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## BEST PRACTICE

### Crisis Communications Planning: Overview

#### PURPOSE

Provides Public Information Officers (PIOs) and Public Affairs Officials (PAOs) with a framework for crisis communications planning.

#### SUMMARY

Public communication is a critical response function following a terrorism incident, natural disaster, or other major emergency. Pre-incident planning, coordination, and preparation will improve the ability of public safety, public health, and healthcare organizations to communicate effectively with the public during the response and recovery to an emergency.

#### DESCRIPTION

A major emergency will require incident managers and other government officials to establish systems for communicating with the public during the emergency. The National Incident Management System (NIMS) defines public information systems as “the processes, procedures, and systems for communicating timely and accurate information to the public during crisis or emergency situations.” Local and state officials are largely responsible for communicating essential emergency details to local populations.

This series of Best Practices provides PIOs, PAOs, and other government communications officials with a framework for crisis communications planning. These Practices can assist communications planners in establishing the public information processes, procedures, and systems described in NIMS. These documents do not constitute a complete list of the processes, procedures, and systems required in the development and implementation of emergency information to the public.

#### *Terminology*

Common definitions of crisis communications refer to an organization’s efforts to communicate with external stakeholders and the public during a crisis. In the context of emergency response, crisis communications refers to the efforts of emergency response officials to communicate with the public during a crisis or emergency incident. Crisis communications informs the public about the emergency, reviews the government’s responses, directs the public to sources of assistance, and recommends protective actions.

Risk communication is a critical component of crisis communications. Risk communication is the process of informing and influencing the public’s actions to avoid risks. Risk communicators describe known risks, identify the probable negative outcomes associated with taking certain actions, and recommend ways of avoiding risk.

## **Public Communication During Public Emergencies**

Public communication during a crisis or emergency is more challenging than normal or day-to-day communications. Factors contributing to the challenge of public communication in an emergency are:

- Multi-agency response;
- Compressed timeframes;
- Situational uncertainty—especially in the early stages of a crisis; and
- A stressed and emotionally strained public.

### **Multi-Agency Response**

The response to a public emergency may involve multiple public safety, public health, and health care organizations—with each one communicating with the public. Incident response may involve emergency personnel from multiple jurisdictions, including state and federal government agencies. As the number of agencies and organizations responding to an emergency increases, so will the number of agencies communicating with the public. Mechanisms like Joint Information Centers (JICs) provide PIOs and PAOs from participating response agencies with a multi-agency structure for developing, approving, and communicating public information. JICs and similar structures also enable public affairs offices to pool personnel and other resources.

### **Compressed Timeframes**

Crises and emergencies are by nature fast-paced and rapidly evolving situations. They can compress the time available to PIOs and PAOs for receiving information, developing public messages, and providing these messages to the public. This compressed cycle increases the difficulty of managing public communications operations, the difficulty of communication between the incident managers and the crisis communicators, and the opportunities for making mistakes.

Additionally, a crisis is likely to compress the news cycle and increase competition between news organizations. As a result, news organizations will increase pressure on incident managers and communications officials for information. PIOs and PAOs need to be responsive to the condensed news cycle and the increased demand for information. This may require frequent press conferences and media events, one-on-one contacts with journalists, arranging interviews with government experts and officials, and increasing the number of public affairs staff to support these increased operations.

### **Situational Uncertainty**

Incident managers may face difficulties in maintaining situational awareness during emergencies—particularly in the initial stages. At the same time, the public's demand for information is likely to be highest during the initial stages of an emergency. Gaps in situational awareness can increase the difficulty of providing answers to many of the public's questions. Because of gaps in information and knowledge, officials and spokespeople are likely to make mistakes and provide inaccurate information. Crisis communications experts advise PIOs and government spokespeople to manage the public's expectations by openly discussing the likelihood that officials and spokespeople will make mistakes and will release inaccurate information.

### **Emotionally Charged Situations**

In addition to providing the public with timely and accurate information, crisis communication experts stress the importance of appropriately framing information and messages. Spokespeople need to consider the style and format of their delivery as they provide information to the news media and the public. Experts encourage spokespeople and

other officials to recognize the public's emotional state and demonstrate empathy, compassion, and understanding.

### ***Terrorism***

Terrorism exacerbates many of the challenges inherent to crisis communications. A terrorist incident will evolve rapidly. A large number of organizations will participate in the response and recovery efforts to a terrorism incident—including local, state, and federal government agencies and private sector interests. Incident managers, PIOs, and PAOs are likely to find it difficult to meet the overwhelming demand for information. Terrorism will heighten public concerns about safety and can produce widespread and sustained anxiety. An act of terrorism is likely to test the media relations and public communications skills of the most seasoned and experienced crisis communicators.

Terrorism poses unique challenges for risk communication. Effective risk communication can help the public understand and avoid the public safety risks created by an act of terrorism. This includes efforts to describe the physical effects of known terrorist incidents and raising public awareness of the threat of additional terrorist attacks. Risk communication starts with identification and assessments of risks generated by the act of terrorism. Communicators need to understand the nature of the risks facing the public before explaining these risks to the public. Included among the factors shaping the risks to the public resulting from a terrorism incident are:

- Type of weapon(s) used and the physical/physiological effects;
- Location of the attack(s);
- Modes or tactics of the attacks;
- Nature of the response; and
- Possibility of future attacks.

Assessing and communicating risks may be particularly difficult during terrorism incidents involving chemical, biological, radiological, or nuclear weapons.

### ***Historical Background***

The attacks of September 11, 2001 and the anthrax mailings of October 2001 illustrated the importance and challenges of crisis communications to emergency response and recovery. After-action reports identified several problems with public communication efforts during these incidents. These included:

- Public health and public safety agencies had insufficiently planned for crisis and risk communications;
- Response agencies failed to establish effective multi-agency coordination mechanisms—including JICs—to coordinate and clear messages and information among responding agencies;
- Senior government spokespeople appeared to lack familiarity with the fundamental principles of crisis and risk communication; and
- Government officials' inability to answer questions and meet requests for information from the news media produced tension and, at times, hostility between officials and journalists during the anthrax crisis.

Despite these problems, two examples of effective crisis communications emerged during the 2001 terror attacks: New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani's public communication efforts following the September 11<sup>th</sup> attacks on the World Trade Center and Dr. Anthony Fauci's, Director of the National Institute of Allergies and Infectious Diseases (NIAID), explanation the risks to the public resulting from the October anthrax mailings.

According to crisis communication experts, Giuliani and Fauci were effective crisis communicators because of their ability to obtain accurate and timely information and then appropriately frame information as they communicated it. Mayor Giuliani understood the public's grief and confusion and he demonstrated empathy, compassion, strength, and, at times, frailty in his press conferences.

During the anthrax mailings of 2001, officials had problems identifying the source of the anthrax, the quality of the agent, and the means of dissemination. Lacking this information, officials found it difficult to provide the public with accurate assessments of the risk of anthrax exposure. Even after identifying the mail system as the source of exposure, officials and government experts found it difficult to assess the probability of future exposures through contaminated mail.

Dr. Fauci recognized the public's emotional and irrational reaction to the anthrax mailings. To overcome the public's concerns, he translated complex and highly technical information about anthrax into clear messages and recommendations for action.

### ***Improving Crisis Communications Capabilities***

As a result of the lessons learned from the 2001 terrorism incidents, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) began integrating crisis communications into its terrorism planning and preparedness programs to improve capabilities. Beginning with the FY2002 bioterrorism grants to state and local public health agencies, HHS established a separate category of funding for crisis communications planning and preparedness. As a result, state and local public health agencies have completed a significant amount of preparation and planning for crisis and risk communication during terrorism incidents, particularly bioterrorism incidents.

With the increased attention and resources devoted to improving crisis and risk communication capabilities, several research efforts are underway at university-based research institutes and other research establishments to identify and evaluate public messages and information during specific emergencies and terrorism contingencies. These research and analysis programs evaluate the psychological and behavioral reactions of the public during specific types of crises, emergencies, and terrorism scenarios. Some of this research is sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security, the Department of Health and Human Services, and other Federal agencies.

These research programs are using a combination of historical analyses of historical disasters and crisis, public surveys and focus groups, and statistical modeling to identify the specific messages and information that empower the public to protect themselves, their families and homes, and their businesses during specific types of emergencies or terrorism scenarios. References and links to many of these programs are included in this document and others in this series of Best Practices. PIOs and PAOs should refer regularly to these programs for the latest analyses and findings.

### ***About this Series of Best Practices***

These Best Practices provide PIOs, PAOs, and other communications officials with guidance and recommendations for crisis communications planning. They are useful to a variety of different emergency response organizations, including public safety agencies, emergency management organizations, public health agencies, and healthcare organizations. Pre-planning and preparation before future crises can help an agency or department improve crisis communications capabilities when a crisis occurs.

This Best Practice series describes six core elements of crisis communications planning and preparedness:

- [Crisis Communications Planning: Creating a Crisis Communications Plan](#): Developing a crisis communications plan for the agency, jurisdiction, or region;
- [Crisis Communications Planning: Pre-Packaging Informational Materials](#): Preparing information and messages for public release during crises and emergencies (including planning to identify the public's information requirements during specific terrorism scenarios);
- [Crisis Communications Planning: Pre-Identifying, Training, and Selecting Spokespeople](#): Establishing plans and protocols for selecting and training appropriate spokespeople for use in a range of possible emergencies;
- [Crisis Communications Planning: Preparing Communication Mechanisms](#): Identification and preparation of direct and indirect communication mechanisms—including efforts to improve media relations and pre-identification of public spokespeople; and
- [Crisis Communications Planning: Establishing Joint Information Centers](#): Establishing multi-agency coordination mechanisms for formulating and clearing public information and materials during a crisis.

Improving crisis communications capabilities has the added benefit of improving public communications for all situations. Implementing many of the recommendations and suggestions can also help agencies improve their day-to-day public communication capabilities.

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