Communicating in a Crisis

SC Association of Counties | Institute of Government
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It's not enough just to know how evacuation routes flow, where shelters are located, how to activate road closures or where supplies are stored. County officials must also be prepared to share information (and often fight misinformation/rumors) quickly and accurately with both your residents and the news media when a crisis strikes.

Communications planning for a crisis response

1 – Identify a designated media contact/spokesperson/communications liaison for your county or department to be involved on both the preparation and response teams. This is a necessity, not a nice-to-have.

- Should not be someone who would have another major role in a disaster (i.e., sheriff or fire chief) who needs to be tending to the emergency, not fielding reporter calls or organizing news conferences.
- Should be readily accessible, well-spoken, respected, knowledgeable, and (ideally) known to reporters.
- Should have the authority to quickly approve news releases/statements without layers of approval process.
- Should have the trust and confidence of the county leadership.

In most cases, when reporters call, they are not looking for a "gotcha" story where they're trying to trick you into saying something or trying to embarrass your county. The reporter is just trying to get correct, factual information from a person who knows what's going on. They call who they believe to be the expert or the most likely to return a call looking for help. This is especially true during crisis situations when it's chaotic and deadlines are shorter than usual. If you're not the expert, say so, then direct the reporter to the appropriate person.

2 – Anticipate issues.

- Include the comms team as key players in crisis planning.
- Identify the various types of communication responses that will be needed to go along with your plans for different types of crisis scenarios.
- Clearly define the events or triggers that would activate a crisis response.
- Plot out all possible scenarios, even if they seem highly unlikely. In many cases, a situation becomes an emergency only because it wasn't anticipated.
- Know your core messages around the situation and how to incorporate them in any media responses.

While it may seem like a waste of time to try and plot a communications response to anything bad that can happen, investing this time will pay off in the long run.

3 – Get organized by designating a single staff contact assigned for each item below with clear chain of command and accountabilities related to communications.

- ☐ Create and update monthly a list of current team members and alternates with work and cell numbers and email addresses. Prioritize by factors such as home locations (who can get to a site the quickest if an event happens during non-work hours) and diversity of cell/internet providers (if one cell tower is lost or one internet provider is down, this ensures not everyone is on the same carrier).
- ☐ Monitor social media to understand what misinformation/rumors may be circulating about the situation. Social media substantially speeds up the time it takes for bad information to travel.
- ☐ Compile a prioritized stakeholder and partner list, including preferred communication channels. Stakeholders could include hospitals, airports, schools, etc.
- ☐ Update your media list weekly. Yes. Weekly. These positions change frequently. Following reporters on X is a good way to keep track of their comings and goings to new jobs.
- ☐ Set up a "phantom" web page on the county website and that could immediately be launched as a crisis response page where a designated person could update information. Consider having this page duplicated on a server away from the county offices and ensure someone can remotely update this site in case the server isn't available.
- ☐ Set up an emergency-use YouTube channel that can be activated immediately when needed.
- ☐ Identify public information back-up staff from other jurisdictions who can provide support to county staff if needed. This can work similar to mutual aid with power and other types of emergencies where the contacts are already in place. The Palmetto Alliance of Public Information Officers may be able to help with this.

4 - Communicate with employees and council.

- ☐ Share information with staff and council members before, or at least at the same time, it is released to news media. If the situation warrants, call a staff meeting/telephone conference and provide appropriate information on the circumstances of the situation.

5 – Communicate with partners/stakeholders

- ☐ Establish clear protocols for information sharing with neighboring jurisdictions, state agencies, and other stakeholders to ensure unified messaging.

6 - Report your own bad news.

- ☐ Don't allow another source or a social media outlet to inform the media first or start rumors. This is your first step toward losing control of the situation.

7 - [Track media inquiries](#) and return calls as promptly as possible.

- ☐ Keep track of issues being raised by reporters and a record of which media covered what.
- ☐ Track social media. The internet doesn't forget. AI might help with this.
- ☐ Know what's out there after the crisis is over.

Reporters will expect ongoing contact that includes complete, honest information, background material, some indication of how the organization intends to proceed, information about the impact on your staff and citizens, regular updates and after-the-crisis follow up.

8 - Do the right thing.

- ☐ Build trust with the news media long before a crisis happens. This is an ongoing process that requires consistent, authentic engagement.

In any emergency situation, your first responsibility is to the safety and well-being of the people involved. Once safety has been restored, face the public and face the facts. Never try to minimize a serious problem or "smooth it over" in the hopes that no one will notice. Conversely, don't blow minor incidents out of proportion or allow others to do so. Own the situation. Empathize with victims of the situation in authentic ways beyond "thoughts and prayers."

9 – Get ahead of misinformation

- ☐ Carefully follow all types of media – traditional, social media, etc.
- ☐ Address misinformation when necessary.
- ☐ Consider using AI to analyze text, images, and videos to detect potentially false or misleading information circulating online.
- ☐ Remember all communication in a crisis situation falls under FOIA.

10 - Debrief

- ☐ Make sure to include your communications team in your debriefing activity.

Did you need a better process for returning media calls? Were your channels of communication with the public adequate? Did the identified spokesperson have the tools needed to respond adequately to questions? How did you handle misinformation and rumors?

Meeting the media as honest brokers of accurate information

1 – Establish best practices

- Develop media relationships and an accurate media list long before a crisis hits. Enlist assistance from the SC Press Association if needed for media contacts or credentialing.
- Be proactive. In general, it is good policy to release information about the situation as quickly as possible. Comments should be of a general nature until all the facts are in, but then it is far better to get the full story out as soon as possible.
- Value accuracy and truth above all else.
- Deal with local reporters first if national reporters are on the scene. The locals will still be there long after the national reporters have packed up and left.
- Stress what's true, but avoid repeating misinformation or rumors.
- Maintain regular, proactive contact with the media and stakeholders, even if there is nothing new to report.
- Remember the mic is always hot.

2 - Be forthright in your comments, but avoid "no comment" or "off the record."

- Try to have some comment, even if you can't give the whole story (see bridging below).
- Never tell a reporter something you aren't willing to see in print.
- Be mindful of the need to strike a balance between the competing needs of the public's right to know, privacy issues and legal issues.
- Remember the mic is always hot.

When the public reads or hears "no comment," the natural assumption is the spokesperson has something to hide. Also, if you give a reporter nothing, they will likely work much harder to get around you to get the story which increases the chance of the reporter getting wrong information.

"Off the record" is sometimes misunderstood and misused, so don't rely on it to protect you.

3 – Identify possible "bridging" statements to keep you focused on your message

- "I don't have that information at this time, but what I can tell you right now is …"
- "I can't address a hypothetical, but what I can tell you at this point is …"
- "Right now, we're focused on bringing the situation under control, so I'm not going to speculate on the cause of the incident, but what I can share right now is …"
- "Let me put that in perspective by adding …"
- "What's most important to remember here is …."
- "That's an important question, but for now we must be focused on …"

4 – Breathe and use verbal white space

- Recognize that nerves are normal before speaking in an emergency situation. "Square breathing" can help calm nerves and center the speaker before speaking.
- Use "verbal white space" to give you a second to regroup thoughts or slow down an aggressive exchange.

5 - Maintain a calm and empathetic tone

- Project empathy and understanding in your messaging, tone and body language to reassure the public and encourage trust
- Avoid "thoughts and prayers" as this phrasing often sounds trite and insincere. Options to consider include:
  - "Our hearts are with those affected."
  - "We stand with everyone in the community affected by this situation."
  - "Support is available during this difficult time."
  - "This tragic event is deeply saddening."
- Use active voice statements whenever possible. Passive voice often implies an official is attempting distance from the situation or avoiding accountability
  - Instead of "Mistakes were made." Try "We made mistakes."
  - Instead of "The situation will be resolved." Try "We are working to resolve the situation promptly."

6 - Use people-friendly language

- Avoid jargon, acronyms
- Provide background on the situation even if it seems obvious (locations, names, etc.)
- Avoid using negative statements. Instead of stating what you didn't do, flip it to say what you did do.
  - Instead of "The county did nothing wrong in evaluating the risk of a water line break." Try "The county followed all safety protocols in evaluating the risk of a water line break."
- Mirror questions back.
- Talk in soundbite sized phrasing.

7 – Dress the part

- Consider branded clothes, if appropriate. Think through the optics of various types of clothes (EX: uniforms, windbreaker, polo shirt, tie, suit, etc.)
- Avoid shiny badges, jewelry that can catch light
- Avoid loud, jangly jewelry/accessories that can make annoying sounds

- ☐ Be mindful of long hair that can brush a lavaliere mic.
- ☐ Consider where to clip a mic battery if using a lavaliere mic.
- ☐ Pay attention to body language.

8 – Understand (and control to the degree possible) staging of media events

- ☐ Lighting
  - Will the stage space be adequately lit for television?
  - Does it account for natural light?
  - Check background/backdrop for reflections or bouncing light
- ☐ Audio
  - Provide mult box for reporters to plug phones/recorders in to and a flat lectern for mic stands
  - Listen for ambient sound like fans or outside noise that can be controlled
  - Provide quality microphones and speakers, windscreen to cut down on wind noise and reduce "popping" sounds
  - Check to ensure a lectern mic can be adjusted for people of various heights
- ☐ Stage size
  - Will the stage hold all the people on the program?
  - Seated or standing
  - Stage height
- ☐ Lectern
  - Height and width
  - Shelf
  - Light
  - Flat top for mic stand
- ☐ Other considerations
  - Handicap access
  - Deaf/other language interpreter
  - Captioning
  - Handheld mic to take questions
- ☐ Nice-to-haves
  - Branded mic flag/pop-up banner
  - Branded clothes