

A GUIDE TO CREATING AN EFFECTIVE CRISIS PLAN

A crisis can threaten the reputation and integrity of your city, its staff and its leaders. Negative attention can severely damage your city's good name – and hurt efforts to attract new residents, visitors and businesses to your city.

Creating an effective crisis plan is thus crucial.

A crisis plan lays the groundwork for your city's response to an evolving news event that has the potential to reach crisis proportions. The plan will help identify the city's communications needs during a crisis, including:

- The key members of the response team
- The resources that will be required
- Prepared statements that will help frame the city's initial response to the media and the public
- The roles that various city workers will play in the crisis.

Each crisis is different and fluid. Events can change day by day, even hour by hour. Therefore, a crisis plan must be flexible and designed for use in any situation. It provides a template from which the city's response will be based. It is intended to serve as a guideline to assist your city during the tense moments of a crisis, when quick actions are a necessity and having a plan in place is essential.

That's why it's best to plan early and establish a communications plan that can actually work in a crisis.

Here are the essential elements of a crisis plan:

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS TEAM

This is the brain trust for your crisis management plan. The team will consist of members representing key sections of your city government. It could be chaired by the mayor or city manager and should include staff members who are key to government operations and the immediate situation (for example, an IT expert if there is a data breach). The team should include representatives from the city's legal office, public safety agency and public relations/communications staff. Make sure you have complete contact information for all of the members, in case they need to be reached quickly after hours or on a weekend.

SPOKESPERSON (AND BACKUP)

Your spokesperson will be the face and voice of your city government through the earliest stages of the crisis. So he or she must be well-trained to deal with the media, be strong in the face of adverse conditions and challenging circumstances, and be unwavering, trustworthy and confident in front of reporters and TV cameras. He or she must be able to reassure the public while simultaneously sticking to the predetermined key messaging points. This is an essential position in getting the city through the crisis, and the task cannot fall to someone who simply happened to be available at the time. He or she must be the right person for this important job. And make sure you also have a trained backup in case one is needed, such as for overnight shifts if the crisis demands 24-hour messaging (a tired spokesperson is one who can make mistakes, so it is important that this person get regular relief and rest).

KEY MESSAGES

It's imperative that you enter a crisis situation prepared. Draft "holding" messages that can be used or adapted early in a crisis, allowing you to get out in front of the developing event and establish the flow of information. But even as the facts become known, all communications should still revolve around a small number of key messages designed to provide factual information, reassure the public and commit to finding out what happened.

POLICY FOR FRONT-LINE EMPLOYEES

Make sure your city has a policy for how front-line employees handle outside inquiries, including possible calls from the media. It's best to have everyone direct media calls to your designated spokesperson, but even employees whose duties don't make them part of the crisis response may still be asked for information. Make them aware of their duties in a crisis and how to respond appropriately.

MEDIA LISTS

Identify members of your local media who should be contacted during a potential crisis. Include those who specialize in certain subject areas and may need to be contacted in specific situations. Make sure your list is complete, including names, publications, titles, email addresses, and work and mobile numbers.

COMMAND CENTER

This will be a centrally located room or facility through which all decision-making and information will flow in a crisis. This will be your operation's brain center, equipped with the necessary technology to allow your crisis team to monitor news coverage, stay in contact with city staff and the public, and collectively manage a crisis situation. If the preferred location does not already have the necessary equipment and supplies in place to support it serving as a crisis command center, identify in advance where those items will come from and how they will get to the command center immediately when the need arises.

MEDIA MONITORING

During a crisis, you will need to rely on the media a great deal to get your message out to the public. You will need to monitor media reports to ensure that the city's message is conveyed accurately. In addition, you will need to monitor the media – including social media (see below for more detail) – as a possible source of information to help guide the city's response. Your crisis communications plan will designate employees whose job it will be to:

- Monitor coverage
- Collect information from news reports
- Note issues being focused on by traditional and social media
- Highlight errors and misinformation that need to be corrected
- Create a log of activities
- Important contact information

Identify a person (or persons) to be responsible for maintaining a contact list. This list will include the names and all phone numbers of key city workers who have a role to play in your city's crisis management plan. Make sure the list is constantly updated and available to all key personnel.

LIST OF KEY STAKEHOLDERS

Identify the important audiences with whom you need to be communicating during specific crises, both internally and externally. Determine how you are going to reach them.

COMMUNICATION CHANNELS

Depending on the crisis and your stakeholders, identify what communication channels to utilize in order to best deliver your message. In today's world, those channels will span traditional and social media. Identify which of these channels will be used to reach particular audiences. For example, to keep city employees properly informed you might use email to deliver the latest information, but to inform the general public you might post a statement to the city's website.

(Consider having a dedicated web page set aside for the latest developments, so the public can easily find the most current information.)

SOCIAL MEDIA

A social media plan is a critical element of any crisis communications plan. Appoint a team of city staff to monitor social media posts during a crisis. It's important to stay alert to what the public is reporting on social media sites in order to prevent misinformation from spreading. Post a statement on social media outlets as soon as possible following an event, and direct people to the city's website for further updates. Use the city's various social media platforms (Facebook, Twitter, etc.) to direct people to your city's website for complete information. Make sure you have all the necessary information easily accessible to handle these communications, including account log-in names, passwords, etc.

PROTOCOL

Identify who will be notified when a potential crisis arises. What are the triggers for gathering the crisis team? Who will write the media statements or adapt them from "holding" messages? Who must approve them? How will these statements be released? These are some of the topics for which clear protocols should be established in order to guide your response with as much clarity and purpose as possible.