

Crisis Communication

Most counties, regardless of location or size, have some sort of emergency management or disaster recovery plan. But do you have a plan to address how you will communicate with your citizens and react to the news media when a natural or human-induced emergency occurs?

It's not enough just to know how evacuation routes flow, where shelters are located or where supplies are stored. You must also be prepared to share information (and often fight misinformation/rumors) quickly and accurately with both your residents and the news media.

1 – Anticipate problems.

- Identify high-potential 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.

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

2 – Identify who is to be designated as the spokesperson for your county or department.

- Should be readily accessible, well-spoken, respected and knowledgeable.
- Should not be someone who would have another major role in a disaster (i.e., sheriff or fire chief)

In most cases, when reporters call, it's not 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.

3 - Assemble and organize resources.

- 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 system).

- Compile a prioritized internal and external stakeholder audit, including preferred communication channels. Stakeholders could include hospitals, airports, schools, etc.
- Update weekly your media list. Yes. Weekly. These positions change frequently.
- Set up a “phantom” web page on the county website 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.
- 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.

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 the media.

- 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.
- 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.

Sometimes the media will be on the scene. In other situations, you will need to initiate contact. This should be done as soon as the basic facts are in hand. The initial contact should be followed with a formal statement, including any updated information and plans for investigating the incident.

6 - 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 note on lawyers and journalists).
- Never tell a reporter something you aren’t willing to see in print.

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 ten times 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.

7 – 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.

8 - Track media inquiries and return calls as promptly as possible.

- Keep track of issues being raised by reporters and keep a record of which media covered what
- Track social media. The internet doesn't forget.
- 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.

9 - 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."

10 - Debrief.

- Make sure to include your communications efforts in your debriefing activity. Think about whether your primary spokesperson was available and prepared.

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?