

John Guilfoil Public Relations, working with their client, the Rhode Island Police Chiefs' Association

Rhode Island Police Chiefs Address Concerning Rise in Motor Vehicle Fatalities



Situation Analysis

Our client, the Rhode Island Police Chiefs' Association (RIPCA), represents more than 50 police departments across the entire state. JGPR provides RIPCA with media relations, public relations, and written communications like press releases on a variety of topics that relate to state-wide public safety issues.

RIPCA had seen what appeared to be an alarming trend of motor vehicle fatalities over the course of the previous year. They came to JGPR last October looking for a way to highlight and raise awareness of the issue.

Halloween weekend is typically a very busy time for pedestrian traffic incidents, and our client wanted a way to tie together various motor vehicle and pedestrian safety tips in time for the holiday, while being proactive in addressing the recent spike in motor vehicle fatalities. This would need to include a study of the hard data on fatality rates across several years to verify their concern, as well as ways to make the issue personal so it didn't just become about the numbers but about the lives that were being lost.



Statement of Objectives

As RIPCA often partners with various state agencies on ways to engage Rhode Islanders on their initiatives, we recognized the value of holding a press conference that would bring multiple agencies together in one place. This would illustrate not only the multiple factors that lead to roadway fatalities, but also the ways the problem can be addressed.

Through our press releases and this press conference, we hoped to:

- Bring numerous RIPCA member departments together to show that the issue of motor vehicle fatalities is a concern across the state.
- Invite multiple partnering agencies, both statewide and federal, to further show the immediacy of the issue.
- Invite all members of the Rhode Island media, including local TV news, print media and radio, in the hopes of getting the message out as far and wide as possible.



Program Planning and Strategy

JGPR worked with members from the Rhode Island Department of Transportation to analyze several years of data on motor vehicle fatalities. We also reached out to multiple Police Chiefs across the state to solicit examples and anecdotal information relating to the issue. Once finalized, we emailed our analysis to each police department in the state to encourage them to attend the press conference. Each department expressed support for the event, with most agreeing to attend.

We also knew we needed to bring in outside organizations to emphasize the concern over motor vehicle fatalities. Those invited include:

- **Peter Alviti, Jr., Rhode Island Department of Transportation Director (representing a state-wide municipal organization).** Rhode Island DOT had been involved in the planning of the event, and Director Alviti would be asked to speak on the trends surrounding the different causes of motor vehicle fatalities.
- **Col. James M. Manni, Rhode Island State Police Superintendent and Rhode Island Department of Public Safety Director (representing a state-wide police organization).** Col Manni would be asked to speak on the issue from a state-wide perspective and how the trend mirrors what is being seen in other parts of the country.
- **Diana Gugliotta, AAA Northeast Senior Director of Public Affairs (representing a regional public-facing agency).** Director Gugliotta would be asked to add a human element to the issue by speaking about the real-world consequences of drunk and distracted driving, as well as ways parents can speak to their children about vehicular safety.
- **RIPCA President/Lincoln Police Chief Brian Sullivan would speak on behalf of the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (representing a collaboration between RIPCA and a federal-level transportation agency).** Chief Sullivan would be asked to discuss safety precautions that could be used by drivers to reduce motor vehicle fatalities, as well as the federal programs RIPCA is involved with such as the “Click It or Ticket” campaign, the “Drive Sober or Get Pulled Over” campaign and the “U Drive. U Text. U Pay.” campaign.

Program Planning and Strategy, cont.

As an added element to entice the media to attend, we identified that fatalities were on the rise despite less people being on the road due to the COVID-19 pandemic. With less people on the roads, police believed people were being more careless and aggressive with their driving. We made sure to promote this angle in our pre-event media advisories and wrote talking points for various members of RIPCA so they could speak on the issue at the event. We knew a press conference related to both transportation fatalities and the COVID-19 pandemic would generate a great deal of attention from the media.

To make the event even more accessible, given that some media outlets were unable to attend, we made arrangements for one of the departments to livestream the press conference via Facebook Live. Prior to the event we shared the link with each of the departments across the state and with each of the media members we invited. JGPR provided troubleshooting to ensure the livestream was properly set up and monitored the comments to bring any questions that viewers had to the attention of RIPCA officials.



Results Documentation

Members from a total of 37 police departments from across Rhode Island were present for the event, which was held on Thursday, Oct. 29. Finding space big enough to accommodate so many officers was a challenge due to COVID-19 gathering restrictions, but we were able to reserve space at the Rhode Island Emergency Management complex. Rather than have officers stand off to the side, they were asked to line up in a semi-circle around the perimeter of the room in order to show their solidarity in addressing the issue of motor vehicle fatalities.

Additionally, each of the state and federal agencies invited to attend were present. Each agreed to speak at the event, knowing the importance of raising awareness over the issue. Speakers were joined by RIPCA Executive Director Sidney Wordell, who provided introductions to each speaker and background information on the issue.

In total, television coverage for the event reached an audience of more than 64,000 viewers and was worth roughly \$6,000 of PR publicity. Online and print news audience reached nearly 100,000 readers. (See supporting documents for further breakdown of media coverage)

Media coverage included:

- The state's four largest TV news stations, WPRI-12, ABC-6, WJAR-10 and Fox Providence
- The state's largest news radio station, WPRO
- The state's latest print newspaper, the Providence Journal, and the Providence-based Valley Breeze newspaper each viewed the meeting over our Facebook Live feed.

Each media outlet had coverage of the press conference posted within a few hours of the event's conclusion.



Results Documentation, cont.

The Facebook Live feed was viewed by more than 2,200 people, which exceeded the viewership expectations of the client prior to the event.

While final statistics on motor vehicle fatalities for 2020 are still being tabulated, our client has credited the press conference with raising tremendous awareness over the issue. It has led to additional outreach opportunities for RIPCA and their state and federal partners. One of the promises made during the conference was to hold follow-up events during 2021, and one such event, a “Blessing of the Roads” celebration, has already been held that raised additional awareness of the topic of highway safety.

RIPCA has already vowed to hold another press conference exactly one year after their 2020 event to show concrete measures that have been put in place to make Rhode Island roadways safer and to hold the organization accountable to their promise to reduce motor vehicle fatalities across the state.

Agencies
represented:



Media
coverage:

