

# National Transportation Safety Board

Washington, D.C.



## Media Relations Following a Major Transportation Accident or Incident

This document has been prepared by the National Transportation Safety Board to help communication staff of a transportation operator (airline/railroad/pipeline/etc.), infrastructure facility (airport, canal, bridge etc.) or manufacturer (ship builder/airframe or aircraft engine/locomotive/etc.) involved in a major accident or incident understand the NTSB's philosophy and cadence in the hours and days immediately following such an event. In addition, this document provides guidance on NTSB procedures, which all parties to an NTSB investigation must follow.

### **Communications Challenges and Assistance**

The NTSB understands and appreciates the multiple communication challenges that an organization faces when a major accident occurs. It is the policy of the NTSB to work cooperatively with the communications team of affected organizations both as they and the NTSB are responding to the accident. Experience has demonstrated that it is beneficial for the organization to seek out NTSB media relations staff for information, coordination and guidance at the earliest possible opportunity.

### **NTSB Mission**

Congress created the National Transportation Safety Board to investigate all civil aviation accidents and significant events in other modes of transportation, in the United States. In addition to determining the probable cause, the NTSB issues safety recommendations in an effort to prevent future accidents. The NTSB is an independent agency; it is not part of the Department of Transportation or Federal Aviation Administration.

There are five members of the NTSB – nominated by the president and confirmed by the Senate – who serve five-year non-concurrent terms. Members serve on go-teams to major accidents on a rotating basis and accompany the teams to serve as the principal spokesperson for the investigation while on scene. It is the five members of the NTSB who will eventually vote on the probable cause, any changes to the staff-written draft report and safety recommendations.

### **The Party System**

Since its inception, the NTSB has conducted investigations under a party system, using experts from other agencies and organizations to provide technical expertise it may not

possess during the fact-finding phase of an NTSB investigation. By legislation, the Federal Aviation Administration is a party to every aviation accident investigation. All other parties are selected by the NTSB based on the NTSB's needs for that particular investigation. The NTSB alone conducts analysis of the facts, determines probable cause and issues safety recommendations.

Generally some or all of the following groups will be parties to an investigation:

- Operator (airline/motorcoach/pipeline/etc.),
- Equipment manufacturer (truck/aircraft/ship/etc.)
- Engine manufacturer
- Unions (truck drivers/pilots/machinists/mariners/etc.)
- Transportation infrastructure operator (shipping port/canal/railroad depot/airport/etc.)
- Emergency responders (police/fire/emergency management departments/etc.)

Additional parties may be added as needed.

### **The Go-Team**

After the NTSB learns, or is notified of a major accident, an evaluation is quickly made to determine the level of NTSB response. An NTSB go-team is comprised of investigators whose discipline and expertise match the needs of a particular investigation.

These investigators chair investigative groups with party representatives who can offer technical expertise. Typically, groups are formed on-scene in some of the following disciplines:

#### **ALL MODES**

- Operations
- Weather
- Survival Factors
- Human Performance
- Maintenance Records
- Vehicle recorders (if applicable)

#### **AVIATION**

- Air Traffic Control
- Aircraft Performance
- Powerplants
- Structures

#### **RAIL**

- Track
- Signals

#### **HIGHWAY**

- Motor Carrier

- Vehicle
- Highway
- Forensic Mapping (if relevant)

## MARINE

- Engineering

Recorders groups work out of NTSB headquarters in Washington.

The Investigator-in- Charge, or IIC, is a senior career employee of the NTSB and oversees the investigation. Accompanying the go-team is the board member serving as primary spokesperson and at least one member of the NTSB media relations team. The IIC can also serve as spokesperson. The team travels to the accident scene from Washington by government aircraft or commercial airline. The on-scene investigation typically lasts four to 10 days.

For major aviation accidents involving an air carrier, rail accidents involving Amtrak or high-speed rail passenger carriers, specialists from the Transportation Disaster Assistance team will facilitate and integrate the resources of the federal government and other organizations to support the activities and efforts of the local and state government and the operator to meet the needs of victims and their families.

TDA specialists will also support local jurisdiction family assistance operations following other transportation mass casualty incidents (e.g. motorcoach, marine, pipeline, general aviation, and commuter rail).

## Connecting with NTSB Media Relations

When an organization has been involved in an accident, we encourage a communications representative to contact NTSB Media Relations at [mediarelations@ntsb.gov](mailto:mediarelations@ntsb.gov) or (202) 314-6100, which is closely monitored by the media relations duty officer. In most cases, the duty officer will be the NTSB's primary media contact on-scene.

The best and quickest way to monitor NTSB activities and media communications is to follow @ntsb\_newsroom on X, formerly Twitter, where the media relations team posts briefing times and locations, photos and video and other urgent communications.

(If the media relations specialist on duty cannot be reached, call the NTSB's 24-hour Response Operations Center at (202) 314-6290. This non-published number is only for emergencies.)

## At the Accident Site

The NTSB immediately establishes a command post as close to the accident scene as possible, most often in a hotel.

Once the Go-Team arrives on scene, the NTSB holds an organizational meeting during which parties are designated and the investigative groups are defined. Every evening, an

investigative progress meeting will be held. Media, attorneys and communications representatives from party members are not permitted in these meetings.

The organization's party representative (known as the coordinator) may brief communications staff on the progress of the investigation. Communications representatives should meet with the NTSB's on-scene media contact as early as possible and on a regular basis.

### **Roles of NTSB and Other Organizations in Releasing Information**

It is during the organizational meeting that the parties agree to follow the NTSB's procedures, part of which affects an organization's communications staff. The IIC's standard prepared opening statement contains the following paragraph:

*"The NTSB will disseminate to the public all information regarding the accident [investigation], either through our NTSB member, a media relations specialist, or me. We will hold regular briefings to the media. Please refrain from discussing the accident [investigation] in public or giving information about it to the media. Any violation of this request will be considered a serious infraction of NTSB rules."*

This rule protects everyone. The NTSB conducts media briefings in which only factual information is released. The NTSB does not speculate or provide unverified information. With all parties deferring to the NTSB to release information on the investigation, the investigation speaks in a coordinated manner. Through this procedure, competition and "spin" is minimized, and the maximum opportunity for coordination and cooperation among the parties is maintained.

The NTSB has no objection if an organization sends a communications representative to the accident site. In fact, because there are many questions the media asks that the NTSB cannot or will not comment upon (see below), it may sometimes be appropriate and useful for an organization involved in an accident investigation to send communications staff to the accident site, keeping in mind the rules of participation. Staff from NTSB Media Relations can offer guidance on when such travel to the site by communications staff is advised.

If an organization does consider sending communications specialists to the accident site, we strongly encourage that such actions be coordinated with NTSB Media Relations so formal communication lines are established. It is the goal of the NTSB not to blindside anyone and to work cooperatively with all of the parties within the established guidelines.

### **Communicating With the News Media**

We do not wish to prevent an organization from assuring its customers, employees and the general public of their concern for the victims and their commitment to safety.

We intend to give organizations' spokespersons latitude to disseminate information, provided that such information does not interfere with the goals of our investigation and does not damage the integrity of the party process. Therefore, an organization should stay away from any judgments about the significance of issues, and nothing that is released

should suggest that another party (or other entity) may have played a role in causing the accident. One benefit of our procedures is to prevent a party from offending – inadvertently or otherwise – another party and provoking a reaction in kind.

This is not a matter, however, that lends itself to plain black and white assessments or rules. There is some factual information that is obviously related to the investigation that nevertheless can be released without compromising the integrity of the investigation or damaging the party system. For example, the date the vehicle was manufactured or purchased is a fact we will need for our investigation, yet its revelation by you in the hours after the accident will not harm the investigation in any way and is therefore not prohibited under our regulations.

Similarly, the release of the last date of major inspection or a description of the organization's safety program would be permitted, but a statement like "This pipeline/aircraft/motorcoach has no maintenance issues relevant to this accident" would clearly be prohibited because it calls for a judgment that is not the organization's to make; that matter will be a subject of the investigation.

The following is a non-exhaustive list of what various organizations may and may not say following an accident. There is no way all situations can be foreseen, but this list should provide enough guidance that, combined with common sense and a commitment to our shared goal of promoting safety, spokespersons should have a good idea of what is an appropriate post-accident response.

### **Rule of Thumb**

In considering what would be appropriate to say, a spokesperson can start off with the general rule concept that **anything that could have been said the day before the accident can be said the day of the accident and thereafter**. However, even this needs to be carefully considered. In general, after giving the information to the NTSB, a party participant should feel free to share the types of information detailed below, in general terms.

### **Guidance on Post Accident Communications: Operators**

Here is some guidance about what can be discussed in post-accident/incident communications with the news media:

#### The Vehicle (motorcoach/airplane/ship/train/pipeline/etc.)

OK

- The circumstances of the accident
- Registration and serial numbers
- Dates of manufacture and acquisition
- Cabin configuration (if applicable) and cargo capacity
- Vehicle systems (however, this could be troublesome as questions could easily lead a spokesperson to speculate on how these systems could have been used)
- When it last underwent a major inspection and its general inspection schedule
- How many of these vehicles are in the operator's fleet (or if a pipeline, its dimensions)

- and length)
- Manifest information like numbers of crew and passengers (in-lap infants if known) and cargo.

#### NOT OK

- Characterizations of what is in the maintenance records or any other characterization that calls for a judgment or implies involvement or non-involvement in the accident
- Any speculation about the possible role the vehicle's components might have played
- Any discussion of wreckage patterns/tire marks/rupture characteristics, etc.

#### The Crew or Staff Involved in the Accident

##### OK

- Their names and basic personal information like their ages only with the expressed permission of the individual, or if fatally injured, the next-of-kin (strongly suggest consulting NTSB TDA before releasing any names)
- How long they've been employed by the operator
- What vehicles they are licensed to operate
- Where they were on their trip (the second day of a three-day trip, for example)
- What equipment they operated that day and how long they'd been on duty

(All of the above information should always be provided to NTSB first.)

##### NOT OK

- Actions of the crew/staff leading up to the accident
- Any relationship between training and the accident
- Any speculation about what the crew/staff might have done or not done during the accident sequence or to prevent the accident
- While there's nothing wrong with saying the crew/staff are highly competent (why else would you employ him or her?), stay away from statements that suggest the unlikelihood of the crew/staff doing something wrong, or that implicitly or explicitly point fingers at others

#### The Accident

##### OK

- When the organization was notified of the accident and how it responded, both with family assistance matters and in providing support and cooperation to the NTSB in its investigation
- Only general circumstances of the accident should be discussed; i.e., it was raining, the flight/train/bus was on time or late, etc.

NOT OK

- Descriptions of the “final moments” before the accident
- What the investigation will focus on or how it will be structured
- Descriptions about wreckage configurations or suppositions about accident sequence
- Announcements about finding vehicle recorders and how they will be handled
- Speculation on the role various factors, such as weather or lighting, might have played
- Any judgments about what the issues in the investigation are going to be and anything that
- implicitly or explicitly points the finger at another potential party to the investigation

#### The Company

OK

- The circumstances of the accident
- In general terms, factual information about your corporate philosophy and structure, and practices on training, maintenance and operations
- Company size, number of employees
- History (including previous accidents)
- Business alliances
- Size and makeup of vehicle fleet

#### Family Assistance

OK

- Publicize a toll-free number for family members to call to receive basic accident flight and point-of-contact information as the first steps of an operator's humanitarian support. Emphasize that the toll-free number be used only by those who have reason to believe a family member or friend is involved in the accident.
- Provide the media with regular updates on their progress in contacting family members of any passengers and/or crew/staff involved in the accident. For example, let the media know that 24 families of the 120 passengers have been contacted. An hour later, the organization could report that 52 families have been contacted. Such reports should continue until all victims' families have been contacted.
- Describe the organization's family assistance plan and to describe its commitment of resources to the family assistance operation.
- Emphasize collaboration with the NTSB, local/state government agencies, and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) to meet the needs of passengers, crew, displaced persons, and their families.

NOT OK

Avoid commenting on areas that the medical examiner or coroner should officially

address. Such areas include:

- Names of crew, passengers, ground fatalities, and their family members without expressed permission of the individual, or if fatally-injured, the next-of-kin.
- Subject matter that the medical examiner or coroner should officially address, such as: condition of remains; victim search and recovery process; victim identification procedures and the length of time it may take to complete the process; and cause and manner of death.
- Names and locations of medical treatment facilities that have received patients (without expressed permission of the treatment facility).
- Location of the Friends and Relatives Center (FRC), the Family Assistance Center (FAC) or the location and time of planned events such as a family site visit or memorial service.
- Specific financial compensation offered and/or accepted by family members in the immediate aftermath of the accident.

It is also important to let the medical examiner or coroner officially release the names of the fatalities that have been positively identified. Once this information is released by the medical examiner/coroner, the carrier is free to discuss this with the media.

### **Guidance for Transportation Facility Operators**

In a nutshell, any statements from airport/shipping port/canal, etc. following an aviation accident should be limited to two broad areas:

- The circumstances of the accident
- How the accident is impacting facility operations
- Very general description of the emergency response
- What provisions, if any, are being made at the facility to accommodate family members of accident victims
- If an aviation accident, airport layout, such as runway configurations

Any questions on the cause of the accident or the progress of the investigation should be directed to the National Transportation Safety Board.

A facility operator might wish to give out some specific accident information immediately after the event, much as it does routinely (such as an airport would about flight diversions or weather delays). In these occasions, the NTSB understands the need for the facility to release operations related information in keeping with its normal practice.

OK

- The approximate time of the accident, location, equipment involved.
- The impact of the accident on facility operations, such as closures and related delays
- A very general description of the emergency response, such as the number of vehicles that responded to the scene
- Description of provisions made at facility to accommodate family members of accident victims



NOT OK

- Characterization of the emergency response, such as “excellent” or “fast”
- Detailed accounts of what was seen or experienced by facility personnel, such as a description of the crash itself or reports of witnesses that may have relayed information about the crash to facility officials
- Description of passengers, crew, other victims or family members that could compromise an individual’s privacy

There is a notable media availability that a facility might wish to perform. NTSB Survival Factors investigators will want to debrief emergency responders early in the investigation. Once that has occurred, the NTSB has no objection to these personnel meeting with the news media to discuss the emergency response effort in more detail than the initial general accounts that responders may have spoken to the media about in the first few hours after the accident/incident.

In all cases, it is the NTSB’s intention not to interfere with the facility operator’s normal procedures or interactions with the news media, provided they do not interfere with the progress of the NTSB’s investigation.

#### **Guidance for Manufacturers**

In most accidents the majority of the initial media attention is focused on the operator. The manufacturer generally has less media exposure early on, but may be subject to greater scrutiny as the investigation unfolds and as details emerge that could lead the public to believe that the vehicle/pipeline systems or components played a contributing or causal role in the accident.

OK

- How many vehicles/miles of pipeline have been manufactured
- How many vehicles/miles of pipeline are currently in service and hours operated
- How many incidents or accidents the vehicle/type of pipeline has been involved in worldwide
- General description of equipment and its functions
- How many company investigators are assigned to work with the NTSB
- How the company is cooperating with investigators to determine the cause of the accident
- Design changes planned or taken as a result of the accident (This would likely occur many months after the accident but could happen before a determination of probable cause. Be careful not to assign a cause to the accident but stick to a safety issue that the company moved to address. This should all be closely coordinated with the NTSB IIC and Media Relations)

NOT OK

- Characterizing the performance of any equipment during the accident sequence
- Suggesting that crew/staff actions were inappropriate or inadequate in any way

- Insisting that their equipment had no detrimental role in the accident

**Media Interviews: Spokespersons**

Although the NTSB does not prohibit parties from providing spokespersons to be interviewed by news media, party members are reminded that everyone in their organization, including leadership and spokespersons, are strictly prohibited from releasing any investigative information to the public via the news media or any other means. Any questions about these types of media interactions should be directed to the NTSB Media Relations team prior to any interviews.

**Post-Accident Media Relations**

Throughout the entire investigative process, an organization may be asked by the news media to comment on the information released. As a party to the investigation, the organization cannot speculate as to the cause of the accident or offer analysis of the factual information. Keep in mind at all times the guidance in our regulations:

Part 831.13, Chapter 49 of the Code of Federal Regulations

"Flow and dissemination of accident or incident information":

*All information concerning the accident or incident obtained by any person or organization participating in the investigation shall be passed to the IIC through appropriate channels before being provided to any individual outside the investigation... [N]o information concerning the accident or incident may be released to any person not a party representative to the investigation...before initial release by the NTSB without prior consultation and approval of the IIC.*

## **Investigation Milestones**

When the NTSB ends its on-scene media activity, the media relations team returns home. Additional information released about the investigation will be released from Washington.

### Recordings and Transcripts

There are a few significant milestones during the course of the investigation. In an aviation investigation, several weeks after the accident, when the contents of the certified transcript of the air traffic control communications have been verified, we will authorize the FAA to release the recorded ATC communications and transcript to the public. It should be noted, however, that the ATC transmissions of many aviation frequencies are recorded and made available on websites sometimes within minutes or hours of the accident or incident occurrence.

ATC recordings are not to be confused with the cockpit voice recorder, or CVR, recordings, the audio portion of which is never authorized to be released to the public by the NTSB. The original CVR recording is always returned to the operator. The NTSB releases the relevant portions of the transcript when it opens the public docket.

### Public Fact-Finding Hearing

In an effort to collect additional information from sworn witnesses, the NTSB sometimes holds a fact-finding investigative hearing. Hearings are held in either the community where the accident occurred or at the NTSB's headquarters in Washington. The factual reports from the various investigative groups, as well as the transcript of the pertinent portions of any audio recordings, are released on the first day of the hearing. If no hearing is held, those documents are released in a public docket from the NTSB's Washington headquarters.

### Party Submissions

Toward the end of the process, parties have an opportunity to submit to the NTSB (and provide to all other parties) their proposed conclusions, findings of probable cause and safety recommendations. These submissions will ultimately be included in the public docket.

## **Final Board Meeting and Determination of Probable Cause**

Usually within 12-18 months from the date of the accident, the NTSB Members discuss and vote on a final report on the investigation. The draft report, prepared by NTSB staff, includes findings, a determination of probable cause and safety recommendations (although recommendations can be issued at any time during the investigation). An abstract of the conclusions, probable cause and safety recommendations is posted online shortly after the end of the meeting. The full report will appear online several weeks after the meeting, after incorporating any changes made by the board as well as any additional member statements.

## **Aviation and Marine Accidents Outside the United States**

Under international treaty obligations, the NTSB may participate in accident investigations occurring in foreign territories involving aircraft or ships of U.S. design, manufacture,

registration, or operator, or having major U.S.-made components. Only the investigating nation may release information on the findings of the investigation. Therefore, all inquiries related to foreign accidents should be referred to that country's investigating authority.

### Summary

The NTSB was established in 1967. Since that time, it has investigated more than 140,000 aviation accidents and thousands of surface transportation accidents. We are a public agency, doing the public's business. Please do not hesitate to contact us if additional guidance or assistance is needed.

To reach the NTSB Media Relations duty officer	Email: <a href="mailto:mediarelations@ntsb.gov">mediarelations@ntsb.gov</a> or call: <b>202-314-6100</b>
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NTSB Main Number: **202-314-6000** (monitored during business hours). After hours or in an emergency, call the NTSB Response Operations Center: **202-314-6290** (staffed 24/7/365).

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