to wrap my brain around the needs and opportunities on incidents, while juggling day job responsibilities, and am not always sure where best to focus my attention.

Resolution

Steal and share. We’re in this together. The Southwest Area Incident Management Teams have been working together for the past two months to help ensure we’re ready for the season ahead. We’ve tied-in with all of the Type 1, 2 and 3 team PIOs to help ensure consistency and efficiency.

We’ve been holding weekly conference calls, have created a Firenet team to share tools and templates, held a pre-season webinar training for all our SW area PIOs, and have been sharing lessons learned. We will continue to share higher level lessons learned, tools and resources on the NIFC PIO Bulletin Board and the Firenet PIO Toolbox team.

On this Sawtooth Fire incident we had several members from some of our other SW IMTs working with us, which hopefully helped set them up for success. Time will tell as they’re currently out on new incidents and will likely have more lessons to share in the coming weeks.

This RLS was submitted by:

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Southwest Area Type 1 Incident Management Team #1

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