



Riverbend City: Community Information Mission

Introduction: Welcome to Riverbend City

Expository Text: It's a typical morning in Riverbend City—commuters are en route to work, students at the university are groggily heading to class, and children are beginning the school day. Suddenly, the sounds of screeching metal and explosions pierce the air as the Southern Inlet freight train loaded with hazardous chemicals hits a sinkhole and derails. At city hall, the mayor and his staff prepare for a press conference. They need to consider carefully what the public needs to know at this time.

Instructional Text: In a crisis, public administrators need to be very aware of how information is disseminated. As you watch this mission, think about the difference between official and unofficial information, and also the difference between personal and interpretive information. How do these concepts relate to this scenario?

Characters in this Mission:

- Gail Armstrong, Professor of Chemistry at Beck University
- Keith Bauer, Mayor
- Laurie Boyett, Riverbend City Free Press
- Nicole Fernandez, Fourth Grade Teacher
- Celia Green, Short Order Cook
- Rick Hilliard, Press Secretary
- David Julian, Reporter for WDDO Television
- Master N-Roc, Local Hip-Hop Artist
- Victoria Moran, Reporter for WNRT Televisio
- Jim Siler, Chemical Engineer, Allied Chemical
- Lorna Sommer, Police Officer
- Adele Walker, Mayor's Chief of Staff

Scene 1: City County Building, Mayor's Office

Expository Text: *Mayor Keith Bauer gathers with his press secretary and chief of staff to quickly plan for a press conference.*

Dialogue 01: *The mayor starts the meeting.*

KEITH:

Rick, Adele, I'm depending on you to help me out here. The public wants information about this chemical spill. I want to be sure that the information we provide is accurate.

ADELE:

Absolutely, Keith. Did you look over the press kit we assembled?

KEITH:

Yes. You did a great job, especially considering how little time you had.

RICK:

The press conference is scheduled in half an hour, Keith. Can we go over the main talking points that I need to hit on?

ADELE:

I just spoke with the public health director, and she said to make *sure* you speak to the issue of sheltering-in-place. She just emailed me some talking points that I'll forward on to you right away. Also, she wants us to limit the possibility of misinformation circulating about the chemicals. Be sure to emphasize that there were three chemicals involved—anhydrous ammonia, chlorine gas, and hydrochloric acid. Refer the reporters to information in the press kit about these three chemicals. Like Keith said, we need to be as forthcoming and accurate as we can about the chemicals involved and the dangers they pose.

RICK:

Thanks, Adele!

ADELE:

And she also said to anticipate questions about whether the chemicals might travel down the river and across the international border with Canexico. It's too early to know if this is going to happen. Be sure to emphasize that one of the key principles of the National Incident Management System is that incidents like this begin and end on the local level. Also point out that Riverbend City has worked with border cities in Canexico to develop joint contingency plans.

KEITH:

We've already contacted the Mayor of San Serrife, Canexico.

RICK:

Good. I'll be sure to emphasize that. If the chemicals do travel across the border, it will be good to show that we've been hands-on from the start and that we've kept them in the loop. The last thing we need is an international incident to come out of this mess.

KEITH:

Here's one thing I need your advice on. As you know, six months ago, the city had the opportunity to update the city's disaster management plan. We didn't do it. When the press figures that out, they'll have my head.

RICK:

Why didn't we update the disaster management plan?

ADELE:

The city needed money to prevent a teacher's strike. To make that happen, a number of programs were cut—including updates to the city's emergency response system.

KEITH:

It seemed like the right decision at the time. A teacher's strike was almost certainly going to happen unless we did something.

ADELE:

It *was* the right decision, Keith. You couldn't have anticipated a disaster of this magnitude.

RICK:

Keith, I doubt the issue will come up today. Reporters are going to be asking questions about chemicals and the immediate safety of the public. If the issue comes up, I'll emphasize that our immediate concern is public safety, and that we'll be happy to answer questions about spending priorities at a later date.

KEITH:

Sounds good to me, Rick.

Scene 2: City County Building, Briefing Room

Expository Text: Rick Hilliard, the mayor's press secretary, briefs the press on the response to the disaster.

Optional Content: [Riverbend City Press Kit](#)

Dialogue 02: Rick Hilliard begins the press conference.

RICK:

Good morning, everybody, I know that you all have many questions—we all do—so I'll update you on what we know about the situation and then I'll open the floor to questions.

This morning at approximately 8:15, a Southern Inlet Metropolitan freight train with 62 cars derailed near downtown Riverbend City. Of the 17 derailed cars, several were carrying hazardous materials in tanker cars and shipping drums. At least five tanker cars were breached in the derailment and one car and an undetermined number of drums were thrown into the river by the explosions.

Emergency responders were on the scene within minutes of the first call and an incident command post was established according to NIMS guidelines.

At least one of the derailed cars exploded, causing multiple fires. The spill also caused a cloud of toxic vapors so that Riverbend City authorities evacuated approximately 3,500 people from homes and businesses including a nursing home within a mile of the derailment.

Residents outside the evacuation area but within the affected area, have been advised to shelter-in-place—in other words to close and lock windows and doors, turn off air conditioning, block door and windows with dampened towels, and if possible to stay in an upper interior room with no windows.

People exposed to the chemical cloud, or smoke from the accident, are urged to seek medical attention.

The Red Cross has opened a shelter at Beck University for evacuated residents to stay tonight. Residents will be allowed to return home once the incident commander determines that the spill is contained and is no longer dangerous.

I'll take your questions now, and be sure to view the press packet.

Dialogue 03: Rick takes a question from reporter Victoria Moran.

VICTORIA:

This is Victoria Moran, with WNRT Fox. In light of the recent discovery that Al Qaeda has been recruiting suicide bombers from the Riverbend City Somali community, has the possibility of terrorist activity been considered?

RICK:

Victoria, I can say with confidence that at this time we have no reason to believe there is any criminal or terrorist connection to this unfortunate accident. Obviously, we will need to wait for the NTSB to conduct a full investigation, but the apparent cause of the derailment was the formation of two sinkholes along the track. I'm told that the sinkholes were probably caused by the unusually heavy rains last week. Again, we won't have the full story until the NTSB has concluded their investigation.

Dialogue 04: Rick takes a question from reporter Laurie Boyett.

LAURIE:

You mentioned that some chemicals were released into the river. As you know, the river crosses the international border. What risk do these chemicals pose to the community of San Serrife?

RICK:

Great question. One of the key principles of the NIMS – National Incident Management System is the concept that incidents like this begin and end at the local level. Riverbend City has worked with San

Serrife to develop joint contingency plans.

The EPA has developed the Border 2012 initiative, and we have been in communication with them about this accident. We have also contacted the mayor of San Serrife. I know that the ministry of health has been in communication with the incident commander.

Dialogue 05: Rick takes questions from reporter David Julian.

DAVID:

Rick, can you give us any more information on casualties or injuries?

RICK:

I can tell you that the engineer and conductor of the train are being treated for minor injuries. There is one fatality—a bystander who was near the Clellen Bridge when the blast occurred. He appears to have been killed by flying debris from the train.

Several people in the area of the chemical cloud are experiencing respiratory and eye irritation, and have been taken to RCMC. Unfortunately, this includes children from the Washington Allston Elementary School. I don't have the exact number of children who have been taken to RCMC, but the accident occurred shortly before school started and so many children were in the schoolyard and were exposed to the chemical cloud.

DAVID:

Wow. And can you tell us what chemicals were released by the explosion?

RICK:

We are certain about three chemicals—anhydrous ammonia, chlorine gas, and hydrochloric acid. At this time representatives from Southern Inlet, the corporate owners of the derailed train, do not believe any other hazardous materials were released.

Dialogue 06: Rick takes a question from reporter Alice Harris.

ALICE:

Rick, I know you've provided some information in the press kit about the chemicals that were released, but what are the likely short-term and long-term health effects of exposure to these chemicals?

RICK:

Great question, Alice. Inhaling hydrochloric acid vapors can cause coughing, choking, inflammation of the nose, throat, and upper respiratory tract. The vapors from hydrochloric acid can irritate and damage the eyes, and direct contact with the toxin can cause redness, pain, and severe skin burns.

Anhydrous ammonia produces an irritating, corrosive vapor, which causes chemical burns to the skin, eyes, nasal passages, throat and lungs.

Chlorine gas is changed into a liquid so that it can be shipped and stored. When liquid chlorine is released, it quickly reverts back into a gas that stays close to the ground and spreads rapidly.

Exposure to chlorine can cause coughing, tightness in the chest, burning sensation in the nose and throat, watery eyes and blurred vision, nausea and vomiting, and skin irritation.

The main thing people should know is that if they are experiencing difficulty breathing or shortness of breath, they need to seek medical attention. Additionally, people need to be aware that symptoms of exposure may be delayed, so again, if they experience these things, they should seek medical attention.

Scene 3: City County Building, Hallway

Expository Text: Reporter David Julian—who is a little bit phobic about chemical poisoning—starts gathering information about the chemical spill.

Dialogue 07: David converses with fellow reporter Victoria.

DAVID:

Victoria! Where are you going?

VICTORIA:

Um, to cover the biggest news story we've ever had in Riverbend City?

DAVID:

Victoria, be careful out there! You heard what he said about those chemicals. Severe skin burns. Choking. Damage to the eyes.

VICTORIA:

Well, yes, those are some *possible* effects of the chemicals. Would you recommend I avoid breathing?

DAVID:

This isn't a joke, Victoria. Did you read the press kit? I think they're downplaying the real damage these chemicals can do. They could be withholding information by using the public panic excuse!

VICTORIA (kind of sarcastic):

Well, you're a reporter, David. If you think that's true, investigate.

DAVID:

Oh, I will, Victoria.

VICTORIA:

Sounds like a Pulitzer in the making. Well, I have a lead, David. I have to go follow up.

DAVID:

Be careful out there, Victoria! Please be careful!

Dialogue 08: David calls Gail Armstrong, a chemistry professor.

GAIL:

This is Gail Armstrong.

DAVID:

Professor Armstrong! This is David Julian from WDDO Television. You don't remember me, but I was in your Chemistry for Poets lecture hall 10 years ago. May I please have a moment of your time?

GAIL:

Of course, David. I'm guessing this has to do with today's train wreck?

DAVID:

It sure is. Professor Armstrong, I've just learned that the chemicals that were released into the environment were hydrochloric acid, chlorine, and anhydrous ammonia. What can you tell me about them?

GAIL:

Well, they are all chemicals that are used every day. Usually they aren't harmful. However, they are all potentially dangerous substances that must be handled with caution. If they mix they can form a fairly caustic brew. Exposure to large quantities of these chemicals can be harmful and occasionally even fatal. Chlorine gas has been used as a weapon since World War I and was used against the American troops in the Iraq War.

DAVID:

Oh no! How many Americans were killed?

GAIL:

I believe as many as 30 were killed in one of the attacks. Although keep in mind that the force of the chlorine explosion was responsible for far more deaths than the actual chemical.

DAVID:

What about hydrochloric acid?

GAIL:

Hydrochloric acid is a very common substance that's used in everything from cleaning agents to food additives. It's even used in our stomachs as an important part of digestion.

DAVID:

That sounds benign, but what happens if people are exposed to large quantities?

GAIL:

Exposure to *very* large quantities of hydrochloric acid can be fatal. In severe cases, exposure can lead to circulatory failure and pulmonary edema, which is fluid accumulation in the lungs. Both can be fatal. But I want to emphasize that these are worst case scenarios and we really...

DAVID:

Thank you! Professor Armstrong, what are you most worried about in relation to this chemical spill?

GAIL:

Well, I need more information about what actually happened today before I can make a statement. But one thing that I hope the city is considering is the possible effect to the ground water. Because of geological conditions in this area, it's entirely possible that a chemical spill could contaminate the water supply in Riverbend City and in the nearby country of Canexico.

DAVID:

Oh no! What kinds of geological conditions?

GAIL:

I'm not a geology expert. A good person to talk to about this is Jim Siler. He's a chemical engineer with the Allied Chemical Company.

DAVID:

Thanks, Professor Armstrong! You've been a tremendous help.

GAIL:

David, I want to emphasize that it's impossible to know how much damage these chemicals will actually cause until we find out more...Hello? David?

(dial tone)

Dialogue 09: *David calls Jim Siler.*

JIM:

Jim Siler here.

DAVID:

Mr. Siler, this is David Julian from WDDO Television.

JIM:

You're kidding! I watch you all the time. What can I do for you?

DAVID:

Mr. Siler, Professor Armstrong from Beck University told me to call you. I'm trying to find out more about the possible effects of the chemical spill on the water supply of Riverbend City and in Canexico.

She said there were geological conditions in this area that make it very likely that a chemical spill could contaminate the water supply.

JIM:

Well, I don't know about *very* likely. But we do need to be careful. Because of the geology in this area, soil sampling and water sampling will need to be ongoing to make sure there's no contamination. The terrain in this area is karstic, which means that it's defined by soluble bedrock that has high rates of permeability. That means that water can run unimpeded through sinkholes and underground caves, bypassing the normal filtering that occurs. Basically this means that there's a reduced opportunity for contaminants to be filtered out.

DAVID:

I'm not sure what all of that means, but it sure sounds like contamination is a possibility! Is it true that the water supply could be contaminated across the Canexican border?

JIM:

Possibly.

DAVID:

Jim, I'd really like to get you on camera. Can I meet you down at your office with a camera crew?

JIM:

Of course! Bring a gas mask.

DAVID:

What? Where do I get one?

JIM:

No, no, I'm just kidding, man.

Scene 4: Television Set

Expository Text: After interviewing Jim Siler, reporter David Julian delivers an on-air report.

Dialogue 10: *David Julian delivers a special report.*

(opening "news music")

DAVID:

Hello, and welcome back to our continuing coverage of today's chemical spill. I'm David Julian, and here's the latest news.

WDDO Television has now learned from credible sources that the potential damage of the chemical spill may be far worse than what was reported earlier from the city. While trace amounts of chemicals like hydrochloric acid and chlorine are found in everyday household products, exposure to large quantities of these chemicals *can be fatal*. In fact, chlorine gas has been used in chemical warfare since World War I and was responsible for the deaths of dozens of soldiers in the Iraq War.

However, WDDO Television has learned that the biggest concern may be with the Riverbend City water supply. The geological conditions in this area increase the likelihood that the water supply could become contaminated by a chemical spill. And because of similar geological conditions under the Canexican border towns, their ground water may be at risk as well.

I spoke with Jim Siler, a chemical engineer from Allied Chemical Company. Here's what Siler had to say about this developing story...

Scene 5: City County Building, Front Steps

Expository Text: After David Julian's news broadcast, fear and rumors spread throughout the city about the dangers of the chemicals. An angry crowd gathers outside of City Hall to protest.

Dialogue 11: *Officer Lorna Sommer tries to control the angry crowd.*

LORNA:

All right. Everyone needs to stand back.

CELIA:

We demand to speak to the mayor! He's lying to us about the chemicals. And I saw on the news that there's chemicals in the ground water and we're all gonna get sick and die!

LORNA:

Ma'am, calm down. There's no immediate danger.

CELIA:

That's a load of #\$\$%!

NICOLE:

Yeah. How do we know we can believe you?

CELIA:

Saddam Hussein used that acid stuff to kill our troops in Iraq. It's true! My cousin's best friend was in Iraq and that's exactly what happened to him. And now it's in our drinking water. You drink that #\$\$%! and your lungs fill with fluid and you die. I heard it on the news!

LORNA:

Ma'am, you can't believe everything you hear on the news.

MASTER N-ROC:

What, and you're saying we can believe everything the cops say? And that the mayor says? That's a load of bull! The city will say whatever the #\$\$%! it wants us to think. I heard that Mayor Bauer had the chance to update the city's disaster plan six months ago and he spent the money on something else. Mayor Bauer doesn't give a #\$\$%! about the people in Riverbend City! He just wants to get reelected.

CELIA:

You tell 'em, Master N-Roc!

(lots of angry crowd noise)

Scene 6: City County Building, Meeting Room

Expository Text: *Mayor Keith Bauer holds an emergency meeting to deal with the misinformation and the protestors.*

Dialogue 12: *The mayor's just about had enough.*

KEITH:

Are the protestors still out there?

RICK:

'Fraid so, Keith. I think the police have it under control though.

KEITH:

What a mess! I can't take much more of this. Do you think I should resign?

RICK:

Now, Keith, we can handle this. There's been some misinformation that's reached the public. We need to come up with a response to keep this from getting any more out of hand.

ADELE:

I think what we need right away is a hotline for citizens to call to get accurate information about the disaster. The public needs to know that we're working with them, not against them.

RICK:

That's a great idea, Adele.

KEITH:

Yeah. How do we make that happen?

ADELE:

Well, remember a few months ago when that dairy company sold contaminated products all over the area? The public health department partnered with a local organization that runs a crisis hotline. They trained the crisis volunteers and other volunteers from the community to answer phone calls about the dairy products. And it was a huge success. I say we contact Peggy Truman from public health immediately and ask her to help us set up a hotline for chemical spill information.

KEITH:

Great idea. Can we use the same crisis center?

ADELE:

That seems likely. It'll be a lot of work, but clearly we're having a problem with getting information out to the public. In situations like this, public-private partnerships can be a terrific solution. I'll call Peggy Truman right away.

RICK:

And I need to write a press statement.

ADELE:

In this circumstance, I think the mayor should give the statement.

KEITH:

Agreed. Adele, you go call Peggy Truman. Rick, help me write a statement.

Mission Summary

Congratulations! You have completed the Community Information Mission.

Some questions to consider:

- How well do you think the city responded to the need to provide citizens with accurate information?
- Do you think the community hotline will be an effective approach? Are there other actions the city should take as well?
- What should the mayor say in his statement to the public?
- Could anything have been done to prevent David Julian's news report?

Summary Document Content

LOCATIONS:

In this mission, you visited five locations in and around City Hall in Riverbend City on the day of the chemical spill: The office of Mayor Keith Bauer, where a meeting took place to discuss a press conference about the chemical spill. The press room, where the press conference about the chemical spill took place. A hallway outside of the press room, where reporters David Julian and Victoria Moran conversed. The street and surrounding area outside of City Hall, where angry protestors gather because they heard misinformation about the chemical spill. A City Hall meeting room, where officials meet to discuss strategies for addressing the misinformation.

THEMES:

This mission focused on how official and unofficial information played a role in how the public processed information during a crisis. As the crisis began, Riverbend City officials carefully strategized the official information they presented to the public about the types of chemicals involved in the spill and other important public safety information. Unfortunately, unofficial information about potential (but probably unlikely) consequences of the chemical spill found its way to the public through the news media, which caused public panic. In response to this, city officials discussed public-private strategies for addressing the problem, and decided to work with a local crisis center to create a chemical information hotline.

RESOURCES:

[Riverbend City Press Kit](#) : The packet of information distributed to reporters at the press conference following the chemical spill.