



## Considerations for Crisis Communication Planning

It is important for all organizations to plan for crisis and how to communicate effectively during times of crisis. An effective crisis plan will help to manage risks, provide consistent accurate information and protect the image of the organization. An effective message during emergencies can help support staff, volunteers and constituents of the organization as well as being a great tool in an emergency.

When developing a crisis communication plan, the organization should consider what methods will be used to communicate, who needs to be communicated to and who will be the lead voice for communication. A team approach to planning is often the most effective. This team should be comprised of staff, volunteers, legal counsel and possibly community stakeholders. The organization should identify one key person to serve as the spokesperson in times of crisis. The spokesperson is often the CEO or public relations staff person. The spokesperson should be the only person communicating on behalf of the organization; all inquires should be referred to the spokesperson.

Many options are available for communication including media, Internet, social sites and personal contact. The planning team should identify which options are best utilized for communicating to the key audiences during times of crisis. Communication tools will vary based on the audience. Written information might be effective for the spokesperson, key staff or the media; however personal discussion and phone communication may be more appropriate in some instances. The style for communication must be discussed prior as part of planning for a crisis. The planning team will decide which form of communication is most appropriate.

There are many audiences for the organization to consider. Staff, volunteers, constituents, the community, stakeholders and the media should all be communicated to in a manner that will be most effective for them. Both the form and content of communication should be considered for each audience. The planning team should identify these groups and how to communicate to them effectively as part of the written crisis plan.

### **Additional considerations:**

Train the Spokesperson: Spokesperson training helps them to be prepared and to respond in a way that optimizes the message of the organization. Role-playing can be helpful in training for the spokesperson. The spokesperson should learn to utilize the organization's fact sheets and written crisis response message to stay on point and communicate effectively. Training will help to minimize misinterpreted information about the organization and to maximize the appropriate message to the various audiences of the organization.

Communicating with the Media: It is important for the spokesperson to communicate the organization's key point and message. Media representatives will request information they feel their constituents need. This relationship is important and should be nurtured in advance and thoughtfully. All of the facts may not be immediately available during a crisis, so remember to keep communication lines open. Provide factual information when it is available; be honest, courteous and professional. Control the situation as appropriate, such as preventing media on properties, restricting access to facilities, personal and information. Making "No Comment" responses can often lead to assumptions and tension; this should be avoided unless no information is available. The spokesperson should have prepared response information that is reviewed by counsel. This is the information that should be provided and used for interviews; remember to answer questions thoughtfully and succinctly.

Develop a Fact Sheet: A fact sheet that describes the organization, its activities and its people should be developed as part of crisis planning. This information should be updated regularly to ensure it is current. This information will be important as a message, talking points and media response is developed for a specific incident.

Prepare Staff and Volunteers: Ensure your staff and volunteers know what is happening prior to seeing information in the media. Your staff and volunteers represent your organization in the community and should be prepared as part of your communication plan. Staff and volunteers should be provided with basic information, understand their role and know how to refer inquiries to the organization's spokesperson. Staff and volunteers should know to avoid communicating directly with the media or discussing crisis incidents with others.

Sample Crisis Communication Steps: Not all emergencies or incidents are the same. The crisis planning team leader must determine what steps should be taken in times of crisis. These are the basic steps to be followed in most crises.

- Assess the situation, gather information and determine a response strategy
- Contact your insurer, risk manager and legal counsel
- Create a message, talking points and media response materials
- Communicate to key staff and volunteers
- Communicate to stakeholders, the media and the community
- Maintain a written log of communication
- Review the situation and response to communications
- Adapt the message as information becomes available and in response to feedback

Additional crisis management information is available from the [Nonprofit Risk Management Center](#) and the Safe-Wise [Online Resource Library](#)