Managing Communications Following a Major Aviation Accident or Incident

Robert Sumwalt

Presented at NTSB Training Course for Junta de Investigacion de Accidentes de Aviacion Civil
Buenos Aires, Argentina
April 14 & 15, 2016
September 2015 – Letter of Intent to Assist Argentina with Rail Investigations
NTSB Accepted Observer Status to ACRM (AIG Regional Conference)
• NTSB is an independent federal agency
  - investigate transportation accidents
  - determine probable cause
  - issue safety recommendations
Facilities

• Headquartered in Washington, DC
• 4 Regional Offices
• NTSB Training Center
The Board

Earl Weener
Bella Dinh-Zarr
Vice Chairman

Chris Hart
Chairman

Robert Sumwalt

Vice Chairman
Our greatest virtues:

Independence

Credibility
Communicating in the Wake of a Transportation Disaster
The way a crisis is publically handled can either make or break you.
Lac-Mégantic, Quebec
July 6, 2013
Could this be you?
Could this be you?

- Reputations suffer
- Credibility destroyed
- Confidence shattered
Your organization may survive after a poorly handled crisis, but your career may not.
Could this be you?

Your organization may survive after a poorly handled disaster, but your career may not.
Could this be YOU?
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania
May 2015

Peter Knudson
Role of the On-Scene Board Member

Robert Sumwalt
Family Briefings
Meeting with Elected Officials
Transportation Disaster Assistance (TDA)

Peter Knudson
Robert Sumwalt
Transportation Disaster Assistance Point Paper

What is the NTSB?
The National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) is an independent federal agency charged with investigating and determining the probable causes of all fatal transportation accidents in the United States and selected accidents in rail, highway, marine, and pipeline operations. The NTSB has an ongoing interest in the transportation industry, which is the responsibility of the Department of Transportation. Safety recommendations developed from NTSB investigations are aimed at preventing accidents from occurring and are issued to public and private organizations in an effort to improve transportation safety.

What is TDA?
The NTSB’s Transportation Disaster Assistance Division (TDA) coordinates the resources of federal, state, and local agencies, transportation carriers, and the American Red Cross, in order to meet the needs of family members and survivors following a transportation accident. TDA also serves as the primary resource for investigating information for family members and survivors.

What gives TDA its authority?
Three federal laws provide the legal mandate under which TDA operates:
- Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996 (Public Law 104-256)
- Forest Air Carriers Family Support Act of 1997 (Public Law 105-148)
- Rail Passenger Disaster Family Assistance Act of 2006 (Public Law 109-482)

These acts of legislation are the authority for the NTSB’s investigation of the accident, the American Red Cross, and supporting federal agencies following an accident where the following criteria apply:

Legislated Aviation Accidents:
- Accidents in US or contiguous
- Major domestic and foreign air carriers (Part 121/139)
- Major loss of life

Legislated Rail Accidents:
- Accidents in US
- Interstate and foreign passenger cars (Amtrak)
- Inter- and intramodal high speed rail passenger cars
- Major loss of life
- Explosion: subway and light commuter, tourist, historic, scenic, or excursion rail carriers

How are families assisted after an accident?
Federal, state, and local agencies, transportation carriers, and the American Red Cross work together with the guidance of TDA to ensure that the needs of family members and survivors are being addressed. Typical family assistance operations are handled under the following areas:

Family Assistance Centers
The Family Assistance Center (FAC) is a secure meeting place established by the transportation carrier for family members and survivors. The FAC provides a place to obtain services and receive information about the investigation. The FAC remains open throughout the investigation. Personnel from TDA, the American Red Cross, and the Department of Transportation staff the FAC.

Daily Family Briefings
Written notes. TDA coordinates briefings for family members, survivors, and friends at the FAC. These family briefings provide information on the process of the investigation, local agency responsibilities, and available family assistance services. Following the conclusion of the investigation, TDA maintains contact with families and survivors through the NTSB Investigative process.

Personal Effects,
The collection, processing, and return of personal effects are the responsibility of the transportation carrier and the local medical examiner or coroner.

Crisis Counseling Services
Professional crisis counseling services are available through the American Red Cross to family members, survivors, and friends while on-scene at the FAC. Upon their return home, short-term crisis counseling services are also available through local chapters of the American Red Cross with coordination by TDA.

Victim Recovery and Identification
Victim recovery, identification, and data certification are the responsibility of the local medical examiner or coroner. TDA can coordinate technical support to assist in this process.

Assisting Families of Foreign Citizens
The Department of State assists family members, relatives of U.S. citizens, and certified non-citizens to foreign governments, notify other U.S. services, and facilitate assistance services.

NTSB
Transportation Disaster Assistance Division
490 L’Enfant Plaza East, SW
Washington, DC 20594
www.youtube.com
202-393-9373
ambassador@ntsb.gov
News@NTSB
U.S. Family Assistance Legislation

- Aviation Disaster Family Assistance Act of 1996
- Foreign Air Carrier Family Support Act of 1997
- Rail Passenger Disaster Family Assistance Act of 2008
Fundamental Concerns of Family Members

Notification of Involvement

What happened and is my loved one involved?

Victim Accounting

Where is my loved one?

Information and Resources

How do I get information and support?

Personal Effects

Where are their belongings?
The TDA plan is the responsibility of the carrier

- Having a DOT-approved family assistance plan is required of airlines and passenger railroads operating in the US.

- When an accident occurs, implementing the plan is the responsibility of the carrier. (the airline or railroad)

**NTSB coordinates** and provides **additional resources** to the airline/rail carrier and local government to help victims and their families.

NTSB DOES NOT provide the actual family support activities.
Asiana flight 214

- July 6, 2013
- San Francisco, California
- 3 Fatalities
Coordination with the Local, State, Federal Family Assistance Response Community & Transportation Industry

Facilitating victim recovery and identification; East Coast Jets Flight 81; Owatonna, MN

Asiana 214
Victim Services/Disaster Mental Health Support
Coordinate Family Briefings

Amtrak Train 188

Comair 5191
Coordinate Site Visits

Continental Connection 3407

Asiana 214

Continental Connection 3407
Case Study of Crisis Communications Following a Rail Accident

Robert Sumwalt
Peter Knudson
106 MPH

- ‘Reckless’ speed
- 50-mph limit
- Toll rises to 7
- Engineer mum
Peter coordinated over 100 TV interviews
Robert’s Crisis Communications Tips

• Be prepared
• Display command presence
• Show compassion
• Demonstrate transparency
• Stay in your lane
• Remember your message
Crisis Communications Tip

BE PREPARED
Be prepared

- Know the facts
- Identify your talking points
- “Murder board”
Crisis Communications Tip

DISPLAY COMMAND PRESENCE
Command Presence

• Be in control; control the environment
• Don’t be overrun by the media
Command Presence

Please raise your hand. When I call on you, state your name, your media affiliation, and ask your question. Thank you.
P.S. – Don’t be defensive!
Crisis Communications Tip

SHOW COMPASSION
Before I go any further, on behalf of the NTSB, I would like to extend our condolences to the families and friends of the victims of this tragic accident.

• Don’t *read* this – speak from the heart!
• Show that you care!
• Show compassion!
Crisis Communications Tip

DEMONSTRATE TRANSPARENCY
NBC News Investigation of Crumb Rubber
The way you answer does matter.

What was the speed of the airplane as it departed the runway?

“I can’t answer that.”

**If you are the investigator**

“One of the many things the investigation will do is develop a complete timeline of events, including speeds throughout the accident sequence.”

**If you are the operator**

“The NTSB is conducting the investigation, so that question would best be directed to them.”
Crisis Communications Tip

STAY IN YOUR LANE
“Stay in your lane”

Don’t talk about things that are outside of your area.
Crisis Communications Tip

REMEMBER YOUR MESSAGE
NEW DEVELOPMENTS

NTSB Interviewed Amtrak 188 Engineer
The Pivot – your best friend.

• When asked a question that you are not prepared to answer, pivot to your message.
Good Luck!
NTSB Most Wanted List

Robert Sumwalt
2016 NTSB Most Wanted List

- Disconnect from Deadly Distractions
- Reduce Fatigue-Related Accidents
- Improve Rail Transit Safety Oversight
- Promote Collision Avoidance Technologies in Highway Vehicles
- Strengthen Occupant Protection
- Prevent Loss of Control in General Aviation
- Promote Completion of Rail Safety Initiatives
- End Substance Impairment in Transportation
- Require Medical Fitness for Duty
- Expand use of Recorders to Enhance Transportation Safety
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Disconnect from Deadly Distractions

Chatsworth, California
September 2008

[Image of a train derailment]
Implement Positive Train Control
Implement PTC / Reduce Fatigue-Related Accidents
Improve Rail Tank Car Safety

Casselton, North Dakota
December 2013
Improve Rail Transit Safety Oversight

Washington, DC
June 2009
Improve Rail Transit Safety Oversight

L’Enfant Plaza Metro Station
January 2015
Require Medical Fitness for Duty
NTSB is a division of the U.S. Department of Transportation.

a. True
b. False
NTSB is a division of the U.S. Department of Transportation.
a. True
b. False
NTSB investigations are for the purpose of:

a. apportioning blame
b. finding fault
c. determining liability
d. all of the above
e. none of the above
Pop Quiz

Select the most correct answer

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