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BEST PRACTICE

Crisis Communications Planning: Pre-Identifying, Training, and Selecting Spokespeople

PURPOSE

Provides guidance for state and local government agencies on pre-identifying, training, and selecting spokespeople to deliver critical information to the public during an emergency.

SUMMARY

As part of their crisis communications planning efforts, emergency response organizations can pre-identify spokespeople to represent their agency during crisis and emergency situations. Pre-identifying and training spokespeople will assist incident managers and communications officials in selecting effective spokespeople to speak for their agency or department during a crisis or emergency.

DESCRIPTION

During a crisis or emergency incident, spokespeople from responding agencies serve as the direct liaison between the government, the news media, and the public. Spokespeople represent their organization during press conferences, media events, or town hall style public meetings.

Additionally, the incident manager may designate a spokesperson from one of the responding agencies to be the principal spokesperson. In this capacity, the principal spokesperson is the primary representative for all incident management operations and organizations. Working with spokespeople from responding agencies, the principal spokesperson leads press conferences, media events, and other public events.

To ensure the availability of individuals ready to serve as spokespeople during a crisis or emergency incident, PIOs should include the following into crisis communications planning:

- Pre-identify and list potential public spokespeople for their agency;
- Document each potential spokesperson's areas of expertise;
- Identify types of scenarios where individuals could be appropriate spokespeople; and
- Provide training and education to pre-selected spokespeople.

For more information see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice: [Crisis Communications Planning: Creating a Crisis Communications Plan](#).

This Best Practice reviews the following considerations when selecting agency spokespeople during crisis or emergency situations:

- Pre-Identifying Spokespeople;
- Training Pre-Identified Spokespeople; and
- Selecting Spokespeople at the Start of a Crisis.

Pre-Identifying Spokespeople

As part of their agency or department’s crisis communications plan, PIOs or other planners should pre-identify the principal and supporting spokespeople for their organization during crisis or emergency situations. Ideally, spokespeople should reflect the community, including members of minority, ethnic, and religious groups.

The [Indiana State Department of Health \(ISDH\) crisis communication plan](#)

designates the following individuals as potential spokespeople:

- State Health Commissioner
- Director of Office of Public Affairs (OPA)
- Marketing Director
- Bioterrorism Media Relations Director

PIOs should consider the following criteria when pre-selecting spokespeople:

- Possess good crisis communications skills;
- Knowledgeable about response capabilities and incident response plans;
- Able to answer detailed questions about the subject and risks to the public or know which people can provide answers to such questions;
- Ability to communicate in a manner that conveys confidence, understanding, and sympathy;
- Well-established public trust;
- Comfort in front of television cameras and reporters; and
- Skilled in media relations.

The first [Top Officials \(TOPOFF\) exercise](#) held in May 2000 demonstrated the problem of using individuals not trained in basic risk communication skills. During a press conference in the exercise, federal officials did not demonstrate appropriate concern about the incident. This resulted in outrage and a lawsuit from the victims’ families in the exercise.

The [Virginia Department of Emergency Management \(VDEM\)](#) has identified its PIO as the lead spokesperson for the department. If the nature of the incident forces a senior government official (VDEM Director, State Secretary of Public Safety, or the Governor) to be the lead spokesperson, the PIO will take lead responsibility for preparing information and supporting the lead spokesperson.

Training Pre-Identified Spokespeople

After pre-selecting potential spokespeople for their department, PIOs should provide them with training and education to improve their communications and media relations skills. This could include self-study courses, in-house training and education, classroom-style courses offered by external training institutions, and participation in emergency simulations or exercises.

Training Materials

Many state and local response agencies have arranged for their own training courses. The [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention \(CDC\)](#) offers the [CDCynergy](#) program—a combination of multimedia self-instruction materials and tutorials. Staff at the CDC’s Office of Communications have provided state and local public affairs officials with

The [Kansas Division of Emergency Management](#) offers a public information course for PIOs. This provides participants with the basic skills needed to perform their public information duties as they relate to emergency management.

classroom-style instruction on crisis and risk communication. The [Federal Emergency Management Agency \(FEMA\)](#) offers several courses for public information officers on emergency public communication through its [Emergency Management Institute](#) in Emmitsberg, MD. A useful primer on risk communication is [Communicating in a Crisis: Risk Communication Principles for Public Officials](#) created by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Several non-governmental experts have created websites providing information, primers, and tutorials on crisis and risk communication. The [Center for Risk Communication](#) provides original analysis, outside articles, and bibliographies on risk communication. Risk communication scholar [Peter Sandman](#) provides a similar set of materials, including multiple original articles and columns.

To train state and local public health spokespeople, the [Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services](#) uses Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) training modules at local and national conferences; Learning Management System (LMS on-line); state-initiated regional meetings; and internal training sessions.

Public Communications Primers for Individual Responders

In addition to department directors, managers, and PIOs, the media may call on individual responders to act as “spokespeople” during an emergency. To provide first responders with basic training on media relations and public speaking, PIOs can create and distribute basic public information awareness materials. This can be a short booklet listing basic principles of media relations, crisis communication, and/or risk communications. CD-ROM based tutorials can provide responders with communications primers and self-study materials.

Selecting Spokespeople at the Start of a Crisis

Selecting Agency Spokespeople

Agencies can choose to designate a single spokesperson for all crisis and emergency situations, or they can create a “pool” of potential spokespeople. If an agency or department has a number of potential spokespeople, the agency director, communications director, or lead PIO will need

Fire Chief Gary Marrs of [Oklahoma City Fire Department \(OKCFD\)](#) became one of the principal spokesperson during the response to the bombing of 1995. The OKCFD was the lead response agency, and Fire Chief Marrs regularly reported on all response updates and activities.

to select the agency’s spokespeople at the start of the emergency. Factors in selecting spokespeople include the nature of the emergency, the organization’s incident management operational responsibilities, and the organization’s role in communicating with the public.

Selecting the Principal Spokesperson

During some emergencies, the incident manager(s) will have the ability to select the principal spokesperson during the incident. The incident manager can choose the spokesperson representing his or her agency, or select a spokesperson representing one of the organizations responding to the incident. If a spokesperson is chosen from one of the response agencies, he or she should be able to speak for all response and recovery operations.

During the attacks of September 11, 2001, New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani was widely considered to have been an effective spokesperson due to his empathy, authority, and skill at handling the news media. An important factor contributing to his success was his ability to call on appropriate spokespeople from individual city and state agencies to support him at the podium. By so doing, he was able to divert questions to these representatives when more specific incident or response details were necessary.

Spokespeople from the other responding organizations would support his or her efforts.

In some emergencies, senior government officials and political figures may not be selected but rather emerge as the lead spokesperson—i.e., Mayor Giuliani following the September 11, 2001, attacks on the World Trade Center. In these situations, agency spokespeople will play a supporting role during press conferences and media events.

For more information on multi-agency public information centers, see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice: [Crisis Communications Planning: Establishing a Joint Operations Center](#).

Selecting Technical Subject Matter Experts

Some emergencies are technically specific and may require spokespersons to respond to specific scientific issues. Pre-identified spokespeople should therefore establish working relationships with technical subject matter experts to consult during a time of crisis, and to ensure the accuracy and completeness of information relayed to the public. In some cases, these subject matter experts should be encouraged to undergo media relations training, as they may be asked to speak directly to the public. Such experts might include physicians, mental health experts, hospital administrators, lawyers, and experts on crops, livestock, and the water supply.

Shift Management

During an emergency, it may be necessary for a communications office to operate on a 24-hour basis. In this event, the crisis communications plan should provide guidance for creating employee schedules. The plan should include staff schedules—such as three 8-hour or two 12-hour shifts—as well as rest cycles. Shift management should emphasize having sufficient personnel for the office to function, while minimizing staff stress levels.

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