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BEST PRACTICE

Crisis Communications Planning: Preparing Communication Mechanisms

PURPOSE

Identifies information mechanisms that could be used by state and local government departments to relay information directly to the public during an emergency.

SUMMARY

When developing a crisis communications plan, Public Information Officers (PIOs) and Public Affairs Officials (PAOs) should identify a range of communication mechanisms and prepare to use them during an emergency. Multiple communications systems should be used simultaneously in order to reach the widest possible audience. This Best Practice identifies target audiences for different mechanisms, identifies considerations when using specific mechanisms, and reviews the strengths and weaknesses of each mechanism.

DESCRIPTION

No single communication mechanism can reach everyone affected by an emergency. PIOs and PAOs should plan to use multiple mechanisms to communicate with the public during an emergency. Each mechanism can be evaluated according to the types of information it communicates, the audiences it reaches, and the resources it requires. This Best Practice discusses the use of the following communication mechanisms:

- Local Television and Radio Stations;
- Emergency Alert System;
- Internet;
- E-mail;
- Call Centers; and
- Print.

Local Television and Radio Stations

Government officials can communicate directly with the public on local radio and television stations by transmitting live or pre-recorded messages. Direct public addresses or information announcements from senior officials or leaders may also appear more credible than messages relayed by journalists. Examples of such messages includes:

- Brief public information statements or instructions;
- Live or recorded statements from senior officials or community leaders; and
- Scrolling text messages available on digital television broadcasts.

Emergency Public Information Agreements

Volusia County, Florida, has an agreement with WCEU television channel 15 and five local radio stations to act as official emergency public information television and radio stations for the County during emergencies. Additional information on the agreement is available at: http://volusia.org/storm/news.htm.

Planning

The planning necessary for the use of broadcast channels will depend upon the local television or radio station that owns or operates the channel(s). Communications planners should work with station owners and operators on agreements and procedures for use in potential emergencies. Elements of such an agreement might include:

- **Authority:** designation of persons or agencies with authority to transmit messages;
- **Style:** whether the messages will be live or recorded;
- **Production and Logistics:** if local stations will produce the messages, or if the messages will be produced by a government agency and then transmitted to local stations;
- **Medium:** which media will be used (e.g. audio, video, text messages); and
- **Priority:** the circumstances under which government messages will preempt local broadcasts.

Planners may also consider drafting message templates ahead of time that can be changed according to the specifics of the emergency. Pre-drafting messages will decrease the time it takes to prepare information for transmission.

Resources

Transmitting messages via local radio and television stations can be costly and time-consuming. The cost is affected by the desired quality and technical sophistication of the messages. Costs include: technical staff, equipment, and the quantity and length of messages.

Emergency Alert System

The Emergency Alert System (EAS) gives local, state, and federal government leaders and senior officials the opportunity to broadcast important messages on the television and radio during crises. The EAS is the successor of the Emergency Broadcast System.

During a crisis, officials can also use the EAS to provide situational updates and incident details. Messages include evacuation procedures, shelter-in-place orders, as well as other critical health and safety instructions.

> **Emergency Alert System**
> - Federal Communication Commission EAS Homepage: States should consult with the FCC to ensure that their plans conform to specific regulations and testing rules.
> - State of New Jersey EAS Plan: This is a well-conceived EAS plan that contains all the necessary components.

EAS participants include all AM, FM, and broadcast television stations, as well as all cable systems with over 10,000 subscribers. EAS broadcasts can reach a wide audience, since most households and businesses have radios or televisions. When the EAS is activated, regular broadcasting on local stations is interrupted, an emergency alert tone sounds, and then the message(s) are aired.

The Office of the President of the United States, state emergency management agencies (handling requests from state and local government agencies), and the National Weather Service (NWS) can activate the EAS. In the event of simultaneous requests for use of the EAS, message handling priority is the following:

- Office of the President;
- State emergency management agencies; and
- National Weather Service.

Messages broadcasted through the EAS by state and local officials are channeled through the state EMA, where they are cleared for broadcast and sent to local television and radio stations. Officials can speak to their state EMA for specific points of contact, information about the individual state's vetting process for EAS messages, EMA agreements with local media providers, and other EAS broadcast protocols.

Planning

States should develop a comprehensive EAS plan before using the system. New Jersey, Florida and Michigan offer models of already-established EAS plans. Each plan includes the following components:

- **System Logistics:** Describes EAS activation and use;
- **Message Management:** Identifies protocols for coordinating messages among many public safety and public health agencies. For instance, a single office or agency could take the lead role for coordinating EAS messages. An EAS plan should also establish who has the authority to transmit messages;
- **Media Identification:** Catalogs local media providers with which the state EMA has contracted to carry messages;
- **Message Oversight:** Pre-designates a staff member or office to vet and clear public transmissions; and
- **Message Order:** Determines which messages will supersede others according to urgency.

Resources

Some radio and television stations operate in automated, unsupervised modes overnight. During those times, such stations cannot actively monitor EAS transmissions. To address this issue, stations can purchase automated EAS receivers and transmitters. One option, a system called *EMnet*, is a satellite-based hardware and software system that automatically monitors EAS frequencies, receives EAS messages, and retransmits them according to an established protocol. By installing such a system, the EAS can be activated without anyone manually receiving and transmitting the messages. The state EMA, or other agency with EAS oversight, may consider subsidizing this equipment to encourage compliance.

Internet

The Internet can be used to convey critical information to the public during an emergency. A website can facilitate direct public communication and aggregate information from various agencies. A website also benefits inter-agency communication, since important information can accessed through a website. Agency and department personnel could be instructed to monitor particular pages for continually updated information.

Websites can contain a large quantity of information, including:
- Real-time Incident Details;
- Emergency Instructions;
- Preparedness Guidance; and
- Hazard-Specific Information.

Websites can also utilize:
- Text;
- Informational graphics;
- Charts and tables;
- Streaming audio and video; and

Emergency Management Websites
- California includes hazard-specific information and emergency operations plans.
- Connecticut includes information for the public on preparedness and links to plans.
- Washington State includes fact sheets and section for kids.
- New York City includes agency facts, press releases, and *Ready New York* online.

- Interactive demonstrations.

The audience using Internet communications is large and continues to grow. Anyone with an Internet connection can easily access the information. Regular posting to websites will also encourage visitors to return to the site to acquire new information.

As a crisis communications tool, the Internet has several drawbacks, including:

- Sites maintained on servers with limited bandwidth may overload during a rush of users to the site;
- The public's need to be familiar with a website before an emergency;
- Only individuals who have Internet access can receive posted information and materials;
- Users with limited computer capabilities or slow speed access may be unable to use the multimedia features of some sites;
- Utility disruptions may limit or prevent users from accessing the Internet; and
- Web sites can be vulnerable to hacking and misuse.

To address these issues, planners may want to acquire an easy to remember URL and/or make information on the website available through television or radio broadcasts.

Planning

Agencies should keep several factors in mind when designing a website to relay critical information:

- **Clearinghouse:** The website should be the primary online source for emergency preparedness and response information. If the public is accustomed to visiting the site before emergency situations, it will be more likely to access the site during a crisis;
- **Quality Control:** Information should be vetted before it is posted to the site, in order to ensure that sensitive details are not released;
- **Credibility:** Public safety and public health agencies should evaluate materials posted to the website to ensure information is complete and accurate;
- **Children:** Special websites could contain information specifically written for children, making emergency information easier for them to understand; and
- **Marketing:** Officials can use advertising campaigns or community events to build public awareness about the site. Reciprocal linking arrangements with other websites can also bring visitors to the site.

An effective website will be comprehensible, clearly organized, and logically structured. Planners may want to include:

- Overview pages that link to sections with in-depth information;
- Fact sheets with specific information on types of incidents and responses; and
- Links to other federal, state, and local emergency websites.

Emergency Information Websites

The City of Los Angeles Emergency Preparedness Department has developed *Update L.A.*, a website that provides up-to-the-minute information and instructions.

The District of Columbia Office of the Chief Technical Advisor is responsible for coordinating technical information issues. In the event of an emergency, OCTA is charged with ensuring that information on the website remains current and accessible.

Resources

Websites require a start-up investment for initial design and content generation. Sites must also be regularly updated and maintained. Agencies may want to consider hiring a webmaster to design and manage the site. Websites should stay current and utilize new technologies in order to remain effective and relevant.

E-mail

E-mail can be a useful method for sending newsletters about general preparedness issues and for communicating specific readiness instructions during emergencies. Departments can compile e-mail addresses of persons in their jurisdiction and create listservs to transmit important information and instructions.

The benefit of e-mail as a communication mechanism is its ability to quickly provide in-depth information to a large audience. E-mail can also be used to update the public about a developing situation or to provide new or revised instructions if conditions change.

However, personal e-mail addresses are private. Unlike telephone numbers, e-mail address are not compiled and published in public directories. For this reason, emergency e-mail systems require members of the public to sign up for the service in anticipation of an emergency. The utility of e-mail thus depends on the ability to convince the public to submit e-mail addresses and to update those addresses as necessary.

Planning

Government officials seeking to develop a listserv as a method for crisis communication should identify target audiences and establish guidelines for information release. An effective listserv relies on the release of information about an emergency or crisis in a timely manner. Several states, including Texas and Washington, have functioning emergency management listservs that offer forums for discussion and archives of previous emergency and disaster alerts.

Resources

Resources necessary for creating an effective listserv include:

- A website to explain the goals of the listserv;
- E-mail capability to register participants and send information; and
- Access to timely information.

Call Centers

Call centers or hotlines provide the public with an interactive forum for obtaining information about the status of the emergency and steps to ensure safety.

Call centers are useful methods for relaying specific information to the general public. They also give callers the opportunity to speak directly with an individual. This one-on-one interaction allows callers to receive information specifically oriented to his or her needs. The Texas Department of Health has found one-on-one interaction through call centers especially useful in addressing the mental health aspects resulting from an emergency.

"The Texas Disaster Plan mandates that the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS) is responsible for providing crisis counseling staff during a state or federally declared disaster. In order to facilitate this goal, DSHS offers a telephone service where the public can communicate with mental health staff. Officials believe that such a call center may mitigate long-term mental health problems experienced by responders, survivors, and victims of emergencies."

A major disadvantage to call centers, however, is their ability to reach only a small audience. Call centers can only respond to incoming calls from the public. They cannot reach individuals who are unaware of the call center's existence or those choosing not to call the center. For this reason, call centers are a useful secondary and not primary crisis communication mechanism.

The New York State Department of Health (DOH) has made arrangements with a local health organization to provide the personnel and capabilities necessary to operate a call center during an emergency. The DOH is required to give the call center six hours notice before it is to be operable, as well as scripts that operators can electronically access to answer questions about the emergency.

Planning

Emergency planners should consider the following when creating a call center:

- **Information:** To ensure that consistent and uniform information is released to callers, states should consider drafting templates or scripts that call center staff can access during a crisis. Various state health departments, including those in Texas and New York, have already developed such templates;
- **Surge Capacity:** Advance planning should include the ability to increase call center capacity during emergencies by expanding hours and contracting for additional staff. In the event of an emergency, states should also consider a backup source for information if the call center is unable to fulfill its function;
- **Advertising:** Call center telephone numbers are most effective if they are available to the public. The number for the center should be distributed through the Internet as well as on television and radio broadcasts. Some states or localities have also highlighted such numbers in central locations within their phone book. In preparation, states should develop a strategy for communicating this information to media outlets; and
- **Effect:** Planners should recognize that the call center will not be a primary source of information. Many members of the public will not utilize a call center and will rely instead on information transmitted via local radio and television stations.

Resources

A call center must have a designated staff sufficient to handle a large volume of calls during a major incident. In order to accomplish this goal, the center should identify staff before an emergency occurs to ensure that sufficient personnel will be available. It is also essential that staff be available to operate the call center within hours after the incident. Planners should recognize that the human resources required for call centers make them a costly enterprise. These costs could exceed the costs of other communication mechanisms.

Print

Printed brochures, pamphlets, and information sheets can be produced in advance of a major crisis or emergency. These materials can be distributed to the public and contain general response guidelines and hazard-specific information. Agencies can also develop public service advertisements to communicate specific information during emergencies.

Readiness Brochures

The New York City Office of Emergency Management has developed the *Ready New York* program, which includes a series of pamphlets designed to educate the public about emergency preparedness. The materials are free, widely available, and have been translated into nine languages.

Printed materials offer an additional layer of redundancy when communicating with the general population. The material can target specific communities or groups, such as the

illiterate, those unfamiliar with the Internet, and those who do not follow news broadcasts. Additional benefits of using printed materials include the ability to:

- Produce materials in advance of the incident;
- Communicate the material in foreign languages and Braille; and
- Produce a large quantity of information.

Planning

Printed materials should contain in-depth but general content, so that materials do not quickly become out-of-date. Some printed materials can provide general preparedness guidelines, information on specific hazards, and instructions for responses to certain types of emergencies. When drafting printed materials, planners should consider:

- **Ensuring readability:** All printed materials should be easy to read and understand. Focus groups can provide guidance for shaping and refining the message; and
- **Launching the campaign:** Planners may want to use an advertising campaign to increase public awareness.

When developing a distribution strategy, planners should note that some materials can be reprinted in newspapers or be included as inserts. However, printed materials are difficult to update or change. Efficiently and quickly distributing them to a wide audience is also logistically complicated. There should be plans to stock brochures or pamphlets at places where the public frequently congregates. Depending on the type of information and the target audience, distribution locations could include:

- Grocery stores;
- Religious institutions;
- Schools;
- Civic or community centers;
- Gas stations; and
- Convenience stores.

McReady Oklahoma

The state of Oklahoma has partnered with McDonald's to create McReady Oklahoma. The program utilizes McDonald's locations and customer base as a neighborhood center to relay preparedness information to local citizens. Through kiosks, tray liners, and full-color brochures, McReady Oklahoma provides information on a range of safety issues, including flood plans and tornado paths, family preparedness guides, and flood mitigation brochures. Originating as a partnership between McDonald's and the Tulsa Citizen Corps, the program has expanded into a statewide program.

Resources

Printed materials can be costly to develop, produce, store, and disseminate, but local philanthropic organizations may provide grants to fund the projects. Costs of using printed materials include:

- Time and cost for development and production;
- Printing and updating expenses; and
- Cost of speedy distribution of printed materials.

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