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BEST PRACTICE

Crisis Communications Planning: Creating a Crisis Communications Plan

PURPOSE

Provides guidance for state and local government departments and agencies on creating a crisis communications plan.

SUMMARY

During an emergency, the public will turn to the media and the government for information, instructions, and reassurance. By providing critical information to the public in a timely manner, departments can maintain public safety and public confidence in response efforts. State and local government departments and agencies should develop a crisis communications plan that identifies the requirements for quickly and efficiently releasing critical information to the public, media, and other agencies during an emergency.

DESCRIPTION

A crisis communications plan is an important component of a department's ability to manage a crisis. It can either be integrated into the departmental response plan or exist as a separate document. Departments should also decide whether the crisis communications plan would be all-hazards or hazard-specific.

[Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication](#), published by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), provides guidance for health departments on how to devise a crisis and emergency risk communication plan.

Crisis communications plans are not step-by-step instructions for public communications in a crisis. Rather, they provide a reference document for Public Information Officers (PIOs) and other communications staff to prepare for an emergency. The plan should be evaluated and continually reshaped to develop the most effective communications processes for the agency.

The [Virginia Department of Emergency Management \(VDEM\)](#) has organized its communications plan according to incident type, including both natural disasters and terrorism incidents. The plan includes a list of the different messages and instructions that will need to be relayed for each incident.

The Best Practice reviews the core elements of crisis communications plans:

- Messages;
- Audience;
- Staffing;
- Working with the media; and
- Working with other agencies.

Messages

A crisis communications plan should address the following message-related issues:

- Preparing messages;
- Approving messages;
- Relaying messages; and
- Alerts and notification messages.

Preparing Messages

The crisis communications plan should give guidelines for preparing a variety of messages to be used in the event of potential emergencies. To speed the dissemination of public information following an incident, PIOs can prepare informational materials on different topics.

Existing emergency response plans provide PIOs with a starting point for identifying the information and materials they will provide the public during a specific emergency scenario. Reviewing these plans may help PIOs identify the types of information and guidance incident managers will want to provide the public during the execution of specific plans. PIOs should contact emergency planners and review these plans throughout the process of drafting and revising crisis communications plans.

PIOs and PAOs who choose to pre-plan specific messages and information to be provided to the public during specific contingencies may find it useful to refer to academic research and analyses on risk and crisis communications. This research and analysis can assist crisis communications planners to pre-identify the messages and materials they need to provide the public during a range of scenarios and contingencies.

PIOs choosing to pre-package information should develop materials for a variety of possible scenarios. For more information on pre-packaging informational materials, see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice, [Crisis Communications Planning: Prepackaging Informational Materials](#).

Approving Messages

The crisis communications plan should outline the process for verifying messages before they are relayed to the public. The CDC's [Crisis and Emergency Risk Communications](#) recommends at least three people clear a document or message before it is released to the public. This oversight and vetting process is important to elicit a variety of perspectives from a wide range of experts. However, the CDC also recommends that organizations differentiate between the authority to review and comment on materials and the authority to clear—or stop—the release of information. Although many team members should contribute to the development of messages, only a small number of individuals, such as the organization's communications director, should have the authority to clear information. A lack of singular oversight for the final product could result in an inconsistent message.

Relaying Messages

The crisis communications plan should identify and list the spokesperson responsible for relaying the messages. This may include PIOs, department directors, and deputy-directors. The plan should include all of their contact details so they may be reached at all times. For more information on spokespersons, see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice: [Crisis Communications Planning: Pre-Identifying, Training, and Selecting Spokespeople](#).

Alerts and Notification Messages

The communications plan should describe processes and procedures for using any public alert systems in the jurisdiction.

In Washington, DC, community surveys identified an absence of confidence that the public would be notified following a major emergency in the city. To address these concerns, the City government charged its Emergency Management Agency (EMA) with implementing a citizen emergency notification system. [Alert DC](#) allows City residents to register for alerts to be sent to them via an emergency text alert paging system or an emergency voice alert. The District of Columbia is also installing and testing new equipment at several area radio stations as part of its Emergency Alert System. Within the National Capital Region, Arlington and Fairfax Counties in Northern Virginia are developing compatible alert systems.

Audience

A crisis communications plan should consider the mechanisms and procedures necessary for tailoring and relaying messages to those with special needs. This includes individuals who are:

- Geographically isolated;
- Without access to traditional communications mechanisms;
- Limited in language skills, due to health problems or developmental barriers;
- Out-of-town business and visitor population;
- Different cultural groups; and
- Non-English speakers

The **Maryland Emergency Management Agency (MEMA)** has identified a group of individuals skilled in sign language. Following an incident, these individuals would aid government officials at news conferences or media events to translate their messages. This helps ensure the deaf audience is relayed critical and timely information.

To identify these populations, departments may choose to:

- Distribute questionnaires to ascertain specific information;
- Work with organizations directly involved with certain populations, such as, Meals on Wheels for elderly homebound individuals; and
- Use US census information.

The **Indiana State Department of Health Crisis (ISDHC)** Communication Plan includes information on languages spoken other than English for each county. The plan also includes estimates of the level of English proficiency for individuals whose primary language is not English.

Many state and local departments use contractors to provide translations of typical alert announcements in several different languages. Other strategies include working with local colleges, universities, and cultural centers to assist with the translation of messages.

Staffing

A crisis communications plan should address the following staffing issues:

- Staff positions and Functions;
- Shift Management; and
- Staff Surge Capacity.

Staff Positions and Functions

A crisis communications plan should specify staff roles and responsibilities. Staff assignments will largely depend on resources; however, when writing a plan, officials should emphasize the following positions:

- **Spokespeople** are responsible for representing the department when communicating with the media and the public. They should have knowledge of policy, science, and incident details that will need to be communicated. Possible spokespeople include the directors, senior managers, or PIOs in the department. For more information see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Best Practice: Crisis Communications Planning: Pre-Identifying, Training, and Selecting Spokespeople.
- **Public Information Officers (PIOs)** assume the lead role in crisis communications during an emergency. They will need to assess the incident and demands of stakeholders such as media, public, and other agencies, coordinate staff hours and tasks, and communicate with the media and other departments and agencies.
- **Assistant PIOs** assist the PIO with his/her tasks. If this position does not exist prior to the emergency, planners should consider hiring a pre-existing staff member who has regularly worked with the lead PIO.
- **Administrative Staff** support implementation of the plan, review outgoing information for quality control, and monitor availability of physical resources such as supplies, equipment, and infrastructure.

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.

Staff Surge Capacity

The crisis communications plan should provide guidance on increasing staff capacity to meet any changes in personnel requirements during an emergency. Planners should pre-identify essential roles and responsibilities during a major crisis. Surge personnel should be selected based on their position in the organization, availability, and capabilities.

Working with the Media

When developing a crisis communications plan, state and local departments should include procedures for maintaining a list of e-mail addresses, phone, and fax numbers for regional and local media contacts from all major media outlets. This list should be revised and updated regularly. When an incident occurs, the individual responsible for dealing with the media can use the list to relay accurate contact information to local and national reporters.

The [New York State Emergency Management Office](#) (SEMO) prioritizes contact with the Associated Press (AP) wire service reporters. All statewide newsrooms access AP's headlines instantly; this allows agencies to deliver messages quickly to a number of reporters.

The plan should review the following strategies and tactics for working with the media during a crisis:

- **Press Releases:** protocols for releasing brief news reports, including the personnel and offices responsible for their dissemination;
- **Briefing Location:** appropriate locations and facilities for updating journalists and other media representatives;
- **Spokespeople:** rosters of individuals pre-selected serve as PIOs or official spokespeople during specific emergencies;
- **Phone Lines:** establishment of phone lines to receive public and media inquiries;
- **Vetting Information:** protocols for reviewing new information prior to its release to the public and media;
- **Securing Resources:** strategies for securing the physical and staffing resources necessary for public information and media operations during an emergency;
- **Monitoring Media Reports:** identification of staff responsible for observing and assessing the news media's coverage of the crisis. This will assess the communication plan's effectiveness, while ensuring that the right information is being conveyed to the public, and that people are satisfied with the information provided; and
- **Joint Information Center (JIC):** guidelines for working with the media at a JIC. For more information, see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing Best Practice: Crisis Communications Planning: Establishing Joint Information Centers*.

The **Baltimore Metropolitan Area Media Council** organizes regular meetings between senior PIOs and all news directors in the Baltimore area. This facilitates networking and intends to increase media involvement in state and local response planning.

The [Virginia Department of Emergency Management \(VDEM\)](#) has registered with [BurrellesLuce Media Database Online \(MDOL\)](#). This provides updated contact information of media outlets throughout North America. VDEM has created its own query for reporters in Virginia and the District of Columbia.

Working with Other Departments and Agencies

Officials should identify the roles of other state and local departments and consider the procedures for coordinating and communicating with them. This should help departments receive updated incident information and ensure that consistent information is ultimately relayed to the public.

The [Oklahoma City Fire Department](#) established a "Friday Lunch Bunch" for PIOs from different public safety agencies in the area. This allows them to meet informally and network.

The crisis communications plan should identify:

- Contact details for all PIOs from other state/local departments;
- Roles of different response agencies; and
- Procedures for exchanging messages and information between PIOs and public affairs offices during an emergency.

The [Missouri State Emergency Management Agency](#) maintains contact with other PIOs and the media by sending out regular e-mail updates. The Agency traces those that are returned as a way of updating contact information. E-mails are a good way of relaying information quickly to a number of different respondents. The same could also be done for lists of community or private sector partners.

Contact details should be regularly updated and should include:

- Names;
- Roles and responsibilities;
- Phone numbers;
- After-duty numbers; and
- E-mail addresses.

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