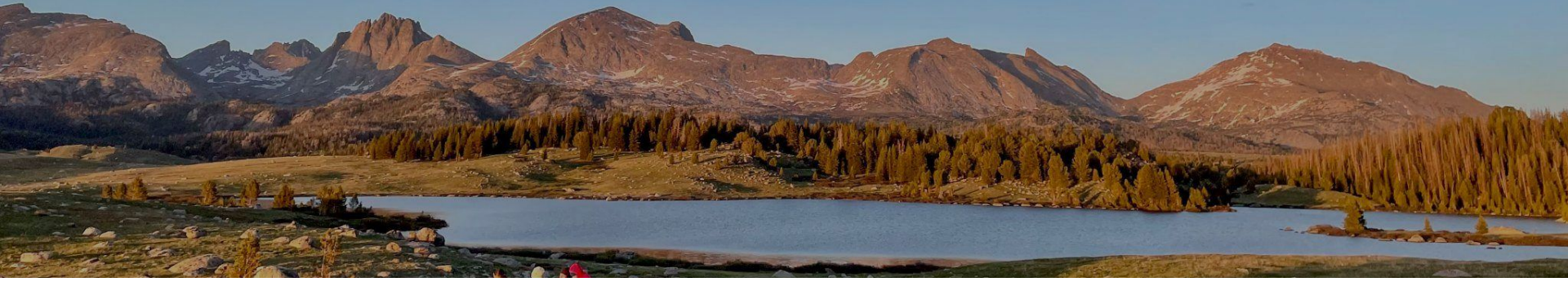
NOLS

CRISIS MANAGEMENT CASE STUDY

WRMC 2026



NOLS



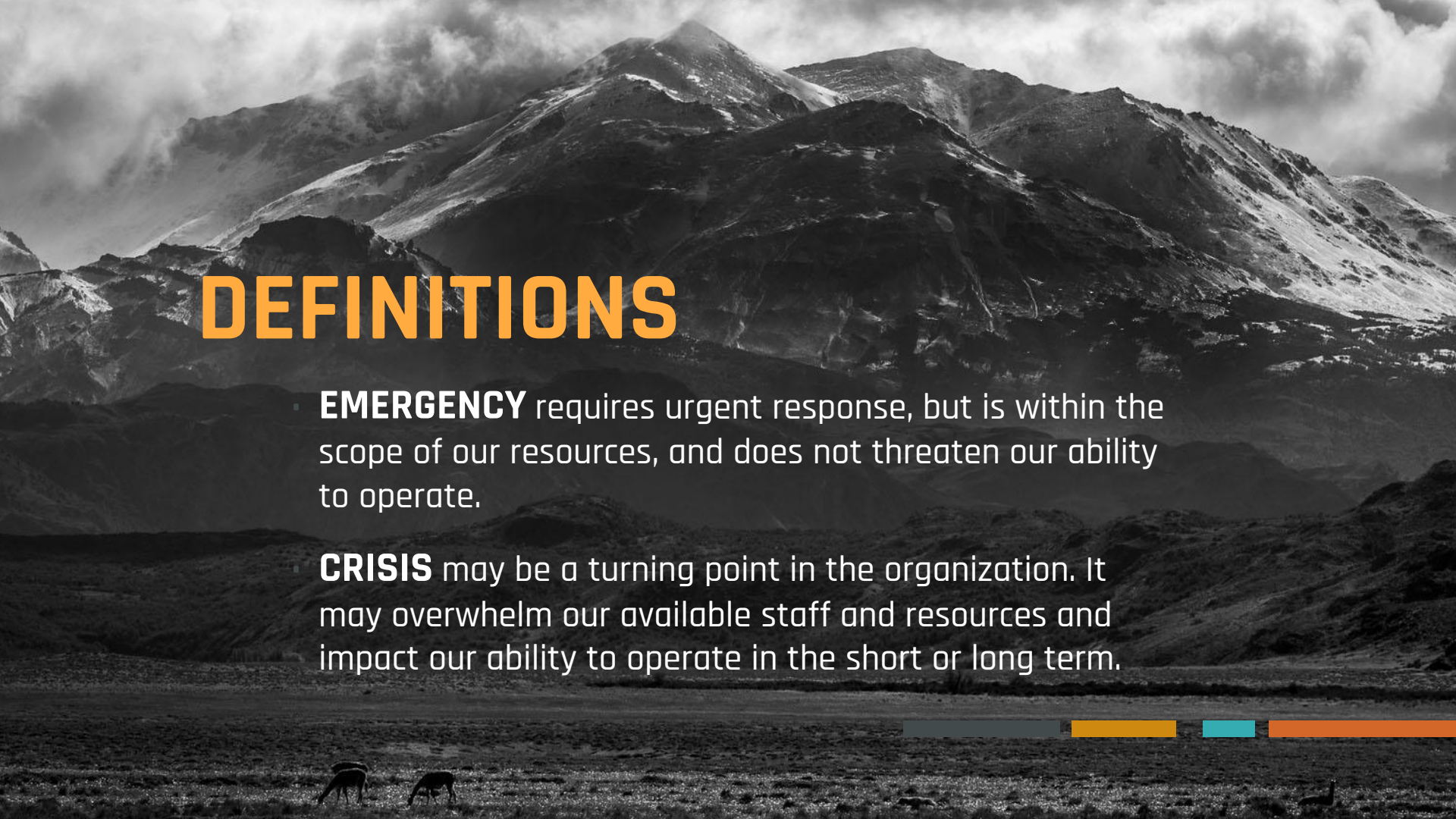
KATIE BAUM METTENBRINK

NOLS RISK MANAGEMENT DIRECTOR, she/her



AGENDA

1. Goals, background, and NOLS systems
2. Incident case study
3. Administrative response
4. Questions



DEFINITIONS

- **EMERGENCY** requires urgent response, but is within the scope of our resources, and does not threaten our ability to operate.
- **CRISIS** may be a turning point in the organization. It may overwhelm our available staff and resources and impact our ability to operate in the short or long term.

NOLS CRISIS CASES

2023 Close call, India, avalanche

2022 Fatality, Wyoming, lightning

2018 Cardiac arrest, Wyoming

2011 Fatality, India, backpacking

2011 Multiple injuries, Alaska, bear attack

1999 Fatality, Alaska, glacier travel

1996 Fatality, Wyoming, river crossing

1992 Fatality, Wyoming, avalanche

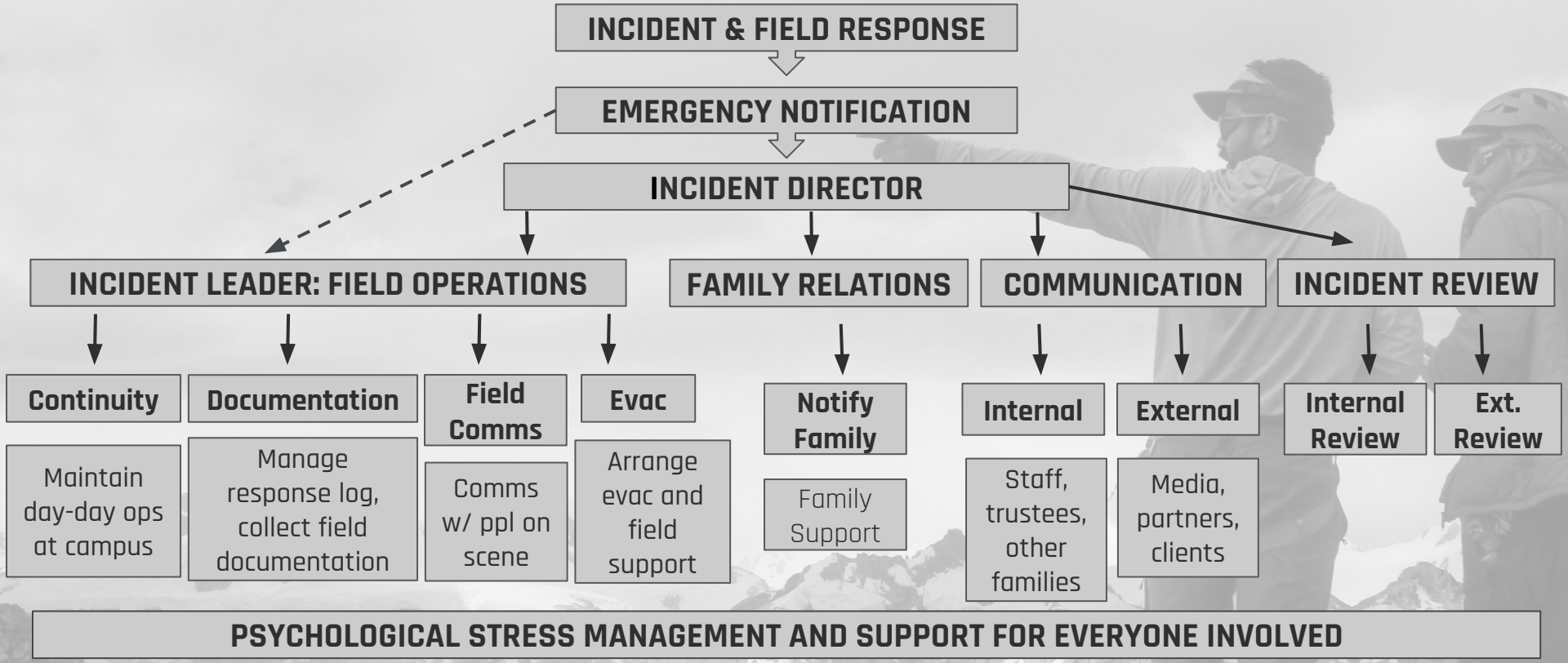
1989 Fatality, Wyoming, mountaineering

CRISIS MANAGEMENT PROTOCOL

1. Provides guidance for your response and management
2. Prioritize tasks, actions, and resources
3. Pre-determine certain actions and decisions



NOLS CRISIS LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE



AN INCIDENT OCCURS

- It is Sunday, July 6th at 2:00 PM
- The on-call emergency contact person at NOLS Rocky Mountain receives a satellite phone call from an instructor saying there has been a fatality on WMT-6/15. She provides the location coordinates.
- The connection is poor and the call drops abruptly.

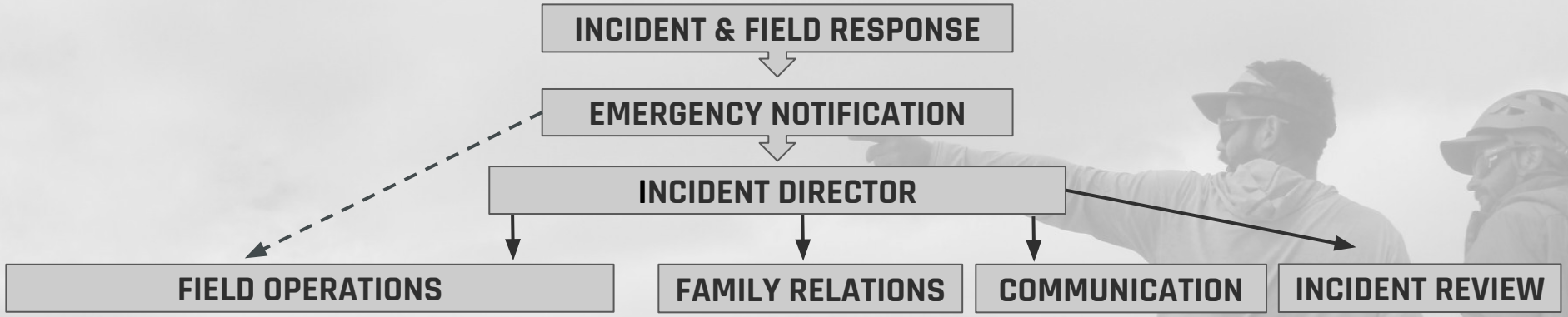
HOW DO WE RESPOND IN THE NEXT HOUR?



CRISIS LEADERSHIP

1. Establish leadership and assign key roles in the first hour
2. Hybrid meetings – team gathers in person and via video
3. Support the team in the field

NOLS CRISIS LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE



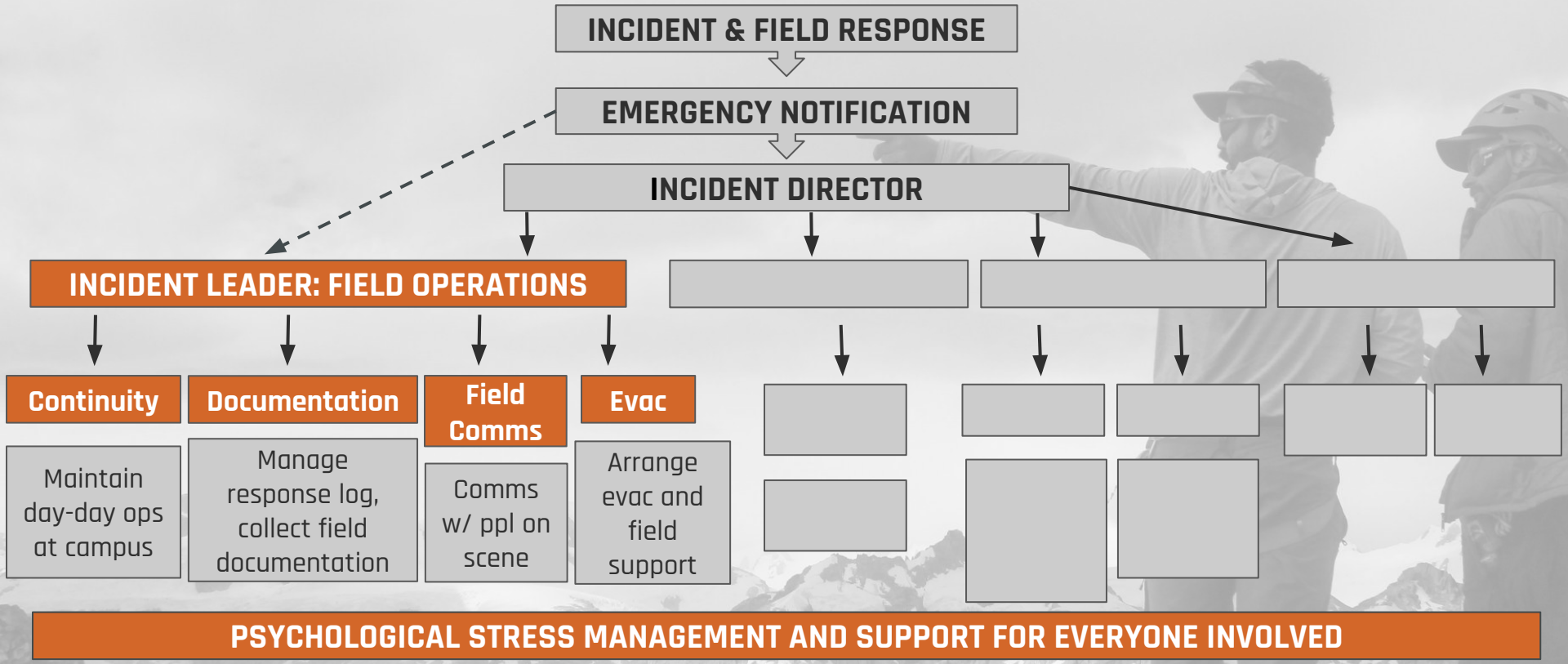
CRISIS LEADERSHIP CONSIDERATIONS FOR SMALLER PROGRAMS



- Which roles can be logically combined in your program?
- What would it look like to pause or suspend other programming?
- Who else can help? Create a “bench list” in your crisis plan
- Lean on external partners

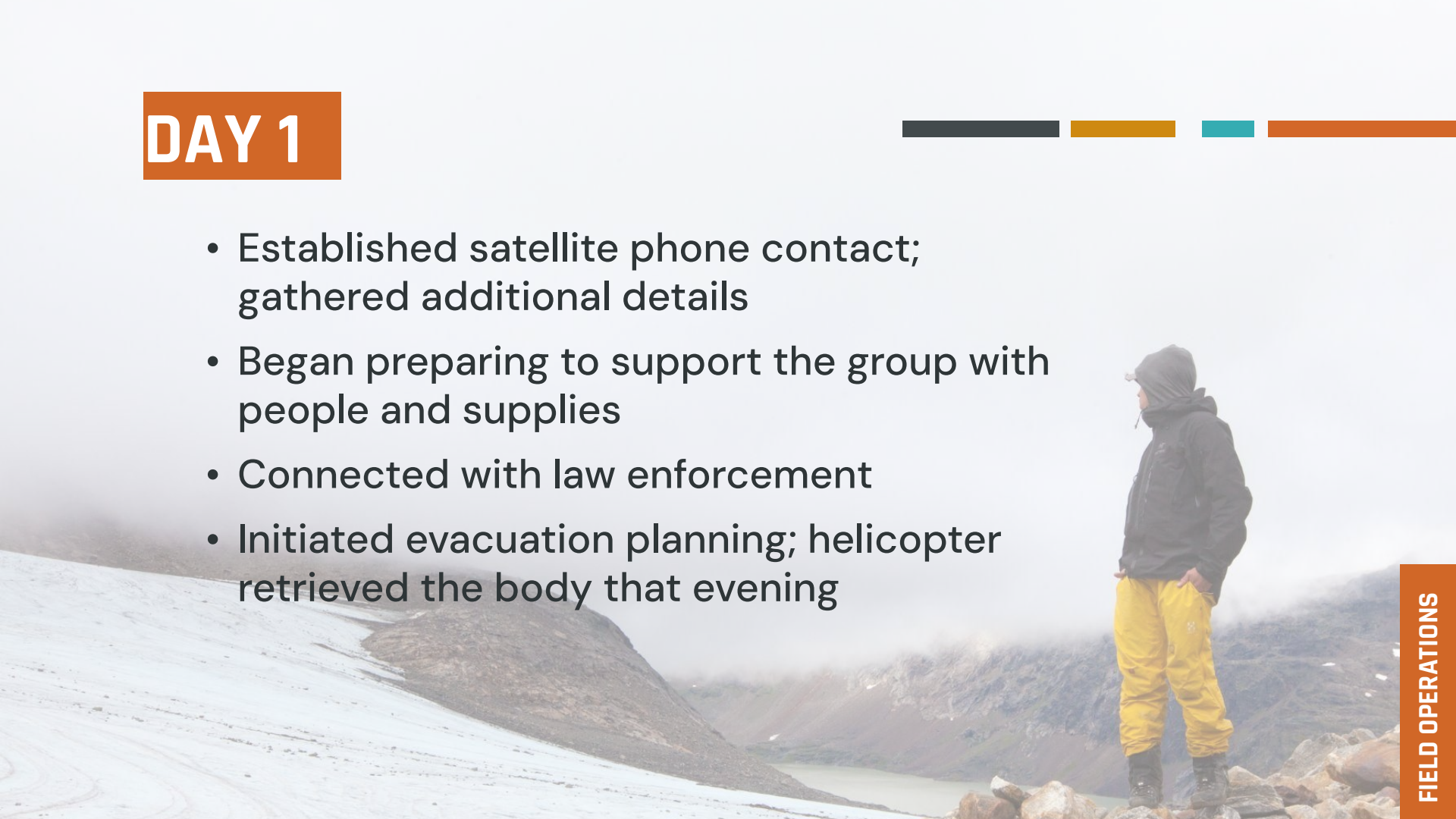

FIELD OPERATIONS

NOLS CRISIS LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE



DAY 1

- Established satellite phone contact; gathered additional details
- Began preparing to support the group with people and supplies
- Connected with law enforcement
- Initiated evacuation planning; helicopter retrieved the body that evening



FIELD OPERATIONS

DAY 2

- Deputy sheriff and staff flew into the course
- Prepared for the group's return to campus - schedule, meals and housing, debrief plan, fact-finding interviews, expected travel arrangement support needs
- Continued to support other courses in the field (~30 at this campus)

DAY 3

- Course arrived at trailhead in late afternoon; vehicles waiting
- Returned to campus: showered, ate, connected with loved ones



SUPPORT OF THE GROUP

- Field Fatality Protocol and psychological first aid
- Serious incident stress discussion next morning
- Counseling made available for students and staff; offers for future support
- Normal end of course tasks; instructors stayed involved
- Resources in the Crisis Protocol for response team, students, instructors, and other staff
- Funeral and other financial decisions
- 3-3-3 Traumatic Exposure Protocol (Responder Alliance); point person for ongoing support

FAMILY RELATIONS
NOTIFICATION AND SUPPORT

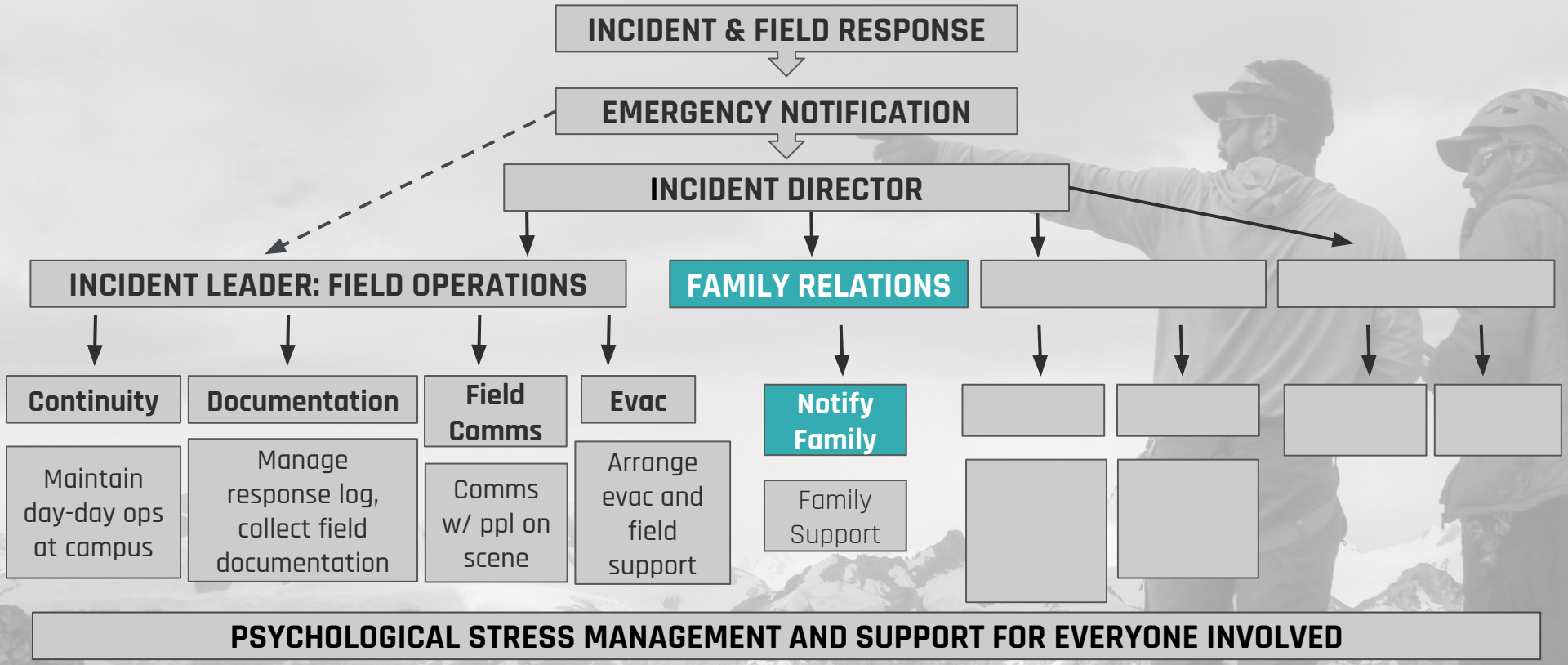


IF THIS WERE YOUR PROGRAM

1. How is the family contacted?
2. Who informs them?
3. What factors are considered?



NOLS CRISIS LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE



NOLS CRISIS PROTOCOL

PRE-PLAN

- NOLS President notifies the family, usually via phone call
- Plan the message; sample script for initial notification. Goal is to be organized, compassionate, direct.
- Be timely; notification as soon as soon as we have some facts and information
- Offer support
- Family is #1 priority for sharing information

DAY 1

- President notified the family by phone
- Shared the basic details of what happened and where Sam's body was being taken
- Had another director listen in on the calls
- Offered other support

DAY 2 AND AFTER

- Two directors met the parents in Jackson
- Provided a written factual summary of the incident
- Spent most of the day and evening with parents
- Assisted them in making arrangements
- Sent students, instructors, staff, and trustees to the memorial service
- Remained in contact over time

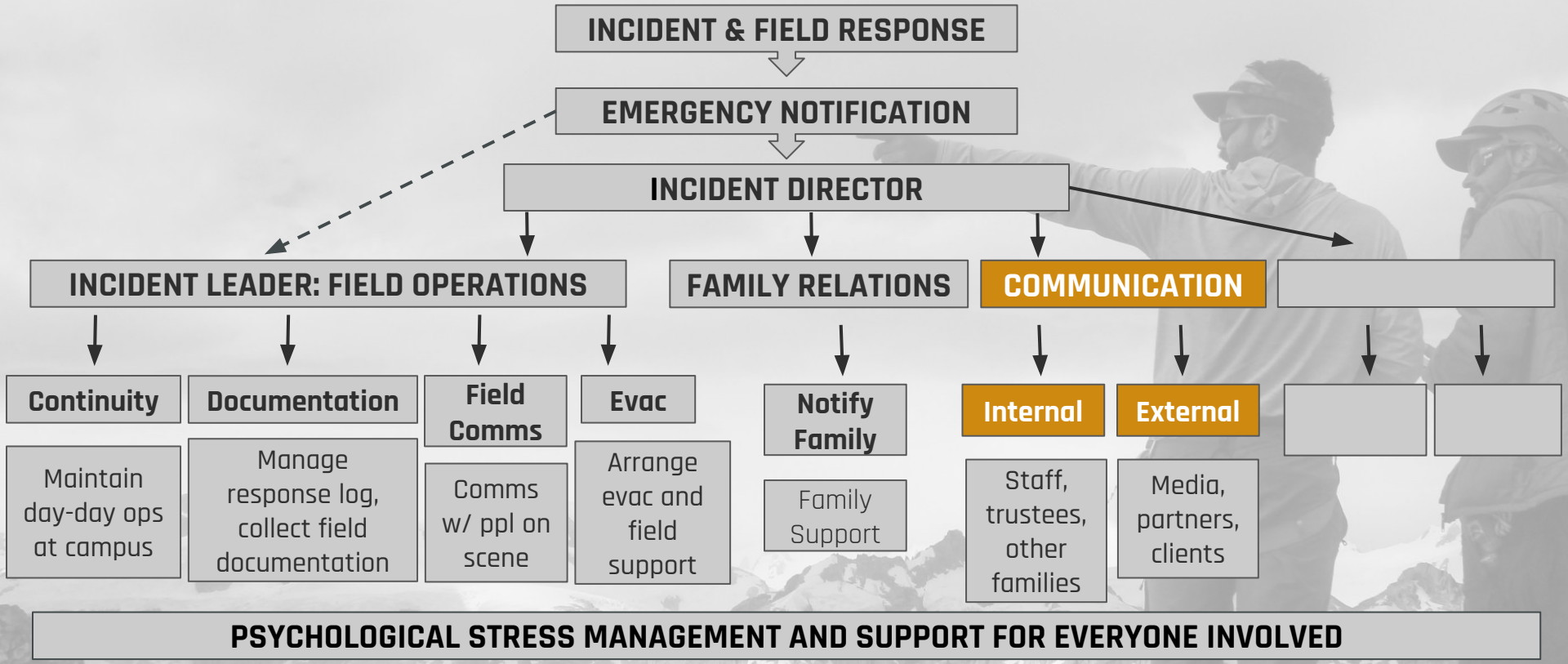
FAMILY CONSIDERATIONS FOR
SMALLER PROGRAMS

- Difficult role to combine with other duties - perhaps team on initial notification is not long-term the contact
- Consider potential financial commitments carefully

COMMUNICATION



NOLS CRISIS LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE



IF THIS WERE YOUR PROGRAM

- Who needs to be informed?
- How is communication managed?
- What do you need to watch out for?



COMMUNICATION

NOLS CRISIS PROTOCOL

PRE-PLAN

- Roles: overall lead, spokesperson, internal comms, media consultant
- Begin compiling summary of known facts ASAP; factual statement and press release form the baseline message for all audiences
- Two groups of audiences - external and internal - pre-identified
- Messaging reviewed by Incident Director, Legal Counsel, (maybe) media consultant
- **No information released that the family doesn't already have**

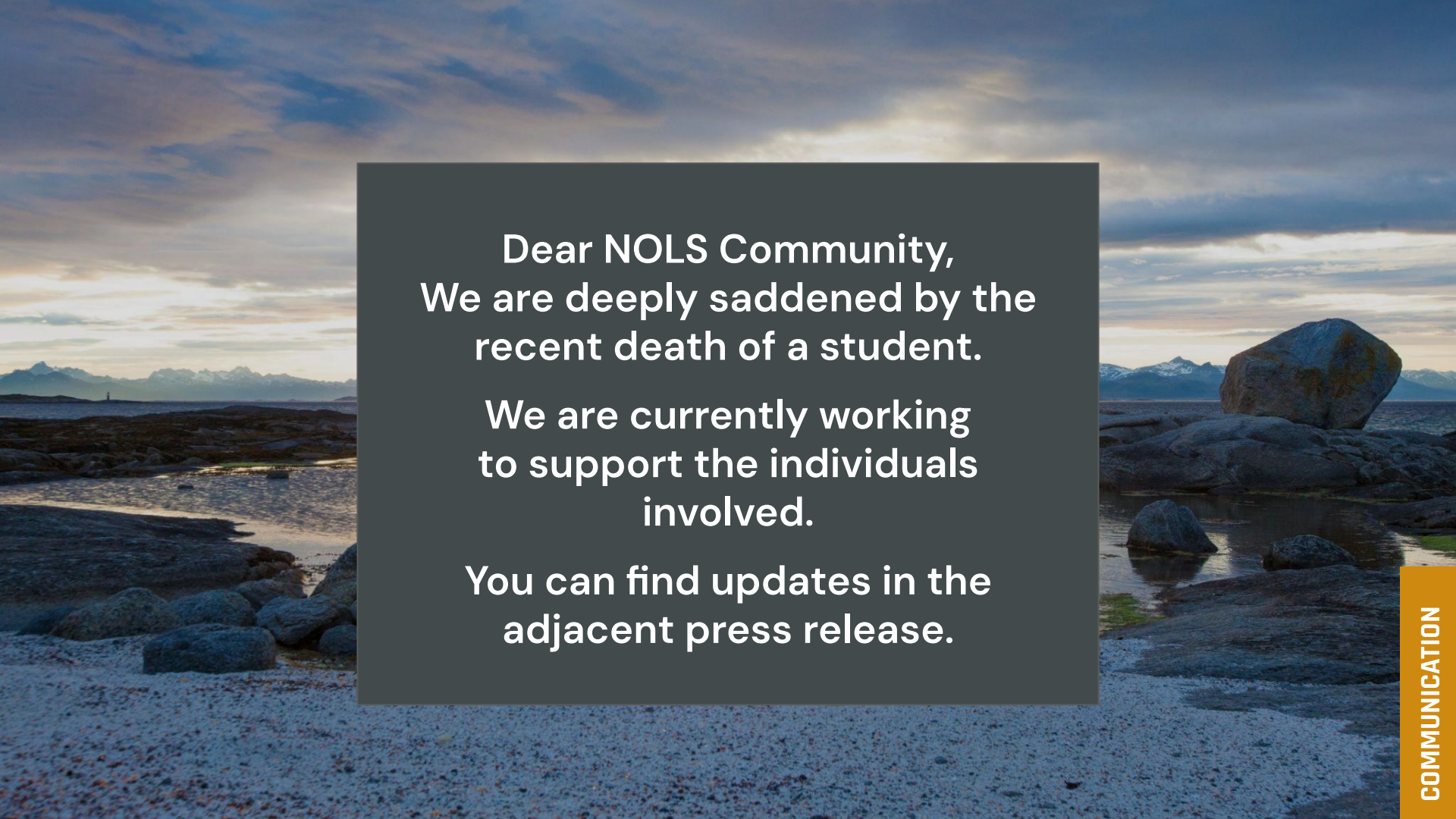
COMMUNICATION

DAY 1

- Identified audiences, needs, and sequencing of messaging

DAY 2

- By 9:00am, we had notified the NOLS Board of Trustees, NOLS employees, families of Sam's coursemates and instructors
- Press release on the NOLS website at noon. Social media redirects.
- Began planning to notify other courses and business partners, clients, etc.
- Customer service staff message-point training and content for incoming inquiries.


Dear NOLS Community,
We are deeply saddened by the recent death of a student.
We are currently working to support the individuals involved.
You can find updates in the adjacent press release.
COMMUNICATION

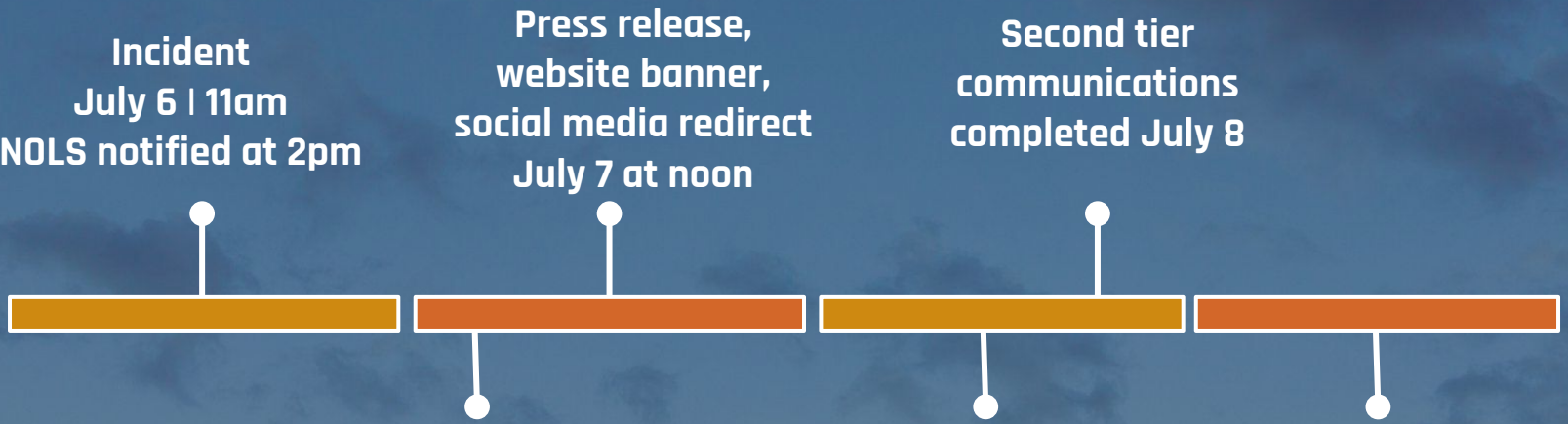
DAY 3

- All staff meeting midday – share information, answer questions, connect
- Second tier communications completed – key partners, clients
- Began notification of other courses in the field; took about two weeks to reach everyone

DAY 4

- Updated press release with new/additional information

PUBLIC INFORMATION TIMELINE



COMMUNICATION

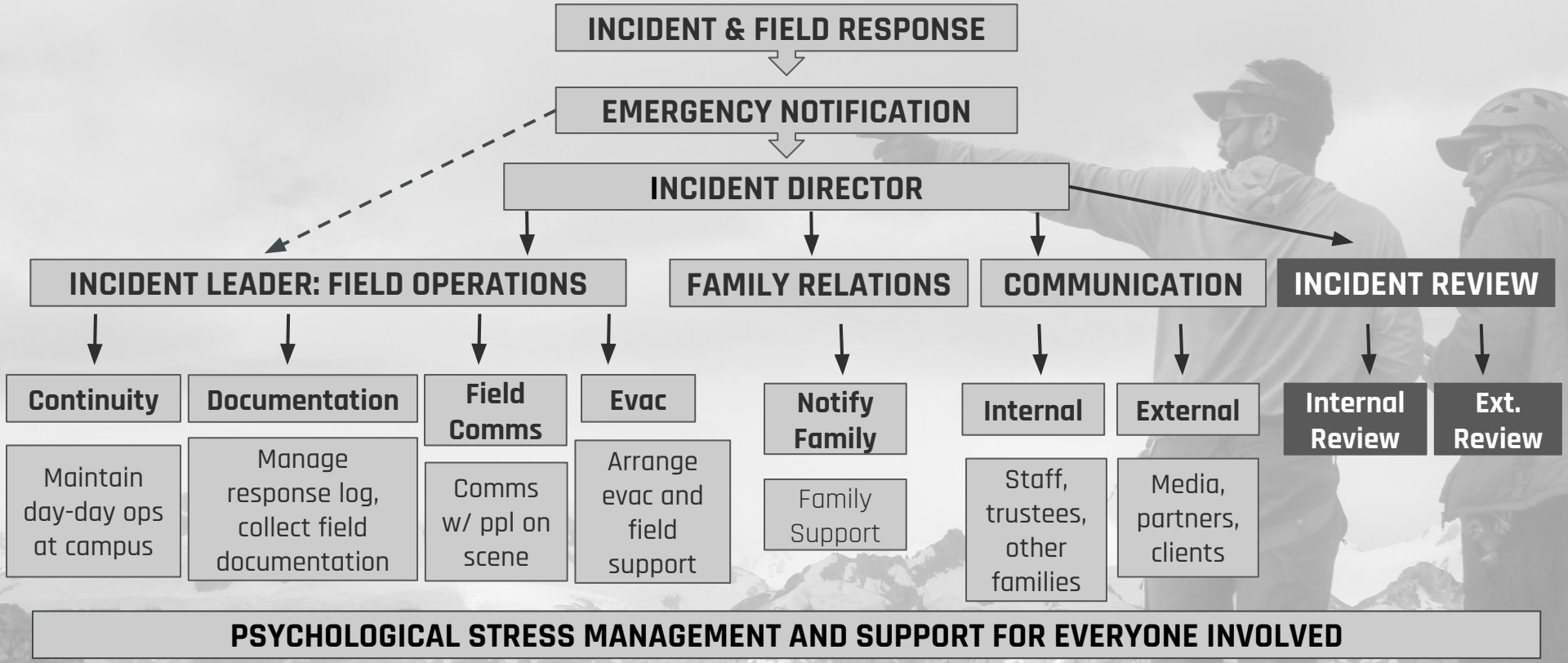
COMMUNICATION CONSIDERATIONS FOR SMALLER PROGRAMS

- Build relationships with professionals in advance
- Identify single-point failure roles, and consider backup options
- If part of a larger org – what infrastructure is already in place? And what additions/modifications do you need?
- Compile anticipated media questions (and answers) and organizational background information in advance – likely even more important than for larger organizations

INCIDENT REVIEW



NOLS CRISIS LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE





INTERNAL REVIEW PHASES

1. Gather facts
2. Analyze the incident
3. Write a report

GATHER FACTS: FIELD

- Witness statements: written statement, just the facts (who, what, when, where)
- Evidence, photos, videos, sketches
- Site visit?

GATHER FACTS: ADMINISTRATIVE

- Google doc
- Student and instructor factual interviews
- Documentation

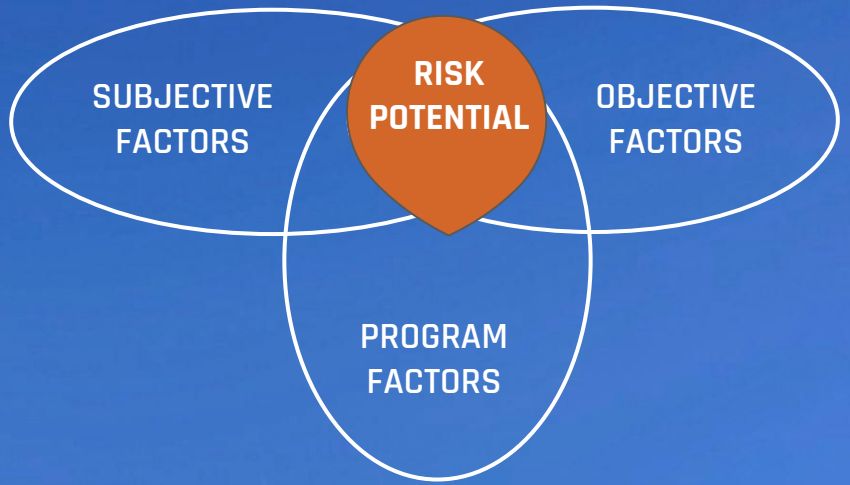
GATHERING FACTS

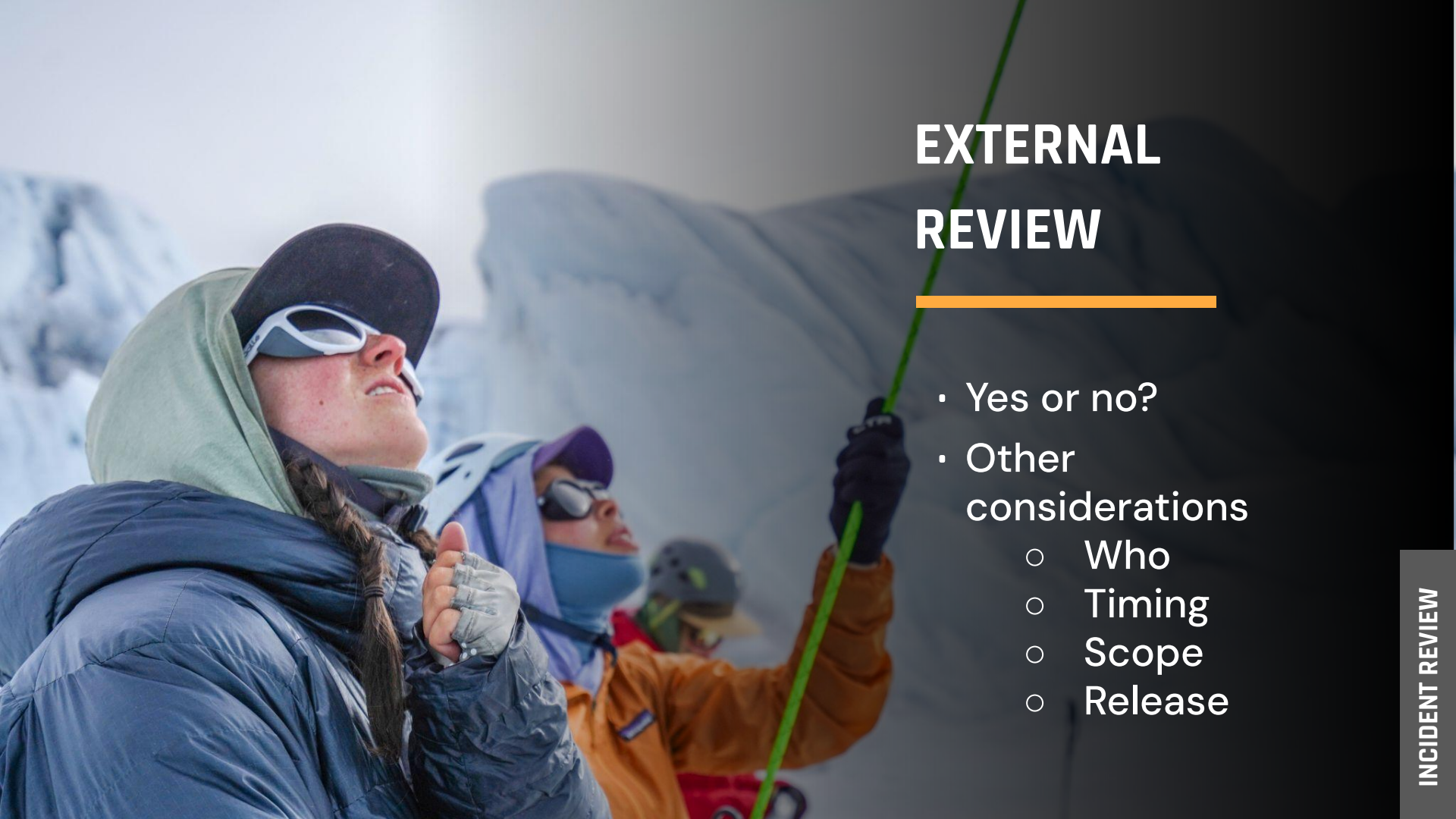
DOCUMENTATION SOURCES

- ❑ Witness statements (written)
- ❑ Instructor statements (written)
- ❑ Interview notes
- ❑ Maps and location coordinates
- ❑ Weather and environmental records
- ❑ Photos and diagrams
- ❑ Incident response logs
- ❑ Course paperwork
- ❑ Outfitting records (gear/food)
- ❑ Briefing information
- ❑ Evaluations (student, instructor, program)
- ❑ Communication logs
- ❑ Reports from other agencies (SAR, law enforcement, land agency, Freedom of Information Act Requests)

INTERNAL REVIEW REPORT

1. Factual account
2. Analysis
3. Conclusion
4. Recommendations for change (if any)

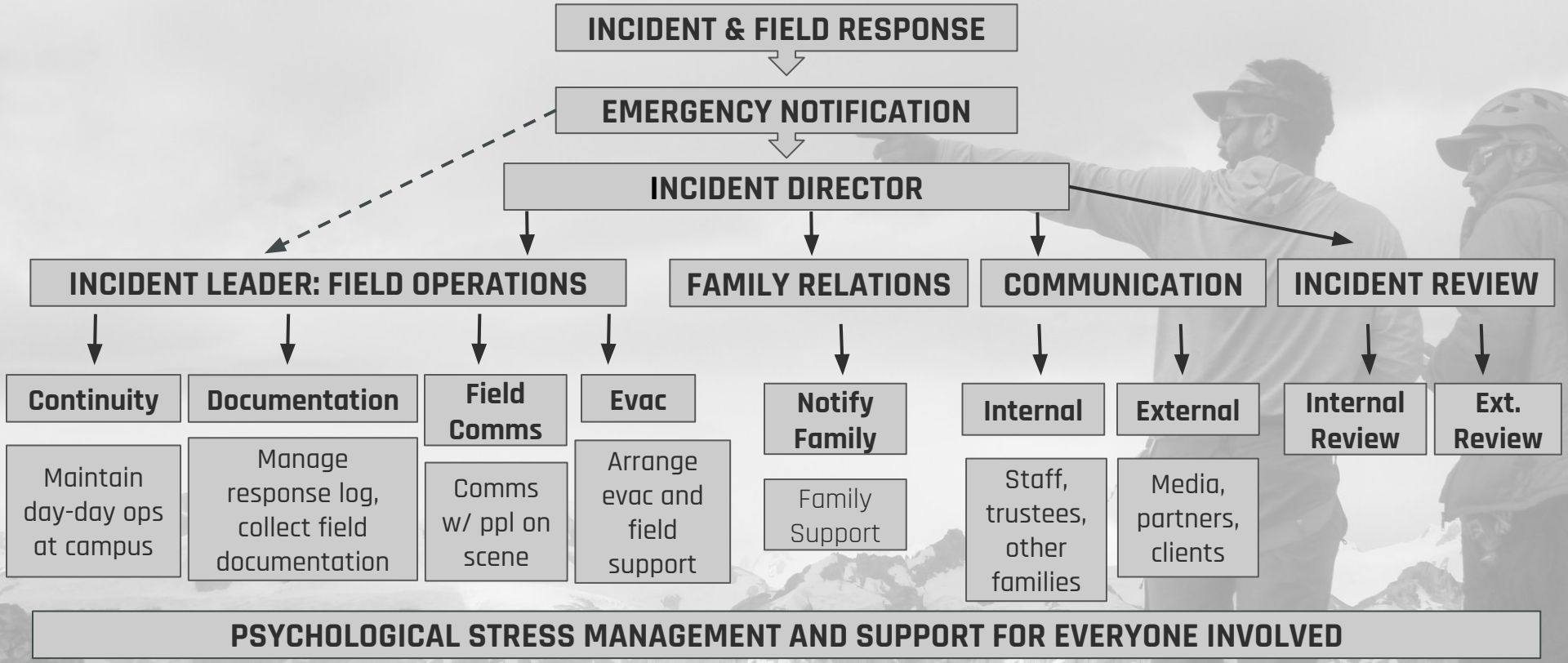




EXTERNAL REVIEW

- Yes or no?
- Other considerations
  - Who
  - Timing
  - Scope
  - Release

NOLS CRISIS LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE





ACTION STEPS

1. IDENTIFY key players in your organization who will be involved in crisis management, and assign likely roles
2. USE the NOLS schematic as a structure to develop your own crisis plan or identify gaps in an existing plan
3. PRACTICE with your plan. Run a drill to identify strengths and gaps.



THANK YOU

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