

MEDIA RELATIONS AT A MAJOR AVIATION ACCIDENT

Airports and the NTSB

If a major aviation accident occurs on or near an airport, that airport will be confronted with many public relations challenges. This document has been prepared by the National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB) to help airport public relations staff understand the Board's philosophy and procedures in the hours and days immediately following a major airline accident, and specifically to provide them with guidance about parameters established by the Safety Board for parties to its investigations.

In a nutshell, any press statements from airport personnel following an aviation accident should be limited to two broad areas: how the accident is impacting airport operations and what provisions, if any, are being made at the airport to accommodate family members of accident victims.

The Safety Board understands and appreciates the multiple public affairs responsibilities that the airport faces when a major accident occurs. It is the policy of the Safety Board to work cooperatively with the public relations representatives of all parties – airlines, manufacturers, unions and airports. Once the Safety Board establishes a command post on scene, airport press officers should feel free to seek out their NTSB counterparts for information, guidance and coordination.

Congress created the National Transportation Safety Board in 1967, charging it with, among other things, investigating all civil aviation accidents in the United States. In addition to determining probable cause, the Board issues safety recommendations in an effort to prevent future accidents. The Safety Board is an independent agency, not part of the Department of Transportation, and has no organizational connection to the Federal Aviation Administration (FAA).

For more than 30 years the Board has conducted investigations under a party system, using experts from other agencies and organizations to provide expertise it does not or may not possess. By legislation, the FAA has the right to be a party to the investigation. All other parties are selected by the NTSB based on the Board's needs for that particular investigation. Generally some or all of the following groups will be parties to an investigation: the airline; the aircraft manufacturer; the engine manufacturer; unions representing the airline's pilots,

flight attendants, machinists and dispatchers; the airport authority; the National Air Traffic Controllers Association; and local crash/fire/rescue authorities. Additional parties may be added as needed.

Upon being notified of a major accident, the Board dispatches a “Go-Team” from Washington. The closest NTSB regional office will immediately respond to control the scene until the Go-Team arrives. The team conducts an on-site investigation typically lasting anywhere from 4 to 10 days (some, notably ValuJet flight 592 and TWA flight 800, have lasted a substantially longer period of time). Sometimes there is a public hearing, most likely held in Washington, D.C., and the Board’s final report is typically issued **12 to 24 months** after the accident. Parties will be afforded the opportunity to provide the Safety Board with their findings, conclusions, and analysis of the events of the accident, although they will not participate in developing NTSB’s analysis or probable cause. **Throughout this period, press and public interest can be relentless.** It is our experience that press attention often focuses on the airport in the early hours after an accident (mostly because airport spokespeople are closest to the event and are perceived to have information to share), but then quickly shifts to the airline and the NTSB.

The First Few Hours

The Board is almost always initially notified of a major aviation accident by the FAA’s Operations Center in Washington. An evaluation is quickly made to determine the level of NTSB response. Sometimes, an accident can be handled by one of the Board’s regional or field offices (list attached), but for most major airline accidents (both Part 121 and Part 135), a full Go-Team is assembled. The team usually travels to the accident site on a government aircraft, but occasionally flies commercial transportation.

Representatives of the Board’s Public Affairs Office always accompany the Go-Team. **This office has an answering machine that during evening and weekend hours gives the home telephone number of the public affairs officer (PAO) on call. When a major accident occurs, the answering machine message will be updated periodically to give information on the level and timing of NTSB response.**

Safety Board family support personnel also travel to the accident scene. They 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 airline to meet the needs of victims and their families.

The Go-Team

The Go-Team could consist of as many as a dozen or more NTSB investigators. The Investigator-in-Charge (IIC), a career employee of the Safety Board, manages the investigation. The investigative team is made up of NTSB investigators who are experts in various disciplines. Each of these investigators serves as a group chairman with representatives from the appropriate parties, including the airline, assigned to his or her group. Typically, groups are formed on scene in all or some of the following disciplines: Structures, Systems, Powerplants, Operations, Air Traffic Control, Weather, Survival Factors, Human Performance, Aircraft Performance and Witness Interviews. Flight Data Recorder (FDR) and Cockpit Voice Recorder (CVR) groups work out of NTSB headquarters in Washington.

In addition to the investigative teams, the NTSB group is also made up of support teams covering public affairs and family affairs. Press officers are dispatched to accompany Go-Teams, sometimes with a Board Member who serves as principal spokesperson. The IIC can also fulfill that responsibility. Safety Board legal officers may also provide support.

There are five Members of the National Transportation Safety Board, nominated by the President and confirmed by the Senate to serve five-year non-concurrent terms. The Members serve on Go-Teams on a rotating basis and accompany the teams to serve as principal spokespersons for the investigation while on scene. It is the five Board Members who, under law, will eventually analyze the factual information collected by the investigators to determine probable cause and issue safety recommendations.

If the aircraft was operated by a foreign carrier or is manufactured outside the United States, the foreign government authority will also be present in accordance with international agreement.

At the Accident Scene

The Safety Board immediately establishes a command post as close to the accident scene as possible, most often in a hotel. Press telephones are installed and those numbers are publicized as soon as they are known.

Once the Go-Team arrives on scene, the Board holds an organizational meeting during which parties are designated and the investigative groups are defined. Every evening, a progress meeting will be held. Public relations representatives from the parties, attorneys and news media are not permitted in these meetings.

If an airport authority is involved in the investigation, airport public information officers should meet with their NTSB counterparts as soon as possible.

It is during the organizational meeting that the parties agree to follow the Board's procedures, part of which could affect airport PR staff. The IIC's standard prepared opening statement contains the following paragraph:

"The Safety Board will disseminate to the public all information regarding the accident [investigation], either through our Board Member, public affairs officer, or me. We will hold regular briefings to the press. Please refrain from discussing the accident [investigation] in public, or giving information about it to the press. Any violation of this request will be considered a serious infraction of Board rules."

This rule protects everyone. Typically, the NTSB conducts press briefings during the day and at night following the progress meeting. Only factual information – that all the parties have heard – is released. The NTSB does not speculate or give out unverified information. With all parties deferring to the Board to release information on the investigation, the team speaks in a coordinated, consistent and orderly manner. Through this procedure, competition for "spin" is thus minimized, and the maximum opportunity for coordination and cooperation among the parties is maintained.

Under federal law, access to the accident site is controlled by the NTSB, even if it is on airport property. At a time deemed appropriate by the IIC, the press is usually escorted to a site close to the wreckage, either in total or represented by a pool. Any such press visit on airport property will be arranged by the Board in close coordination with airport authorities.

What an airport can do

The Safety Board is cognizant of the increasing pressures all of us are subjected to because of the changed nature of our news media. We do not wish to prevent an airport from assuring its customers, employees and its community of its concern for the victims and its commitment to aviation safety.

As with all parties, we give airport spokespersons latitude to disseminate pertinent information, provided that such information does not interfere with the goals of our investigation and does not damage the integrity of the party process.

In that spirit, as mentioned early on, airport press announcements after an accident should generally be limited to two areas: how the accident is impacting operations, and what provisions are being made for victims' families on airport grounds. Any questions on the cause of the accident or the progress of the investigation should be directed to the National Transportation Safety Board.

An airport authority might wish to give out some specific accident information immediately after the event, much as it does routinely about flight diversions or other anomalies at its facility. In these occasions, the Safety Board understands the need for the airport to release time, runway, airline and flight information after a major accident at its facility, in keeping with its normal practice.

There is one final press availability that an airport authority might wish to perform. NTSB Survival Factors investigators will want to debrief ARFF personnel early in the investigation. Once that has occurred, the Safety Board has no objection to these personnel meeting with the news media to discuss the rescue and firefighting effort. This could occur several days after the accident.

In all cases, it is the Safety Board's intention not to interfere with an airport's normal procedures or interactions with the news media, provided they do not interfere with the progress of the Board's investigation.

Please contact the Safety Board's Public Affairs Office for any questions on this guidance. Contact information is below.

(Please also refer to "A Note to Journalists", found on the Board's web site – www.nts.gov – under News and Events)

NTSB Contacts

NTSB website: www.nts.gov

NTSB PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE: (202) 314-6100

(after hours this number has a recorded message)

Home Telephone Numbers of NTSB Public Affairs Officers (PAO)

Ted Lopatkiewicz (703) 556-0967
Director, Public Affairs

Paul Schlamm (301) 654-1263, PAO
Terry Williams (202) 544-1559, PAO
Keith Holloway (301) 516-0642, PAO
Lauren Peduzzi (202) 265-4282, PAO

24-Hour Communications Center (202) 314-6290

[This is not a public phone number]

List of NTSB Regional/Field Offices

Northeast Regional Office (Parsippany NJ) 973-334-6420
Northeast Field Office (Washington DC) 202-314-6320
Southeast Regional Office (Miami FL) 305-597-4610
Southeast Field Office (Atlanta GA) 404-562-1666
North Central Regional Office (West Chicago IL) 630-377-8177

South Central Regional Office (Arlington TX) 817-652-7800
South Central Field Office (Denver CO) 303-361-0600
Northwest Regional Office (Seattle WA) 206-870-2200
Northwest Field Office (Anchorage AK) 907-271-5001
Southwest Regional Office (Gardena CA) 310-380-5660

4/02