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# Social Breakdown

*How outdated police media strategy lost the Twitter-verse in Ferguson*

By CHIEF JOEL F. SHULTS, Ed.D.

Officer Darren Wilson reacted within seconds to the threat he perceived shortly after noon on Saturday, August 9th.

Almost a full day after the incident — at 1000 hours the next morning — Chief Jon Belmar of the St. Louis County Police Department held a press conference. Belmar



SHULTS

explained that a Ferguson officer's gun led to Michael Brown's death. He said that Brown physically assaulted the officer, and during a struggle between the two, Brown reached for the officer's gun. One shot was fired in the car followed by other gunshots outside of the car.

That would have been a classically appropriate press strategy in 1994. In 2014, everything Belmar said that Sunday morning was already irrelevant.

*Welcome to 21st Century Media Relations.*

Twitter — and all of its digital cousins — had already framed the story of an unarmed black teen with his hands up in surrender shot by an angry racist cop.

The truth of the morning-after press release may be lost to history.

It was certainly lost to the rioting crowd that evening.

Just as Ferguson PD called in assisting agencies, there were groups waiting in the wings with fill-in-the-blank racist cop story templates that spoke to their constituents long before the voice of Chief Belmar.



**Ferguson (MO) Police encounter protestors on city streets in the wake of the Michael Brown shooting death. Online messaging far outpaced information released by law enforcement agencies, further fueling community reactions.**

By the time the police were able to use their pre-Twitter media relations protocol, the storytelling battle was already lost.

What price are we now willing to pay to stick to our investigative and media relations protocol? Our public not only demands information, but rejects any rational arguments we might make for delaying.

The fear of releasing too much information too early has been replaced by

the fear of having your story silenced by the kinds of tortured narrative that framed the Michael Brown story, not only for the angry crowds, but by the reporters from the mainstream media as well.

Our PIO (public information officer) positions must be staffed or supported not just by the congenial face of Officer Friendly, but by the digital skills of Officer Nerd.

Deep involvement by decision-makers

must be shared by the crowd-sourced media experts who are shaping and monitoring the digital dialog. That online "story" sometimes springs forth within seconds of an incident.

I didn't say "critical incident" there, because a police activity that a law enforcement professional would consider quite normal can be framed by someone else as "another case of misconduct."

Police leaders need to revisit the old media relations principles of personal contact, respecting news cycles, ensuring accuracy, and pleas for patience and trust to the public. That works for CNN, but that's not where Ferguson rioters got their information.

Media relations in the era of Twitter and other social media all but demands that even a mid-sized department of 50 or so officers needs to have at least one person involved in the process who understands and can help navigate those online outlets. If you don't, the job will be done for you. And you won't like the results.

**ABOUT THE AUTHOR:** Joel Shults operates Street Smart Training and is the founder of the National Center for Police Advocacy. He is retired as Chief of Police for Adams State University in Colorado.

*This article originally appeared on PoliceOne.com, the online resource for Law Enforcement, and is reprinted by permission. Visit PoliceOne to access articles, information, and resources that help officers across the United States protect their communities and stay safe on the streets.*

# NIOA '14 app a year-round connection

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NIOA News is the official  
newsletter of the National  
Information Officers  
Association.

It is published six times  
annually.

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**Stephanie  
Slater**

Another tremendously successful NIOA Training Conference is in the books! From the record number of attendees and high caliber presenters to new friendships and great networking, this conference was definitely one of the best that I've attended in my 7 years as an NIOA member.

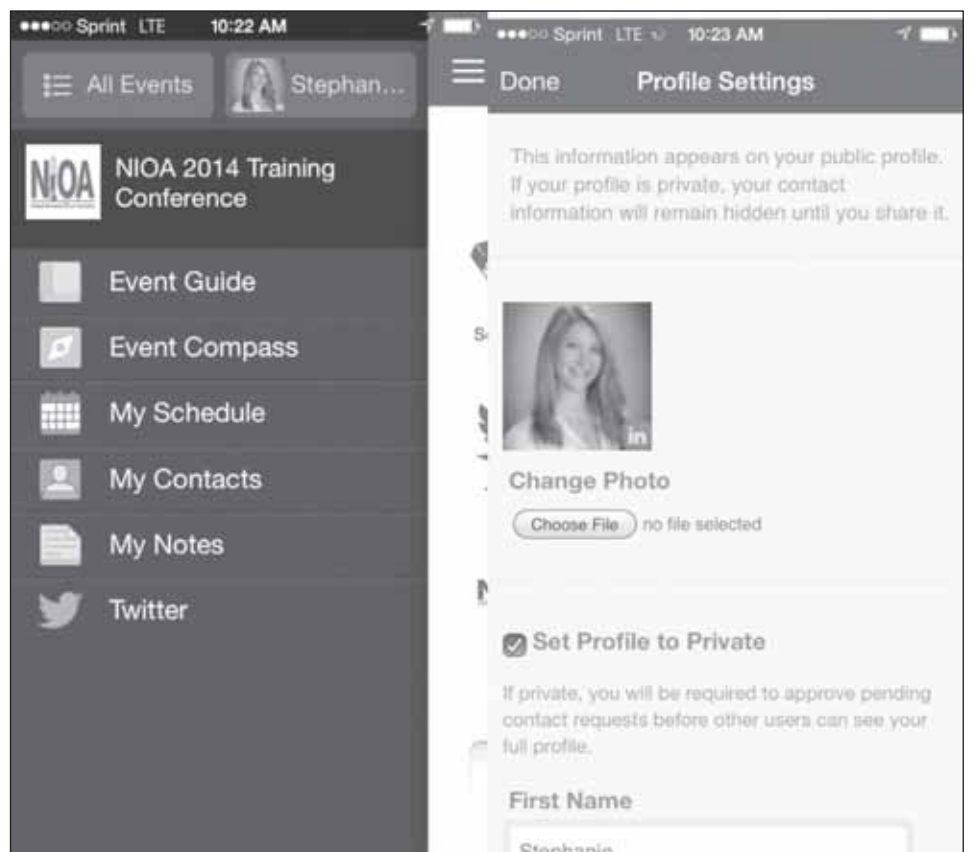
Though it's 10 months away, you might want to put the bug in your supervisor's ear now about attending the 2015 conference. We sold out of conference space this year and anticipate the same thing happening next year. The conference dates are Aug. 30-Sept. 2, 2015 at the Sheraton Sand Key Resort in Clearwater, Florida.

I look forward to serving as your president during this next year, and hope that you will reach out to me with your suggestions and feedback about ways we can continue to grow NIOA into the nation's premiere organization for professional public information officers.

I hope you enjoyed using the NIOA app during this year's conference. We know there were a few kinks with it, and we're working with the developer to make it easier to access and use in the future. We encourage you to use the app throughout the year to stay in touch with each other. Here is a refresher guide for how to use it.

## Login

Once you've downloaded the app, tap on the NIOA 2014 Training Conference, and enter in



the event code NIOA14 (case sensitive). You will then need to log in. Click on the three horizontal lines next to "Event Guide" at the top of the screen. Then click on the photo icon on the top right of the screen next to All Events.

Type in your app registration code\* and the email address you registered for the conference with. Then click on "Login" to access the app. Only logged in users can access the attendees list.

The app registration code was sent to your email address from CrowdCompass.

## Don't have your registration code?

Click "retrieve it here" (below the Log In button) to request that your registration code be sent to your email.

## Profile Setup

Click on the three horizontal lines next to "Event Guide" at the top of the screen. Then click on the photo icon on the top right of the screen next to All Events to setup your profile.

By default, "Set Profile to Private" is checked. For better networking: uncheck it if you want everyone to be able to see your information.

## Attendees

View a list of attendees! Only logged in users will be able to access this function. Click on any attendee to view their profile. If the attendee did not uncheck the "set profile to private" box, you will not be able to see their contact details. Request their information by clicking the icon below their name. You can also record notes to help remember all of your contacts with the pencil icon.



We appreciate all of your feedback on what you liked about the app, and suggestions about what can be done better. Keep those coming!

Please do not hesitate to contact me at 561-742-6191 or slaters@bbfl.us.

[ VicePresident'sView ]

## Feedback reflective of our diversity



Ed  
Buice

First, a heartfelt thank you for the honor of serving as your vice president; I'm grateful and humbled. I'm very passionate about NIOA and promise to work tirelessly to promote our organization. People need to know what a great thing we've got going.

Can you believe it's already been over a month since we were in Clearwater?

Thank you to those who offered feedback on this year's sessions via the NIOA app. Board members have been reviewing the comments and your input

will definitely help make next year's annual training conference even better. If you were in Clearwater but were unable to provide your insights – or maybe you just have more you want to say – it's not too late. Just email your comments to me at [edbuice@aol.com](mailto:edbuice@aol.com) or any other board member.

Be as detailed as possible about why you did or did not like a particular session, exactly what you want to learn next year, and whether you'd be interested in interactive training. Perhaps we all pull out our cell phones and other mobile devices and spend a few hours walking through the process of shooting, editing and distributing video news releases from the field. How does that hit you?

If there's a certain topic you want to learn more about, let us know. Writing, photography, developing a better speaking voice, PIO gear and gadgets perhaps. If you've seen an incident on the news that you think would make a great case study, give us those suggestions also. Remember, NIOA is your organization and we want to serve you.

It's fascinating to see the wide range of

opinions offered on any given conference session. One attendee might write, "This was the BEST session ever!!! I LOVED it!!!" But on the same page you may see: "This was the lamest presentation of the conference." There were several topics which some people felt should have been covered in half the time, while others wanted the same class to be expanded to a half-day.

The disparate reactions reaffirm that NIOA members come from a huge range of backgrounds and experiences, and they remind us that as professional communicators we must always remember that what we're saying is being heard and acted on differently by different individuals, especially in crisis situations, when people are fearful.

I encourage you to learn more about the Psychology of Messaging research done by Dr. Peter Sandman, Ron Edmond, Jim Lukaszewski, Jonathan Bernstein and other Risk Communication experts. Just Google any of their names.

*Keep in touch,*

Ed

[ Secretary'sMessage ]

## NIOA needs your topic suggestions



Lou  
Thurston

Many people, over the years, have had visions of the NIOA becoming a large national organization. I'm just not sure those with the visions ever thought they would see back to back huge increases in the number of conference attendees as was experienced the last two years.

The Board and planning committee have

worked extremely hard over the years to bring great presenters to discuss timely and interesting cases.

For the past two years there have been way too many tragic events across the country to choose from and, while tragedy is bad, the good thing is we were fortunate to have great subject matter and great people to walk us through their experiences.

One may ask how we continue to come up with great presentations for future conferences. Well, it's a great question and part of the answer is the entire membership to keep their eyes and ears open for cases they feel could be good case for a conference presentation.

Quite possibly you may not need looking beyond your own back yard.

There is no rule that says the presentation must be about a huge national incident. Quite often there are very interesting local cases where "things went

right and things went wrong and there were lessons learned" that never make the national news.

With that said, the only way the Board knows about the incident is when someone tells us. So, keep your eyes and ears open and send your ideas to any Board member. Remember, if you send in the idea, it may or may not be selected but, if you don't send it in you know it won't be selected.

Remember, too, this is your organization and the only way we have of knowing what you, the membership, would like to see is to hear from you. After all, we are in the communication business.

The Board and the regional directors want to hear your ideas and suggestions so don't hesitate to send them in.

## WELCOME

The NIOA News welcomes the following members to its ranks:

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See WELCOME, page 7

# When news breaks, PIOs go to work

By SHELL ARMSTRONG  
NIOA News

**CLEARWATER, FL** – When the defecation hits the oscillation, the best tool a PIO has is his or her training.

So says Ret. Marine Lt. Col. James Vance, of Vance Communications.

Today's public information officer has five basic responsibilities:

- Represent the agency in the best light.
- Be available 24 hours a day.
- Arrange interviews with subjects and experts as required.
- Handle all breaking news.
- Be the agency's media guide.

Vance employs a "trickle down" process to determine who should best speak depending on the scenario.

"If it involves policy or personnel, look to the CEO," he said. Job-specific issues can be directed to commanders. Officers, meanwhile, can speak to their individual roles in the course of the event.

"The PIO then coordinates and supports the above efforts and continues to handle breaking news."

Maintaining the news connection requires close relationships, too, with the organization's top brass.

"In your role as PIO, to be effective, you have to have constant access to the decision-makers," Vance said. "You have to be kept in the loop. Your chief support has to make what you do a priority."

In exchange for "accepting the king's shilling," Vance said PIOs must "radiate integrity and honesty" in promoting the boss and the agency.

Even the best PIO, however, will find himself on the wrong side of a quote or story at some point. In that moment, the consequences of the mistake can be compounded by the PIO's next move.

"You have to ask if it is important enough to even warrant a correction," Vance said. "How damaging is it? Will it give credibility to an opposite point of view? Is it worth the restatement?"

One must also ask if the fix will reach the audience exposed to the initial error.

Responses to misreporting should be prompt and accurate, he said.

In at least one instance, the PIO must act. "If the mistake is so serious it interferes with an investigation or the function of an agency," Vance said. "If substantial errors go unchallenged, they gain credence and cause damages or harm."

The fix can be as simple as correcting a factual error to seeking a retraction.



**Ret. Marine Lt. Col. James Vance told NIOA members at the 2014 NIOA Training Conference the price for accepting the king's shilling is for PIOs to radiate integrity and honesty in promoting the boss and the agency.**

"The latter usually requires legal action," he explained. "An outlet has to admit its error and apologize."

More often, mistakes can be credited to a reporter's ignorance.

"You have to take the reporter to task and be firm," Vance said.

These days, he said, online corrections are easy. But getting results beyond that requires directing the complaint to the next level – the editor or producer.

Vance said complaints can also be lodged with the state journalism organization or media counsel or even to the FCC.

"If an incorrect story was generated, you can also complain to the network."

When all else fails, Vance said a last resort is to speak with the organization's competition.

"That's really a last resort. Our goal is to maintain the best relationships possible, so use this with care."

Another olive branch often extended by media is a "letter to the editor" or guest column slot to voice your concerns. An opportunity to tell your story any other

time, if your organization is wronged by poor or unfair reporting, it falls to the agency to repair the damage, he said.

"We are trying to proactive here," Vance said. "If all else fails, though, refuse to work with the reporter. It's a drastic action and one I'd only suggest as a last resort."

When breaking news occurs, the first inclination is to hold a news conference.

"This is your big gun drawn for big deals," Vance said. "Use it for major announcements."

Press conferences generally require a good deal of staff time and require a great deal of transparency.

Vance suggests scripting the basic conference and then be prepared to take a few questions.

In major incidents, he advises PIOs use a briefing book with tabbed responses to multifaceted events.

"You are watching for credibility over slickness when picking the cast for a news conference," he said. "And beware of the 'pecking order.' Someone may be next in line, but not exactly the best person to speak on camera."

He suggests rehearsing or at least familiarizing the conference panel with the question-and-answer segment.

The PIOs role then shifts to prepping the meeting area, laying down media ground rules, distributing press kits, introducing the speakers and helping to direct the questions.

Press conferences can have maximum impact to relay an organization's professional and message if done right. Vance said attention should be given to the background and foreground: Do you have a backdrop with a logo? Can the speakers be heard? Also be mindful of the egress for speakers.

"You are really speaking to the public. The media is a secondary source at this point," he said.

When things go awry for an agency, going public can be much more difficult.

"If the brand is wrong, no amount of spin will change the branding," Vance said.

But in the void of information, he said the media and public can easily develop a perception of confusion, incompetence, callousness or poor preparation.

"At worst, they'll just think its obfuscation," Vance said. "That you're being dishonest or insensitive."

"There's no substitute for the absolute truth," he said. "Failure to understand that leads to revelations. In the end, it will all come out."

How well PIOs mine relationships with media will be an asset in trying times, whether it is an internal conflict or an act of God, such as a natural disaster, Vance said.

"The best reporting comes from the best relationships," he explained. "The better the story is told, the more likely you are to reach readers."

"Getting reporters to that level – getting them smart – is a full-time job."

PIOs are best served by embracing social media as part of their plan for meeting communications challenges.

"You have to train, train, train," he said. "And think past the immediate crisis. Keep the victim focus."

PIOs today should also be PR agents for their agencies. Vance said aggressive self-promotion among the public and organizations will pay off in the long run.

"Remember, say it first and often, even when the news is bad," he said. "You have a job. A lot is expected of you if you accept the king's shilling. Your role is to deliver your message to the community."



Clearwater Chief of Police Daniel Slaughter welcomes NIOA members to the city for its 2014 NIOA Training Conference. Also pictured are Immediate Past President Charles Warner, NIOA President Stephanie Slater, Past President Mike Fronimos, Clearwater Fire and Rescue Department Deputy Chief Robert Weiss and Clearwater Mayor George Cretekos.



“You just know it is going to be crazy and information is going to inaccurate for a while,” said MaryAnn Cummings, of the Naval Criminal Investigative Services. Cummings and fellow NCIS spokesman Ed Buice spoke on lessons learned in the aftermath of the Washington Navy Yard shooting rampage Sept. 16, 2013 during which 12 people were killed and eight others injured.

Federal Bureau of Investigation spokesman Jason Pack told NIOA members in the five days it took authorities to clear the Boston Marathon bombing site, large files had been filled with tips called in to the JIC. “We were constantly making sure we had the best photos and the best video to release,” he explained. Much of the information was relayed via the agency’s Website. “As press roles change, you have to be ready to adjust to get the messages out. The way people get their news is constantly changing. Our goal is not to beckon to the press, but to talk to the community.”



JR Labbe, vice president of communications with the JPS Health Network, relied on her past experience as a reporter and knowledge of the law when the Marlise Munoz case created a national stir. “From the beginning, we remained focused on the law,” she said. “The hospital doesn’t make on contest laws.”



NIOA President Stephanie Slater, Past President Don Aaron and Vice President Ed Buice draw names for prizes at the closing reception.

# Blast puts PIO's years with NIOA to the test

By SHELL ARMSTRONG  
NIOA News

**CLEARWATER, FL** – Sgt. Patrick Swanton, PIO for the Waco, Texas, Police Department, found himself in one of “those Forever Strong” situations April 17, 2013.

At 7:29 p.m., the West Fertilizer Company exploded, leaving a crater 10 feet deep and 90 feet wide where the plant once stood.

The explosion destroyed 350 nearby homes, damaged three schools, killed 14 people and injured more than 160 others. Swanton said the blast registered as a 2.1 magnitude earthquake and was heard 40 miles away.

“I give NIOA a lot of credit for getting through what I did,” longtime member Swanton said.

Within the first few hours of the explosion, more than 2,000 calls flooded the 911 center. And a video of the blast captured by a couple of passing teens went viral.

“Getting accurate, timely information was our chief goal from the outset,” Swanton said. “People had been forced out of their homes. It was up to reassure the citizens of our community. They were looking to us for that.”

A good rapport with the local media and smart staging decisions early in the incident proved beneficial.

A livestock barn – complete with

cattle headed to auction – near the scene served as the media staging point, which allowed Swanton and other officials at the scene to provide consistent updates.

“What I am most proud of is that we held onto information until it was verified,” Swanton said. “We were upfront about what we had once it was confirmed. For the most part, reporters respected our requests.”

In the days since the explosion, Swanton said his agency has worked harder to develop its social media outreach for future critical incidents.

“One of the biggest things I learned is it is OK to say, ‘I don’t know’ to the media,” he said. “I may not, but I’ll make an effort to find out.”



Sgt. Patrick Swanton, PIO for the Waco (Texas) Police Department, credits his NIOA connection with getting him through the April 17, 2013, explosion.

## ‘People like us; they don’t take us hostage ...’

By SHELL ARMSTRONG  
NIOA News

**CLEARWATER, FL** – At the end of the day, everyone loves firefighters ... almost everyone.

“People like us; they don’t take us hostage,” Tommy Rutledge of the Gwinnet County Department of Fire and Emergency Services told NIOA members at the 2014 annual Training Conference.

That was why the 911 call at 3:41 p.m. April 10, 2013, so shocked the community.

Firefighters Tim Hollingsworth, Jody Moss, Chip Echols and Sydney Garner were held captive by a 55-year-old gunman who faked a heart attack to get the emergency responders to his home.

“They arrived and he announced, ‘Now, for the real reason you’re here,’” said Cpl. Jake Smith, a spokesman and negotiator with the Gwinnet County Police Department.

The gunman used the firefighters’ radio to communicate his demands to authorities. Among his requests, he wanted his electricity and cable television restored.

As the incident unfolded, Atlanta news hubs were tuned in listening to the entire ordeal since fire radios are not encrypted.

“While we were dealing with procedures, we feared (news producers) were sitting back in Atlanta worried about ratings and



Tommy Rutledge, of the Gwinnet County (GA) Department of Fire and Emergency Services, and Ed Ritter, of the Gwinnet County Police Department, discuss a hostage situation at the 2014 NIOA Training Conference.

were not worried about those officers,” Rutledge said.

Gwinnet County Police SWAT safely extracted the officers. One SWAT member was shot in the arm as he entered the ranch-style house’s bedroom window.

The gunman was killed in the exchange.

“If it goes bad in a hurry, you’re going to be forced to decide what you’re going to release and when you’re going to release it,” Rutledge said. “By the grace of God, this one worked out OK.”



### Trying to Get Noticed?

Thibodaux (LA) Police Department PIO David Melancon and Lafourche Parish (LA) Sheriff’s Office spokesman Brennan Matherne suggest dressing up your press releases and tweets to attract viewers’ attention. Speaking during an “Advanced Social Media” session in Clearwater, Florida, the PIOs said providing high-resolution mug shots and other media helps relay their agencies’ messages.

## Is your agency Twitter verified?

By SHELL ARMSTRONG  
NIOA News

**CLEARWATER, FL** – Is your agency’s Twitter feed verified?

It’s the question NIOA President Stephanie Slater posed to NIOA members at the 2014 NIOA Training Conference in Clearwater, Florida.

Slater suggests members visit gov@twitter.com to complete the process.

Slater, who serves as spokeswoman for the Boynton Beach Police Department, said her agency strongly advocates social media.

“Social media allows us to be our own

media,” she told members.

Among the information Boynton Beach Police regularly posts are live tweets from school zones and officers at work.

Twitter users may also want to consider Tweetdeck, a real-time program designed to track, organize and build custom timelines and searches. “You can see what everyone who is talking about is on,” Slater said.

Hoosuite, another enhanced social media management program, allows users to schedule standard messages, she said.

Other programs getting use are Pinterest, Ustream, Vine and LinkedIn.

# Newtown lessons still resonate with PIO

By SHELL ARMSTRONG  
NIOA News

**CLEARWATER, FL** – Lt. Paul Vance, of the Connecticut State Police, last spoke the name of the shooter at the Sandy Hook Elementary School massacre last year at a final press conference a week after the shooting.

“I am sick and tired of the names of these monsters being plastered all over the place and refuse to be part of that,” Vance told NIOA members at the 2014 NIOA Training Conference in Clearwater, Florida. “I won’t say the shooter’s name again.”

The globe was stunned as the events surrounding the Newtown grade school shooting Dec. 14, 2012, unfolded.

Vance became the face of the event, serving as chief spokesman the duration of the initial investigation.

“The entire response was beyond belief,” Vance explained. As local, state and federal emergency responders rolled up on the scene, they ran from their vehicles, keys still in the ignition, creating a sea of units on the single road leading to the school.

“Our tactical team had to run a quarter-mile to get to the scene,” Vance recalled. “Word spread quickly that someone had gone into that school and started shooting our babies. Everyone came.”

A park one mile from the site of the



**Lt. Paul Vance, of the Connecticut State Police, has not spoken the name of the shooter at Sandy Hook Elementary School since the final press conference held after the Dec. 14, 2012 incident. Twenty children and six adults were killed in the massacre.**

shooting served as the media staging area. It was from there Vance delivered the first statement.

“There was a great deal of carnage at the scene, so we were intent on keeping the media away from there,” Vance said.

Just down the street from the school, at the

Sandy Hook Volunteer Fire and Rescue station house, parents were reunited with their children, while others awaited word on the well being of their son or daughter.

Meanwhile, the chase for information was spinning out of control. Early on, the media misidentified the shooter’s older

brother as the killer and alluded to a previous connection between the shooter and the school, which did not exist.

Before the first press conference convened, Vance said responding agencies met, agreeing their role would be “to try and prevent and stop rumors.”

“A lot of people had eyeballs on the tragedy,” the spokesman said. “The families were truly our prime priority.”

Trooper liaisons were assigned to each of the 26 victims’ families. Vance said the officers shielded the families from media harassment, accompanied them on errands and relayed information as it became available.

“(The liaisons) were with them all the way through the funerals,” he said. “Many remain close even today.”

Units were also posted outside the families’ homes to protect their privacy. “We wanted to make sure that they were not bothered by the press or curiosity seekers.”

Hourly press conference kept the media informed, but Vance said every effort was made to make the families aware of new information, including when the official list of those deceased was released.

“I hope and pray that we never have to endure a tragedy like this again,” Vance said. “I would advise, if you do, to consider the victims, treat the press fairly and take care of yourself.”

## WELCOME:

Cont. from page 3

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# Resolution ‘reactive’ in Ohio case

By SHELL ARMSTRONG  
NIOA News

CLEARWATER, FL – Amanda Berry reached the only person in Ohio who couldn’t place her: a 911 dispatcher.

“Help me, I’m Amanda Berry. ...I’ve been kidnapped and I’ve been missing for 10 years, and I’m, I’m here. I’m free now,” Berry, who had been held captive for a decade in a Cleveland home, told the nonplussed dispatcher last May.

And with that telephone call, Vicki Anderson, a special agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, saw the case she had worked for years unfold.

Berry went missing April 21, 2003, one day before her 17th birthday. While in captivity, she gave birth to a daughter, now age 7.

Also captured and held against their will in that Ohio house were Gina DeJesus – who was taken in 2004 at age 14 – and Michelle Knight, who went missing at age 21.

Anderson said the Cleveland Police Department headed the searches for Berry and DeJesus, with the FBI’s assistance. Because Knight was an adult when she disappeared, no one was searching for her.

The task force assigned to the search canvassed neighborhoods, combed the sex offender registry and chased tips worldwide in an effort to find the girls.

“We had volumes and volumes of leads that did not pan out,” Anderson said.

And with each birthday or anniversary of the day of their disappearance, family members would hold vigils to keep the missing girls in the spotlight.

“We would later learn that every time anything happened and was covered on TV, he made them watch,” Anderson said of the captor, who hanged himself in jail shortly after his sentencing to life in prison plus 1,000 years.

Events unfolded rapidly as law enforcement converged upon 2207 Seymour Ave., where the girls had been tortured and help captive.

“It was immediately problematic,” Anderson said of the situation. “No one knew who was in charge.”

Cleveland Police blasted a Tweet announcing the rescue and local politicians quickly began weighing in, but it would be another 16 hours before the first press conference was held.

“That was a huge mistake,” Anderson said. “The head honchos weren’t ready.”

The special agent described the week reintegrating the girls and taking care of their needs as “controlled chaos.” The need for meetings with honest exchanges between all agencies and political entities became hugely apparent.

“From the outset, we knew this was their story to share,” Anderson said of the girls’ ordeal. “It was not ours to tell.”



Vicki Anderson, special agent with the Federal Bureau of Investigation, spent years canvassing neighborhoods, combing the sex offender registry and chasing tips in the hunt for Amanda Berry and Gina DeJesus.