

NEMA 2026 Mid-Year Forum

Public Information Officers (PIO) Subcommittee Full Subcommittee Report

This document highlights the key efforts and accomplishments of the PIO Subcommittee. For more information about these activities, please contact Celia Cusick at ccusick@csg.org.

Executive Summary:

Over the last five months, the PIO Subcommittee has been focused on successful state approaches. In particular, the subcommittee has discussed messaging and communication strategies for diverse incidents, winter weather communication, and shared ongoing agency-level projects. Additionally, the subcommittee has learned more about the EMAC process and EMAC deployments as a PIO.

Overview of the Key Subcommittee Efforts:

Briefing on the Emergency Management Assistance Compact (EMAC)

Angela Copple (EMAC Program Director, National Emergency Management Association) provided a presentation on EMAC. Among the information she briefed on were the following points:

- EMAC is both Federal and State law, and the only nationally adopted emergency management compact implemented by state emergency management agencies.
- In recent events, the need for Public Information Officers has grown due to the rise of misinformation, disinformation, and malinformation, and EMAC has been utilized to augment PIO support during incidents.
- PIO deployments have increased since 2020. Additionally, deploying virtually is an effective option for PIOs. During Hurricane Helene, 8 PIOs deployed through EMAC.

Presentation on Recent Tsunami

The PIO Subcommittee held a presentation on the Washington Emergency Management Division's communication response to the 2025 Tsunami. Elyssa Tappero (Tsunami Program Manager, Washington Emergency Management Division) provided the brief. Some of the key lessons from the discussion are as follows:

- On July 29, 2025, an earthquake hit off the coast of Kamchatka, Russia, and was determined to be an M8.8.



- This triggered a tsunami off the coast of Washington. Washington's response lasted about 18.5 hours, and the highest recorded wave was 1.4 ft. Fortunately, there were no casualties and no damage.
- From a communications perspective, this was a success for Washington State, as they were able to push out consistent social media messaging and quickly notify overnight visitors in waterfront areas.
- The event generated new sign-ups for local alert systems and exponentially increased visits to the main Tsunami webpage.

Presentation on PIO Credentialing Process

The Subcommittee also hosted Ashley McDonald (PIO Commissioner Representative, Center for Public Safety Excellence) to provide an overview of the Center for Public Safety Excellence's PIO Credentialing process. Among the information she shared, some highlights included:

- The PIO Credentialing is a process that performs a credible, holistic assessment of an individual and offers strategies for continuous professional improvement.
- Credentialing helps to highlight your professional growth and develop strategies for career enhancement.

Presentation on Inclement Winter Weather Travel Restriction and Ban Planning and Framework

The PIO Subcommittee also received a presentation regarding Pennsylvania's Winter Weather Travel Restriction and Ban Planning and Framework. The presentation was a collaborative effort from the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency and the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation. Randy Padfield (Director, Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency) presented from the Emergency Management perspective. Among the information he provided, some highlights included:

- The Planning and Framework were developed after Winter Storm Jonas in 2016; the priority was to create an approach that restored traffic flow and reduced catastrophic outcomes.
- Pennsylvania developed travel restrictions that can be stepped down based on the forecast. The restrictions follow a tiered approach and also include speed restrictions.
- 501PA Connect is a messaging platform that allows us to communicate with those impacted in the area of a winter weather incident when closures are expected to exceed four hours. This platform also helps broaden situational awareness by allowing those who opt in to complete a survey that asks identification questions

(e.g., vehicle type), which are then plotted on a GIS-based map. Also allows us to push out proactive safety messaging for extended events, such as reminders to conserve battery power and to remove snow from exhaust pipes.

Insights from EMAC Deployment to Alaska

The Subcommittee held a brief that provided an overview of a PIO Deployment to Alaska through EMAC in the Halong Typhoon Response. Vanessa Palange (Community Outreach Coordinator, New Hampshire Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Management) offered her experience, among the lessons shared were:

- Reach out to the EMAC Coordinator and other connections to determine what you will need to bring before you deploy, review the required documentation for reimbursement, and research the area you may be deployed to.
- During the deployment, one challenge was translating a public service announcement from English to Yup'ik. There are many different dialects in the language, and it's not primarily a written language, so we had to read the message line by line. To support this effort, they relied upon assistance from school districts for translation.
- Another aspect of an Alaskan deployment was that the disaster survivors followed subsistence lifestyles, so when meals were initially provided, they did not fit the cultural needs and expectations. We worked to bring in support to help better align with this need.

Cyber Incident Communications Strategy Brief

The PIO Subcommittee held a presentation on the Nevada Office of Emergency Management and Homeland Security's response and messaging strategy for a cybersecurity event that occurred in 2025. The presentation was provided by Brett Compston (Chief, Nevada Office of Emergency Management/Homeland Security), Sharon Luce (Deputy Administrator, Nevada Office of Emergency Management/Homeland Security), and Gail Powell (Chief Communications Officer, Nevada Office of Emergency Management/Homeland Security). Some of the key insights from the brief are as follows:

- Regarding messaging during a cyber event, these events are unique, so messaging may need to be vetted differently, including engaging legal teams early and often.
- Situations like this require a balance of the need to get public information out and awareness of the threat actor's danger. This is a careful balance, and why coordination among partners is essential during a cyber event.
- A central place to coordinate messaging is recommended. To this point, the use of a Joint Information Center (JIC) is encouraged.

Strategies for Managing Government Transitions Presentation

The Subcommittee also received a presentation on managing government transitions and the communications work undertaken during the process. Dillon Taylor (Chief of Staff & Senior Counsel, Virginia Department of Emergency Management) and Lauren Opett (Chief, Preparedness Bureau, Virginia Department of Emergency Management) provided the presentation. Key takeaways from the presentation are:

- The Commonwealth of Virginia does not allow consecutive gubernatorial terms; as such, VDEM has had the opportunity to navigate several executive transitions.
- The transition work begins about six to nine months before an election because there is a two-month period after the election before the inauguration.
- During the most recent gubernatorial transition, VDEM prioritized streamlining many documents to highlight the need-to-know for the executive, such as what information they may expect during an incident and what a declaration covers.
- Other practices include touring the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and press spaces and providing legislative and budget priorities. Model practices that have arisen are creating consistent, professional branding for the department.

Winter Weather Messaging Approach during Winter Storm Fern

The subcommittee received a brief on the Tennessee Emergency Management Agency, which discussed its messaging efforts in response to Winter Storm Fern. Kristin Coulter (Communications Director, Tennessee Emergency Management Agency) provided the brief. She highlighted key communication strategies of her agency during the response, such as:

- Before the storm, we held an in-person press conference and invited partners to the State Emergency Operations Center. During the press conference, we emphasized preparedness messaging, including measures such as what to have at home to prepare for power outages, and encouraged people to avoid travel and stay off roads.
- Once the event began, the first part of the storm was slow, so we shifted messaging to emphasize that people should remain vigilant, avoid travel, and stay weather aware. As the event progressed, we amplified our partners' messaging, including that of Tennessee's Department of Transportation.
- Additionally, due to connectivity issues, we had an influx of calls to local Emergency Management Agencies from people trying to check in on loved ones, so we set up a hotline for them to call.

Spotlighted Practices and Ongoing Projects in States

As a continuation of an earlier effort adopted by the Subcommittee, round robins seek to elevate state practices as a part of our efforts to circulate best practices. Among those highlighted are the examples below:

- Tennessee shared a preparedness month activity that was a partnership with corporate Lowe's called "Tune it Tuesday," where they were able to partner with Lowe's and local EMAs to give free weather radios and batteries.
- Alabama shared that they are working on the Severe Weather Preparedness Sales Tax Holiday and developing a few informational videos in preparation.