

WRITING A PUBLIC HEALTH CRISIS AND EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATION PLAN



1100 W. 49th Street, Austin, Texas 78756, 512-458-7400

CRISIS AND EMERGENCY COMMUNICATION PLANNING

A crisis is any event that triggers a level of public interest and media inquiry that requires a significant increase in staffing and/or resources to make a reasonable media response. Crises include such things as disease outbreaks, disasters and other health matters. Crises also may include fires, breakdowns in communications, disruptions in services and even rumors.

The crisis communication plan provides policies and procedures for the coordination of communications within your agency and between your agency, the media, other agencies and the public in the event of any public health threat, emergency or controversial issue that demands a public health response. The plan not only addresses media relations and communications issues but also includes procedures for the rapid identification of potentially harmful situations and the methods for responding to these situations quickly and effectively.

Specific objectives may be to:

- Anticipate crises and prevent them when possible;
- Respond to crises effectively (e.g., accurate verification, timely notifications, rapid assembly of crisis teams, effective response to rumors);
- Provide timely, accurate and helpful information to the public, partners, media and other audiences during crises.

What follows are guidelines for developing your agency's specific crisis and emergency risk communication plan. Included here are:

- Key Elements of a Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Plan
- Outline of a Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Plan
- Communication Tools.

KEY ELEMENTS

Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Plan

- Signed endorsement from your director.
- Designated line and staff responsibilities for the public health information teams.
- Internal information verification and clearance/approval procedures.
- Agreements on information release authorities (who releases what/when/how).
- Regional and local media contact list (including after-hours news desks).
- Procedures to coordinate with the public health organization response teams.
- Designated spokespersons for public health issues and third-party validators in an emergency.
- Your organization's emergency response team after-hours contact numbers.
- Contact numbers for emergency response information partners (e.g. Governor's public affairs officer, local FBI public information special agent in charge, local or regional department of agriculture or veterinarian public information officers, Red Cross, and other non-governmental organization).
- Agreements/procedures to join the joint information center of the emergency operations center if activated).
- Procedures to secure needed resources (space, equipment, people) to operate the public information and media operation during a public health emergency 24 hours a day, 7 days a week, if needed.
- Identified vehicles of information dissemination to public, stakeholders, partners (e.g., e-mail listservs, broadcast fax, door-to-door leaflets, press releases) during a crisis.

OUTLINE

Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Plan

➤ **Authority**

(This section includes all public health and emergency management statutes and ordinances that would affect the agency. Some may include issuance of public health emergency declarations, access of vaccine stockpiles, use of out-of-state or retired medical personnel and ability to close down sites or activities deemed a danger to public health. This section also identifies the authority that is passed to the agency and by whom.)

➤ **Purpose**

(This section states what this plan is intended to do, for and by whom.)

➤ **Scope**

(This section provides the overall scope or the coverage of the plan. It will outline what areas the plan covers.)

➤ **Situations and Assumptions**

(This section discusses the planning environment and lays out the general circumstances in which an emergency may arise. It lists threats and emergencies for which the crisis communications teams need to prepare. This section talks about how an outbreak is identified, outlines when to activate the plan and what resources are available. It also identifies specific populations that may need special consideration. One assumption is that some events, or even possible events, will bring out the media in force, creating many demands on emergency public information systems.)

➤ **Concept of Operations**

(This section forms the general plan of action to prepare for and respond to a public health crisis or emergency. It is the heart of the CERC plan. This section will include agency line of command, basic activation of agency plans in relation to communications operations and activities, any media policy of the agency and ways to assess media response. In some instances it could spell out the process of participation in a Joint Information Center or Emergency Operations Center.)

➤ **Organization and Assignment of Responsibilities**

(Here the plan discusses the basic delegation of responsibilities for crisis and risk communication. It will include designation of a spokesperson, how to provide 24/7 staffing, assure news dissemination systems and any required interaction with other agencies. This section also names local, state and national participants. A flow chart often is included in this section.)

➤ **Plan Development and Maintenance**

(This section outlines who is responsible for developing, reviewing and updating the crisis and emergency risk communication plan.)

➤ **Appendices**

- Logistical Details
- Call Down Lists
- Available Materials
- News Conference Guidelines
- Media Relations Reminders
- Texas Open Records Act and Freedom of Information Act
- Equipment, Supplies and Services

CRISIS AND RISK COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS

Preparing for a Crisis

Perception is reality, especially in a crisis

A crisis often is not what actually has happened, but what people think has happened. Vital messages often must include not only what you think you should say but also what people expect you to say. When people have genuine fears and concerns, saying “We know best” or “Just leave it to the experts” is not a reassurance.

Every member of the crisis team must understand what it is like on the other side of the fence – for a frightened resident, a distraught relative, overwhelmed public responders, an opportunistic politician, fanatical group. You often must base your communications on what they want to hear. What you don’t say is as important as what you do say.

Preparation is essential but not ever complete

By its nature, a crisis is chaotic. You cannot cover every contingency in planning. But you can know what is expected of your office and who the crisis team members are. Those likely to be involved in a crisis should attend a media training course. Tabletop exercises help a team review how to respond. Invite terrorism and biological warfare experts to these drills.

Ask these questions:

- Who will form the crisis team?
 - Internal?
 - External?
- Who will do the speaking?
 - For the crisis team?
 - For the health department?
- What is our communications role in public health?
- Who are our audiences?
 - Internal?
 - External?
- How do we communicate with them?
 - Public communications?
 - Secured communications?
- What are our messages?
 - 1.
 - 2.
 - 3.
- What resources and facilities do we need?
 - From crisis team?
 - From public health?
- What training can we get and who will give it?

Getting Started in Planning

- Identify person(s) responsible for your department's crisis communication planning and response:

Name: _____

Title: _____

Contact #: _____

- Identify and review any current crisis communication operation plans.
- Identify persons(s) by name in your department responsible for coordinating information updates (outside official response coordination) to the following groups before, during, and after an emergency (designate roles and responsibilities directed at each group):
 - Media
 - Public inquiries by phone
 - Public information on the Internet
 - Partners:
 - Local government officials
 - Emergency Operations Officials
 - State public information officer
 - American Red Cross
 - Hospitals/ERs/Physicians
 - Police and Fire Department
 - List others:
 - Stakeholders:
 - Elected officials
 - Local medical association chapters
 - Major businesses
 - List others:
- Identify who creates/obtains local public information products (press releases, Web pages, Q and As for hotlines, letters to partners/stakeholders) before, during and after an event
- Identify who must review and approve newly created information products—during an emergency—before products can be released to the public, partners and stakeholders:
 - Department director
 - Subject matter expert
 - Public information specialist
 - Other:
- Create the clearance procedures for new information products (e.g., clearance sign-off sheet, simultaneous vs. sequential sign-off).

- Obtain written agreements from other local emergency response officials about who will release what information during an event (e.g., who releases: aggregate casualty numbers, directs public to shelters, updates fiscal aspects, health risks, health recommendations for people and pets, safe drinking water).
- Determine public information release responsibilities and coordination activities with the state public information officer.
- List the local media outlets who should receive information from your department during an emergency by:

○ Outlet name	Day phone/fax/e-mail	Night phone/fax
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For:

- Local daily:
 - Newspapers
 - Radio stations
 - TV stations
 - Local web media
- Local weekly:
 - Newspapers
 - Magazines
 - Organization Newsletters
 - Web outlets
- Obtain the names/contact information of response officials in your department and provide your contact information with each.
- List by name and contact information designated media/public spokespersons for your department during an event (include level of training, experience, and cleared topics).
- Provide spokespersons and other department officials a copy of the “Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication” pocket card (Note: Included in the tool kit) and review periodically with them.
- Identify sources for prepared official public information on emergency health topics.
- Identify non-official subject matter experts who are willing to contribute to public information/ education activities during an event (e.g., president of the local chapter of the AMA). Agree on means to engage them and keep them current with public message points during the event.
- Identify the resources (space, equipment, people) needed to execute public information and health risk dissemination during an event.

- Identify channels of communication to the public, partners and stakeholders during an event (e.g., media availabilities, flyers, posters, town-hall meetings, e-mail listservs, broadcast fax, press releases, web pages.).
- Obtain agreements regarding your department's participation in the local joint information center (JIC) established by the local emergency response management department. (Note: Joining the JIC will multiply your reach and provide you 24-hour public information/media relations support).
- Work with your state/local national pharmaceutical stockpile coordinator to ensure public information requirements are met if medicine or vaccines must be dispensed to the public.
- Integrate your crisis communication plan into the overall department emergency response plan.
- Integrate public information response into local drills, exercises and training.