

Effective Crisis Communication



STRATEGIES AND SOLUTIONS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGERS

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Since the first edition of this report was written following the September 11th terrorist attacks, the world has seen an acceleration of both natural and human-caused crises. Natural disasters alone have cost billions of dollars in damages and resulted in significant loss of life. Sound crisis communications practices can go a long way toward helping citizens and local government personnel understand and deal with dangerous situations in a timely and prudent manner.

This *InFocus* report breaks down the crisis communication process into ten clear steps and provides checklists to aid in preparing crisis communication plans, offers suggestions for integrating social media, presents a template for a core crisis message, and offers guidelines for working with the media. Effective crisis communication strategies will help you translate information about a hazard into language your citizens, personnel, and the media will clearly understand.

This report is an update of “Crisis Communication for Local Government Managers,” by Nancy J. Lampen and Mary L. Walsh, IQ Report, Volume 34, Number 12 2002. ©ICMA

Safety as a basic human need

One of the critical missions of any local government is to provide for the health and safety of its citizens. Local governments, when they act responsively in fulfilling this mission, are helping to meet a critical human need—the need to feel safe. Abraham Maslow, the founder of the humanistic school of psychology, taught that the need for safety is even deeper than the need to love and be loved.¹

The major crises that local governments confront relate, in large part, to citizens' safety and security. Most natural disasters, criminal activity, fires, environmental pollution, and health risks fall under the purview of at least one local government department. Proactive steps taken by local government departments and agencies before, during, and after a crisis can go a long way towards strengthening citizens' sense of security. How you frame crisis events and convey crisis messages will either build citizens' sense of trust and confidence or heighten citizens' fear and feelings of vulnerability.

Providing citizens with a model of how to live through a crisis and deal with feelings of fear can help empower and inspire people to act despite their fears. And giving citizens worthwhile things to do and the ability to make a contribution can give people hope during the worst of times.

The town of Garner, North Carolina, introduces its crisis communication plan and policy by reinforcing the importance of open lines of communication during a crisis event:

*The public will turn to the media and the government for information, instructions, and reassurance. By providing critical information to the public in a timely manner, the town can maintain public safety and public confidence in all response efforts.*²

Crisis avoidance

Risk and crisis are related issues. Preparing effectively for an emergency means both assessing the risk that a hazard will occur and then developing strategies to handle the risk situation if it does occur.

A risk is the probability that a hazard or danger will lead to a serious problem. The estimates of the severity of the consequences of the risk, the probability of exposure to the risk situation, and the likelihood of the danger actually occurring are all elements that local government managers consider when they determine which hazards to anticipate as part of their emergency management.

The city of Seattle's *Seattle Hazard Identification and Vulnerability Analysis* (SHIVA) identifies Seattle's hazards and their consequences to help ensure good public policy decisions and crisis management programs are implemented.

The SHIVA forms the basis of the city of Seattle's disaster planning and preparedness activities. It is a community document with ongoing input from citizens, who help identify community risks. The office of emergency management solicits information from stakeholders to update the plan and monitor citizen needs and perceptions.³

A crisis is exposure to a danger that is happening at the immediate moment. Good emergency management planning that includes risk analysis can help avoid a crisis. After a crisis has passed, however, new and unplanned hazards can occur. For example, the

Mary L. Walsh is principal associate of Climate Change Learning and Information Consulting (CCLIC), and adjunct professor of public administration. She is a former manager of training and safety, director of public works, and chief administrative officer.

collapse of the World Trade Center on September 11, 2001, led to the new risk of exposure to dust and ash for city residents and emergency cleanup teams.

Occasionally local governments may actually create a crisis by ignoring potential risks, not releasing information about a potential hazard in a timely fashion, or not handling a dangerous situation well. A good example of this is the Elk River chemical spill in West Virginia in January 2014. The level of ongoing frustration and anger felt by the residents in the aftermath of this water quality crisis indicates a failure on the part of crisis spokespersons to adequately explain the situation and to give reassuring instructions to the area residents regarding the safety of their water supply.⁴

Crisis avoidance then, is an important aspect of emergency planning. To avoid a risk turning into a full-blown crisis you will want to:

- Identify and assess your community's vulnerabilities
- Develop "what-if" scenarios
- Create an emergency management and crisis communication plan.

There are numerous examples of local government vulnerability assessments and adaptation strategies related to specific events such as floods, droughts, wild fires, and heat waves. (For specific examples see the ICMA e-book *Climate Change Adaptations for Small Municipalities and Towns*).⁵

Using a crisis communication plan

Collecting and disseminating information effectively and efficiently to employees, residents, the media, and other stakeholders during and after a crisis is almost impossible without a written crisis communication plan.

A crisis communication plan is a set of guidelines a local government uses to disseminate information and advise employees, citizens, and the media. It is an important and integral part of any emergency management plan. Advance preparation permits a local government to be proactive instead of reactive and to employ customized methods and strategies.

Poor communication may turn a minor problem into headlines that need to be addressed and managed later. When information is not communicated in a timely manner, the grapevine of misinformation and rumor takes over. The media calls or arrives unannounced on the scene and asks sticky questions and rumors can "go viral" on the Internet.

A solid crisis communication plan helps a local government manage less threatening crises such as financial malfeasance or a labor strike, as well as major disasters. Information that flows into a city is collected and addressed, so that potential problems can be detected and dealt with before they mushroom. Identified and trained spokespeople can facilitate effective communication about the crisis. Crisis communication is becoming more and more interactive through the Internet. For example, Short Message Service (SMS) text message programs for cell phone, web, and mobile communications systems are useful for contacting city employees and stakeholders. These methods save time and prevent an onslaught of incoming calls asking what to do.

The province of Ontario, Canada, has in place a comprehensive program for contacting citizens and personnel in an emergency situation using SMS text messaging, e-mail subscriber services, and social media (Twitter and Facebook). The province's [emergency management website](#) provides useful details for the public on how to subscribe to key emergency alert services. Maintaining up-to-date lists of things to do and people to contact allow city workers to put their energy into managing the immediate crisis. City officials, knowing that the first essential steps of crisis management are being handled, can move on to delegate responsibilities. An excellent resource that outlines the fundamental aspects of pulling together your crisis communication plan can be found at FEMA's site, "Ready.gov."

The perception of risk

Peter Sandman, an internationally recognized expert on crisis communications, developed a formula that defines risk:

$$\text{Risk} = \text{Hazard} + \text{Outrage}$$

Hazard is the quantifiable negative consequences of a circumstance; it is the genuine characteristics of the risk, such as mortality or ecosystem damage that determine experts' response to the risk. *Outrage* is the public's response to the risk, including feelings of apathy, fear, anger, and concern.

Applying this formula can be helpful for local governments in determining the communications they need in a given situation. The public's perception of a risk is a key element in determining how best to communicate about a danger. For example, if a community is facing a health risk such as West Nile virus, the county health department might judge the risk to be high but public outrage is low. A local government could then frame the issue in public relations terms with marketing techniques and public education to alert the target audience.

But in a true crisis, citizen outrage is high and the hazard is high. The public perceives the risk to be very serious and is extremely concerned and upset, and the situation in reality is critical. In this case, communications strategies would be quite different. People must be reassured and their emotional response or outrage must be reduced. Crisis communication needs to manage the outrage so that the level of people's emotions more nearly matches the actual level of risk.

In a crisis, people's emotional response can extend to terror and, ultimately, denial or panic. People can slip into denial as a way of ameliorating their feelings of extreme fear and misery. Crisis messages need to help people move away from denial and hopelessness. One important way to help people deal with their alarm and denial is to offer them something they can do for themselves, their families, the wider community, or the specific victims of the crisis situation.

Sandman suggests that communicators can:

- **Acknowledge uncertainty**—avoid sounding overconfident
- **Speculate responsively**—talk about what you know and don't know, what you've ruled in and ruled out, and what questions you haven't addressed yet
- **Bear the fear**—let your humanity show and express your fear, anger, and sadness; but model forbearance and perseverance
- **Give affected groups something to do**—constructive activity reduces denial, and giving people a choice of things to do is empowering and can help lessen anxiety
- **Prevent panic**—be truthful, not overly reassuring. During a crisis, panic is rare; denial is the more common reaction. Excessive efforts to address panic may distract crisis managers from dealing with denial, which can make people act as though they are apathetic (apathy is different from denial; apathetic people are capable of responding to crisis messages, but people in denial do not "hear" the crisis messages because practical information is meaningless in the face of their extreme fear).

Interestingly, most people in a serious situation slip into a unique frame of mind: they become calm, cooperative, and less likely to misbehave—even traffic jams resulting from an emergency become more orderly. Panic can occur, however, when people receive inconsistent messages from those in authority. A perception of incompetence can lead to panic, and when messages are overly reassuring and sound overly confident, people tend to disbelieve them.

Source: Peter Sandman, www.psandman.com.

Checklist for crisis communication planning

A crisis communication plan answers these basic yet critical questions:

- ✓ How is information gathered?
- ✓ Where is collected information stored?
- ✓ How is information disseminated, by which methods, and through which channels?
- ✓ How will citizens and the media be informed of a crisis?
- ✓ Which are appropriate communication methods for contacting stakeholders?
- ✓ How are non-English-speaking stakeholders, the elderly, and people with disabilities contacted?
- ✓ Who should be the primary crisis spokespeople and backup spokespeople?
- ✓ What are employees' communication responsibilities?
- ✓ Who are contact persons and backups for each stakeholder group?
- ✓ What is the process for determining what and when information will be released?
- ✓ How do employees contact their supervisor or designated representative?
- ✓ How do stakeholders contact the city during a crisis?
- ✓ What are the templates for developing accurate, consistent, and credible messages?
- ✓ What are the core background messages on basic organizational processes?
- ✓ Who analyzes the overall impact of the crisis on the city from a systems perspective?
- ✓ How will critical-incident-stress debriefings be offered for employees and stakeholders?

Steps to effective crisis communication

Although the best planning and preparation cannot eliminate forces beyond your control, the following 10 basic steps can help guide your local government organization toward effective communication during a crisis.

Step 1: Identify key personnel

Well before a crisis, identify key staff members to serve as your crisis communication team. The team usually includes the local government manager, the director of the emergency management program, and department and division heads. Because people of diverse points of view and ways of thinking are needed on a crisis management team, it is important to provide communication, team building, and conflict resolution training for your team to ensure they will work together effectively before, during, and after a crisis. During a crisis, team members may well be under great stress and their prior work together will stand them in good stead.

Step 2: Identify spokespersons

Identify people to speak for the organization during a crisis. Spokespeople play a key role in shaping how citizens and the media perceive the local government's crisis management activities. The local government manager or the highest-ranking public official available usually delivers major crisis update messages to citizens. However the manager should not be the sole person interacting with citizens and may not be the best contact for specific citizen groups.

Consider who your most appropriate stakeholders will be for each specific type of crisis; then appoint spokespeople who seem best suited to establish close ties with that stakeholder group. For example, the director of information services may be the person best able to communicate with businesses affected by a major telecommunications malfunction. An elected official might be a more appropriate spokesperson in the event of a disastrous flood.

All spokespeople need extensive communication training. In addition to public speaking skills, it is essential that a speaker be able to convey empathy and concern as well as credibility and self-confidence. The spokesperson needs to understand how to frame a message so that it is clear and easily understood; for example, it is important to avoid jargon and explain technical concepts in lay terms.

Visual aids in the form of charts, diagrams, models, or videos may be helpful. Because people learn and process information in different ways, it is vital to provide information that will complement diverse learning styles. A certain portion of your community may prefer written messages via the Internet and/or social media contacts while some citizens may prefer radio or television notifications.

Being an effective spokesperson means possessing a number of critical skills. Communication training can help turn a good spokesperson into a highly competent representative of your local government. Communication training may include skill building for:

Interpersonal communication

- Express empathy and compassion for the victims and their loved ones who are affected by a crisis
- Acknowledge feelings
- Acknowledge criticism without becoming defensive
- Handle hostility, fear, and anger.

Presentation skills

- Know how to analyze the audience
- Model calm confidence and a positive attitude
- Know how to deliver bad news
- Stress key information
- Effectively and smoothly use visual aids such as Microsoft PowerPoint or Prezi
- Establish credibility
- Give clear instructions.

What makes a good spokesperson?

Consider these characteristics when selecting your representative during a crisis:

- ✓ Knowledgeable about the complexities of the crisis you are confronting
- ✓ Trustworthy and credible
- ✓ Good presentation and public speaking skills
- ✓ Technically proficient with social media platforms
- ✓ High comfort level in ambiguous situations
- ✓ Calm under stress and pressure
- ✓ Self-confident
- ✓ Empathetic and caring
- ✓ Resilient

Interview skills

- Effectively answer media questions
- Avoid answering some questions; do it graciously
- Set limits when too much is being requested
- Practice listening skills
- Practice clarifying, paraphrasing, and acknowledging
- Practice handling press conferences, television, radio, and print media interviews.

Online and social media skills

- Develop familiarity with Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube as communication tools
- Identify appropriate RSS Feeds for emergency preparedness
- Compose e-mail alerts.

Note: Excellent trainers for spokesperson skills exist in most metropolitan areas. For referrals, contact the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); the American Society for Training and Development; and the Public Relations Society of America.

Step 3: Identify stakeholders

Stakeholders are the members of your community who will be either affected by the crisis or instrumental in the management of it. From a communication viewpoint, identifying and building relationships with stakeholders is essential to effectively managing a crisis. Local government managers need to know who to contact in order to manage and recover from a crisis whether the crisis involves an internal computer network, the community water supply, or the organization's image in the media. Local government managers need to know what information citizens require, how the message should be framed, and how best to contact stakeholders.

The first step in managing communication with stakeholders is to identify all the stakeholders who would be affected by specific types of crises in your community. One way to approach this task is to imagine that one of the scenarios from your crisis management plan has occurred, and identify all the resources needed to effectively deal with the crisis and restore your jurisdiction to full functioning.

Every person or group identified as affected by the crisis scenario or needed in the recovery process would be a stakeholder. List each city or county department that would be affected by the crisis or the managing of it, other branches of government that would be involved, local businesses, emergency services, hospitals, and/or specific media outlets that might cover the story, including the names of newspaper columnists and television and radio reporters likely to cover the story.

Step 4: Build relationships with stakeholders

Identifying potential stakeholders and then developing relationships with them lets your various publics know that you are concerned about their safety and well-being.

Austin, Texas, for example, has made a concerted effort to proactively recruit emergency management volunteers. The city's office of homeland security and emergency management offers regular training courses for citizens interested in becoming a member of Austin's Community Emergency Response Team (CERT). Interested citizens are trained in a variety of disaster relief capabilities such as fire suppression and search and rescue.

Meetings with stakeholders can be excellent feedback mechanisms for learning stakeholders' perceptions of their local government, their specific concerns and special needs, and how they prefer the local government to communicate with them. For example, a meeting between a city's hospital emergency room personnel and the city might be used

to examine ways the city could help the hospital better serve patients in times of crisis. This might result in a plan for communicating where injured persons should go for treatment; identifying communication methods to determine where specific patients are; and announcing traffic routes to the hospital if areas of the city are closed.

Hospital personnel could inform the city of what they would need to have in the event of a chemical spill or other hazardous-substance incident. A classic, real-life example of local government–stakeholder communication occurred in February 2003 when the New York City Health Department placed city hospitals on high alert for a possible biochemical terrorist attack. The seven-page alert to area emergency rooms urged hospitals to increase supplies of a variety of pharmaceutical agents as antidotes to cyanide and other chemical poisons. The alert warned hospital personnel to prepare for patients with respiratory, neurological, and skin conditions and to be aware of clusters of patients exhibiting similar symptoms.

Step 5: Analyze your audience

Your crisis messages will be far more effective if you know and analyze your key audiences. Community members have different sets of perceptions and values, a variety of learning styles, and differing levels of knowledge about the crisis at hand. To communicate effectively, you will need to know your audience before developing your core messages about the crisis.

Messages in a crisis may have to be tailored to several audiences, taking into account such factors as age, race, gender, education, occupation, religion, income, national origin, literacy level, group affiliations, special needs, and fluency in English.

Gathering audience data before a crisis is preferable but not always possible. If you find yourself in the midst of a sudden situation, rely on neighborhood groups, your stakeholder representatives, and feedback from employees to determine the specifics of your audience.

Checklist for communicating with stakeholders

Consider these qualities when communicating during a crisis:

- ✓ Be very visible and communicate, communicate, communicate
- ✓ Demonstrate care and concern
- ✓ Acknowledge feelings of stakeholders
- ✓ Express empathy for the loss of human life, animal life, and damage to the environment; stakeholders will not listen to how the problem is being handled unless they feel that the speaker has empathy for the losses they are experiencing
- ✓ Acknowledge any problems or mistakes that have occurred
- ✓ Thank all local government workers, stakeholders, and others who have worked on the problem
- ✓ Be honest; if the city has contributed to the problem, acknowledge it
- ✓ Describe what is being done to recover from the crisis; offer concise and specific details
- ✓ Tell stories of heroic efforts to make the situation more real
- ✓ Tell the good news
- ✓ Tell people how they can help; be specific
- ✓ Ask for people's questions and concerns
- ✓ Let stakeholders know when you will communicate with them again.

Table 1. Your audience can determine your presentation

Audience characteristics	How to tailor the message
Unaware of situation	Use graphic method—high color, compelling visuals and theme
Apathetic/ victimized	Open up risk assessment and management processes to stakeholder participation; show where past interactions have made a difference; provide choices.
Well-informed	Build on past information
Hostile	Acknowledge concerns and feelings; identify common ground; open up risk assessment and management process to stakeholder participation
Highly educated	Use more sophisticated language and structure
Not highly educated	Use less sophisticated language and structure; make structure highly visible, not subtle
Trustworthy individual	Use that person to present risk information
Comfortable place	Hold meetings in that location
Popular sources of information	Use that method to convey your message
Key members	Ensure that the message reaches each member
Preferred level of involvement	If at all possible given time, funding, and organizational constraints, involve the audience in the way they want to be involved
Misconceptions of risk or process	Acknowledge misconceptions; provide facts to fill gaps in knowledge and correct false impressions
Concerns	Acknowledge concerns and provide relevant facts

Source: Regina E. Lundgren and Andrea H. McMakin, *Risk Communication: A Handbook for Communicating Environmental, Safety, and Health Risks* (Columbus, Ohio: Battelle Press, 1998), 122.

Step 6: Develop core messages

Core messages are the heart of your crisis communication. They summarize the information and facts you want to deliver, along with the emotional concern you wish to convey to your audience.

Although you cannot control how others perceive your crisis message, you can put thought into how to frame your communication and how to send messages so that they are more likely to be understood. What outcome do you want? Do you want to raise citizens' awareness of an issue? Do you want to change their attitude about a situation? Or do you want citizens to take a particular action such as boiling their water or evacuating their homes?

Choosing the best tool for reaching a stakeholder group depends on the goal of the communication as well as the gravity and urgency of the issue:

- **Face-to-face messages** provide immediate interaction with (and feedback from) the audience. The speaker can be sure of the receiver's attention. Elected officials traditionally go to the scene of disasters because they know that face-to-face messages demonstrate personal concern about the welfare of citizens and about correcting the situation. An important caveat is to be sure a personal appearance is timely (i.e., as close to the beginning of the disaster as is possible and deemed safe).
- **Written messages:** press releases are probably the most common form of written message during a crisis and can be used when you need to have a written record. Web pages, e-mails, and RSS feeds can be a quick and efficient way to deliver crisis information, but the audience may be limited. More and more local governments are using social media sites (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, YouTube) as a way to deliver information.

Checklist for developing core messages

Consider these elements when drafting your core messages:

- ✓ Does the public perceive a greater risk than actually exists?
- ✓ Is there a risk the public doesn't realize but should act on?
- ✓ How will interested citizens behave toward you in a crisis situation? Will they be supportive allies or will they be hostile and likely to attack and blame the city/county for the situation?
- ✓ Who are the stakeholders? What are their backgrounds? What would motivate them?
- ✓ What kind of information do interested citizens want or need?
- ✓ What are attitudes/beliefs/issues/needs of interested citizens?
- ✓ How will those attitudes/beliefs/issues/needs affect this communication?
- ✓ How might the life experiences of citizens and stakeholders shape the context of the core messages?
- ✓ How much detail is necessary?
- ✓ How does your information relate to/affect citizens' lives?
- ✓ What do the residents already know about this topic?
- ✓ What cultural diversity exists within the group of listeners? Are there language barriers?
- ✓ What learning styles are out there? Have you taken into account that people process and hear information differently (so you will need to communicate in different ways?)
- ✓ What is the audience's reading level?
- ✓ Where do they get their information?
- ✓ What potential barriers exist between the city/county and these citizens?
- ✓ What are you forgetting about this group?

Guidelines for oral and written communications

Remember that in this age of cellphone technology and social media, citizens will be communicating with each other as the event is occurring. It is very important to get your message out to provide accurate information and quell any rumors that can so quickly spread:

1. Use familiar words wherever possible.
2. Limit the amount of information covered at one time.
3. Be specific and explicit; use descriptive words, exact measurements, and examples wherever possible.
4. State the reason for asking employees to follow a certain procedure and explain what happens if the procedure is not followed.
5. Repeat and recap information frequently to emphasize important points.
6. Use written summaries and visual aids (when appropriate) to clarify your points:
 - Give employees written information they can take away to go over later.
 - Use pictures that show actions (especially when explaining safety procedures).
 - Use international symbols that are understood by people of many cultures.
 - Augment written material with video presentations to make the material come alive.
7. Demonstrate and encourage the correct way to complete a task, use equipment, and so on.

8. Use short, precise words that say exactly what you mean.
9. Rely on specific terms and concrete examples to explain your points.
10. Avoid slang, idioms, jargon, and buzzwords; abbreviations, acronyms, and unfamiliar text may lead to confusion.
11. In written communication, use short paragraphs; each paragraph should stick to one topic and be no more than eight to ten lines.
12. Use transitional phrases to help your audience follow your train of thought; precede related points with expressions like “in addition,” “first,” “second,” and “third.”

To ensure that consistent messages are being sent by the local jurisdiction, identify a spokesperson who is solely responsible for releasing information about the crisis. The spokesperson’s job is to centralize and control the flow of information and monitor the flow of internal and external communication regarding the crisis (see Step 2).

Information must be checked for its validity and then communicated to the appropriate audiences. A policy must be in place explaining why requests from the media for information should be referred to the spokesperson in charge of crisis communication. Other jurisdiction employees should understand they are not to speak to the media themselves, and they should be able to identify and contact the crisis spokesperson.

Designated spokespersons need to know which stakeholder groups they are responsible for contacting, how to contact them, what messages are to be conveyed, and where to send information they learn from these groups.

Contacting stakeholders is a two-way process. In addition to communicating the city’s message, it is essential to learn stakeholders’ perceptions, questions that need to be addressed, and resources available for crisis recovery.

Social media can change the playing field here. It offers instant feedback and can be highly useful in receiving on-the-ground instantaneous observations of citizens directly involved in the crisis—often as it is occurring. (See Appendix A for a worksheet for core crisis messages and a template.)

Table 2. When to talk it over, when to write it out, when to apply technology

An oral message is best when—	A written message is best when—	An electronic message is best when—
You want immediate feedback from the audience	You don’t need immediate feedback	You don’t need immediate feedback, but you do need speed
Your message is relatively simple and easy to accept	Your message is detailed, complex, and requires careful planning	Your message is emotional, you may or may not need immediate feedback, but you’re physically separated (videotape, teleconference)
You don’t need a permanent record	You need a permanent, verifiable record	You don’t need a permanent record, but you want to overcome distance barriers (voice mail, fax)
You can assemble the audience conveniently and economically	You are trying to reach an audience that is large and geographically dispersed	You are trying to reach an audience that is large and geographically dispersed, and you want to reach them personally (teleconference, videotape)
You want to encourage interaction to solve a problem or reach a decision	You want to minimize the chances for distortion that occur when a message is passed orally from person to person	You want to minimize oral distortion, but you’re in a hurry and in a distant location (e-mail)

Source: Courtland L. Bovée and John V. Thill, *Business Communication Today*, 5th ed. (Upper Saddle River, N.J.:Prentice Hall, 1998).

Step 7: Establish protocols

A clear chain of command establishes communication responsibilities and backup responsibility during a crisis. Coordination between city and county agencies as well as internal departmental coordination is critical for effective crisis communication.

Lines of communication need to be clear and open so that critical information is shared well before a crisis. Employees need to know their communication responsibilities when a crisis occurs. For those working in the field, this may mean quick contact with a supervisor about whether they are safe and the status of their availability for an emergency assignment. For employees who are evacuated from a local government building, it may mean reporting to a predetermined gathering location. Employees also need to know how to access information during a crisis, where to go for critical stress debriefing sessions or updates on work schedules, and how to reach key officials.

In this age of social media it may be harder to enforce chain-of-command procedures. Both citizens and employees have access to instant communication via smartphone technology that enables users to send text messages, share photos, etc. All the more reason for you to establish clear directions and to be sure everyone in your organization is familiar with the internal communication process during a crisis. Everyone in your local government needs to know what role he or she is expected to play and the procedures to follow.

Choosing a message format

Your choice of communication channel and medium depends on:

- Message
- Audience
- Need for speed
- Situation
- Audience expectations
- Best method for sending messages
- Importance of timing
- Listener time constraints
- Listener distractions
- Perception of low importance or interest
- Cost.

Step 8: Plan for a communications network

A system needs to be implemented for recording incoming calls, e-mail, and requests for information and for determining how to prioritize answers. Several software packages offer Web-based tools for managing information and tracking information that is collected and disseminated during a crisis. These can be customized to suit specific requirements.

FEMA offers guidance for internal communications during a crisis event and suggests your information technology (IT) staff can play a key role in setting up effective internal communications systems. According to FEMA:

It is important that IT managers work with department heads, local emergency management, and state emergency management to determine technology support requirements prior to an event. IT managers should reach out to emergency management personnel in the community to formulate information technology requirements. Such requirements could include:

Using social media for communicating in a crisis

Social media provides a new set of tools for communicating. It can be particularly useful in a crisis situation when speed matters. The most common current platforms for social media used by local governments are Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.

According to communication consultant Sandy Levine, "There's no longer the perfect news cycle, and people won't wait for you to create the perfect press release. It's about maximum exposure with minimum delay. Integrating the core platforms—Facebook, Twitter, YouTube—into your communication strategy for posting of press releases and online links with appropriate media, and making sure processes are in place so that these communication tools get accurate information immediately, will help ensure your public gets the right information as quickly as possible, minimizing confusion and improving understanding in a difficult situation.

Integrating social media more broadly into your communication plan also ensures you will reach a broader pool of people faster. The flow of accurate information will go more smoothly, the public will be informed appropriately and efficiently, and answers will be swiftly delivered. It can make the difference between a bad situation and a calamity; and focuses our attention on a crucial need of the most important element in any disaster preparedness plan—the safety and security of our citizens."⁶

Ragan Communication, an online news and blog service, offers several practical guidelines for integrating social media into your communication planning:

✓ **Be ready to use every means of communication available**

Traditional media will be overwhelmed with many stories. If you want to get their attention and get coverage as a way to reach your audiences, do these things now:

- *Be ready to post updates to your primary website starting now.*
- *Use iPad and iPhone video to record each update and post it to YouTube.*
- *Send e-mails to employees with links to your website and video.*
- *Post that same video to CNN iReports.*
- *Add links to Facebook and Twitter that send your audiences to your website and your video.*

✓ **Expect a spike in social media communication**

Organizations that often have a relatively small following on social media will see a spike in social media during power outages. As audiences lose computer access, they will turn to their mobile devices. Your crisis communication team must be prepared to monitor social media and reply to posts only when absolutely necessary. Too many replies to negative comments engender more negative comments, and those comments keep posting more frequently in everyone's news feed.

✓ **Direct tweets to reporters**

Increasingly, reporters respond quickly to tweets. For example, in a weather crisis you can generally get a reporter's attention faster with a tweet than with an e-mail, phone call, or text message.

✓ **Be a resource**

Don't confine your social media posts to only information about your organization. Post resource information that your audience needs, such as locations to shelters, information about emergency supplies, and any other creature comforts they need.⁷

Note: For detailed information on integrating social media into your local government see the ICMA *InFocus* report: [Engaging Your Citizens Using Social Media \(Volume 45/ Number 4, 2013\)](#).

- *Establishing information systems to inform, coordinate, and execute operational decisions and requests during an incident.*
- *Establishing information systems to support the establishment of a common operating picture during an incident.*
- *Establishing information management policies prior to an event to integrate information needs during an event into a common operating picture.*
- *Establishing information systems that tie together all command, tactical, and support units involved in incident management. This system must enable all entities to share critical information.⁸*

Step 9: Communicate with the media

The media holds great influence over how the public will view a crisis. A good working relationship with the local media is essential to getting important information distributed in a timely way.

Your organization's spokesperson during a crisis needs to be highly credible because in stressful situations stakeholders' judgments may be influenced by emotions and perceptions more than by facts. Be sure your media spokesperson speaks with authority, has an appreciation of media relations, is mindful of how responses will play with the press, can anticipate the most difficult questions that can be asked, and responds with intelligent and well-considered answers.

Before a crisis occurs, it is a good idea to meet with personnel at various media outlets to learn their needs. Television will need interesting visuals, radio prefers interviews with key officials, and newspapers require in-depth background information. All have deadlines and the more you know about their requirements the easier it will be to get your message out.

You will be best prepared if you have your social media contacts established in advance and use your alert services for both your residents *and* the media.

Meetings provide an opportunity to educate the media on the internal workings of your city or county. Develop a list of in-house experts whom the media may contact for detailed, analytical information. The jurisdiction should maintain contact with these experts during non-crisis times to establish trusting relationships. It is important to educate the general public and the media before a crisis so they understand how well they are being served during a crisis.

Responding to the media in a timely manner is essential—the first twenty-four hours are crucial. Precise, accurate facts about a crisis are often difficult to verify, so it is important to have prepared background information that can be given to the media. Having background information prepared in advance gives you some breathing space and demonstrates to the media the jurisdiction's willingness to communicate and cooperate.

Some things to include in this background packet include:

- Photographs of local government department heads
- Information on specific facilities (for example, the number of workers at public buildings, the capacity of the stadium used as a designated gathering place in the event of building evacuation, location of emergency shelters, etc.)
- Number of employees
- Safety records and practices
- Description of work processes for hazardous jobs

- Description of the nature of hazards that are technical in nature; most media personnel and the general public will not have the background to understand the scientific aspects of hazards such as chemical spills.⁹

Working with the media

The position the city or county initially takes and the way organization officials respond to the media directly impact how the public will judge the handling of the crisis.

Key points of working with the media include:

- Try to gauge the importance of the problem accurately; don't overestimate or underestimate
- Speak to the issues
- Take responsibility and be accountable for your organization
- Research what the public (citizens with a stake in the outcome) and employees are thinking
- Understand that an apology is not an admission of guilt
- Be honest and open
- Establish a good relationship with media reporters before any crisis
- Offer clear, focused core messages
- Immediately notify media outlets if they make a major error in their reporting on the crisis
- Immediately correct any misinformation provided by the local government
- Be prepared for questions such as:
 - When did you know about the problem?
 - What did you do about the problem?
 - What are you going to do?
 - What will the effects be?
- Remain calm; never lose your temper
- Never say "no comment."

Step 10: Debrief after the crisis

In the aftermath of a crisis, people need to process what happened during the event. Debriefing provides a structure for citizens and your staff to discuss their experiences and feelings, gain a sense of perspective, and unload their stress.

Every crisis leaves its mark. After a life-threatening event, post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) will likely affect some members of your community as well as some of your employees. According to the National Center for Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder, most people who are exposed to a traumatic, stressful event experience some of the symptoms of the disorder in the days and weeks after the crisis.

PTSD can lead to depression, increased anxiety, alcohol abuse/dependence, and family and employment problems. Physical problems common in people with PTSD include headaches, dizziness, gastrointestinal difficulties, and chest pain.¹⁰

However, the aftereffects of a crisis may not have been entirely negative. The people involved may have the feeling of having taken part in something bigger than themselves and of having shown their true worth during the event. These positive emotions need to be brought forward, especially if there are members of the group who are feeling a deep sadness, anxiety, or depression as a result of the crisis.

Preparing for the after-crisis debrief

- Inform employees and other stakeholders about plans for meetings and formal debriefings
- Identify who will conduct the debriefing; possibilities include representatives from the employee assistance program (EAP), the city manager, department heads, or an outside firm
- Select a convenient time and place so that affected groups will be able to attend
- Determine what is needed to recover from a crisis
- Identify minimum services and operations needed for the organization's functioning
- Prioritize the minimum needs of people
- Determine who will provide guidance on critical incident stress and whether materials will be given to employees
- Compile a referral list for those who may need further counseling
- Determine whether the same person who did the debriefing will do the follow-up.

Communication behaviors to avoid during a crisis

Handling challenging crisis communications effectively requires self-awareness, self-confidence, and good interpersonal communication skills. Becoming aware of your thoughts, feelings, and internal dialogue before delivering a crisis communication can help prevent you from losing control of your emotions and being blindsided or manipulated by others; and it builds your confidence in your communication skills.

- Don't tell people how they should feel; avoid saying:
 - "We understand how you feel."
 - "I know what you are going through."
- Don't offer unrealistic reassurance; avoid saying:
 - "Everything is going to be okay."
- Don't use technical terms and jargon.
- Don't over- or underestimate the problem.
- Don't say "no comment;" instead say you will get back to them, and then do so, even if you still don't have an answer.
- Don't blame anyone for anything.
- Don't violate the privacy of citizens.
- Don't make judgments.
- Don't use sarcasm or try to be humorous; but if something humorous occurs, it can be used to relieve tension.
- Don't give verbal or nonverbal double messages.
- Don't become defensive.
- Don't allow yourself to be baited.

Summary

Crisis communication is a key tool for local elected and appointed officials during a crisis. However, crisis communication will be effective only if local governments plan ahead and develop communication strategies, solidify relationships with stakeholders, and adequately train personnel long before a crisis ever occurs. There are many resources available to help local governments develop and implement a crisis communications program (see Appendix B Resource List).

Many local governments have excellent programs and are willing to share their knowledge and expertise. Local government staff serves as excellent resources for developing a plan, and citizens are more than eager to become involved in a program that will help guarantee the safety of themselves, their families, and members of their community.

The increase in terrorism, domestic shootings, extreme weather events, and other crises make it important for local governments to do everything possible to safeguard citizens.

APPENDIX A: Worksheet for developing crisis messages

Use this planning sheet to prepare your message to stakeholders. Fill out a separate worksheet for each presentation and communication.

1. Decide what needs to be communicated. What is the goal of this communication?
Do you want to show concern, inform citizens about an issue, give instructions, or persuade them to take a particular action?
2. Tailor the message to your audience.
 - What are the special concerns of this group?
 - What are the demographics of the group?
 - What are their special needs?
 - What do you think their perception of the city/crisis is?
3. Determine the best channel for communicating with this group (face-to-face meeting, telephone, e-mail, through the media)?
4. Build rapport immediately and set the tone for the communication to follow. (Thank the stakeholders for meeting with you. Or use a valuing statement: “I appreciate you taking the time to meet with me today.”)
5. Acknowledge the feelings people are experiencing. Express empathy or concern for the victims of the crisis, for the loss of human life, animal life, and damage to property or the environment (if the city is at fault in some way, remember that expressing empathy is not admitting guilt).
6. Write out the major points of information to communicate accurately; be proactive and honest.
 - Have you used clear concise language?
 - Do you need to explain any technical terms or jargon?
 - How are you going to frame the message? What is the stage of the crisis? Who is at fault? What
7. type of event is it—terrorism, natural disaster, or political hot potato, for example.
8. Apologize if the jurisdiction was at fault and acknowledge the jurisdiction’s contribution to the problem.
9. Tell citizens the positive steps the jurisdiction is taking as well as any good news about the situation.
10. Inform citizens about how they can be of help (for example, donating needed supplies such as blankets and canned goods or giving blood).
11. List the most difficult questions that might be asked. What are the questions you dread being asked? Write out answers. If possible, have the appropriate experts—the director of health and safety and the director of public relations, for example—go over the answers for accuracy and tact.
12. Correct any rumors or misinformation.
13. Request feedback from stakeholders.
14. Rehearse out loud in front of a mirror. If the communication is a written one, have it proofread by an outside reader.

APPENDIX B: Resource list

The following are helpful resources for developing and implementing your crisis communication plan:

Agility Recovery Solutions

www.agilityrecovery.com

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC)

www.cdc.gov

Department of Health and Human Services

National Disaster Medical System

<http://ndms.dhhs.gov/NDMS/ndms.html>

Department of Transportation

Office of Hazardous Materials Safety

<http://hazmat.dot.gov>

Environmental Protection Agency

Chemical Emergency Preparedness and Prevention

<http://www.epa.gov/ceppo>

IBHS Open for Business

www.disastersafety.org

Small Business Administration

www.sba.gov

Ready.gov

www.ready.gov

Red Cross Ready Ratings

www.readyrating.org

Yale Project on Climate Change Communication

<http://environment.yale.edu/climate-communication>

APPENDIX C: Social media case studies

Increasingly, over the past several years social media has become integrated into local government crisis communication plans. The following brief case studies show several types of crises and the ways in which the particular local government managed its communication using social media.

Boston, Massachusetts - Terrorist bombing

In March 2013, two bombs exploded along the route of the famous Boston Marathon. Events unfolded quickly as first responders, marathon participants, and spectators rushed to help more than 250 victims. The Boston Police Department (BPD) immediately put its social media crisis communication strategy into play. Through Twitter, the department provided city residents and the press corps with real-time public-safety information and updates as events unfolded.¹¹

A new report published in March, 2014, by Harvard's Kennedy School of Government analyzed the BPD's social media communication plan. According to the report, "BPD successfully used Twitter to keep the public informed about the status of the investigation, to calm nerves and request assistance, to correct mistaken information reported by the press, and to ask for public restraint in the tweeting of information from police scanners."¹²

City of Azuza, California - Wild fires

The Azuza Police Department's (APD) Digital Media Team created a program for using social media before, during, and after a crisis in order to provide accurate and timely disaster information. The team has made available a good deal of information about the process they followed to develop their [social media crisis communication](#), as well as key components of the program.

The APD's social media plan was tested in mid-January 2014, when the city was faced with battling a fast spreading wildfire that endangered the citizens of Azuza safety and their property.

Several days prior to the crisis, the National Weather Service had issued a "red flag" warning that conditions were conducive to wildfires in northern California. On January 16, a fire broke out at the base of the San Gabriel Mountains and spread within 24 hours to several populated residential areas within the city limits. After three days, the crisis was abated due to the efforts of over 1,800 fire fighters from districts in the region.

In the aftermath of the wildfire, the APD analyzed its crisis communication planning, especially the use of its newly formulated social media crisis communication program. The analysis concluded that:

The use of social media during this incident was invaluable and a key component to helping law enforcement complete their part of the mission, by:

- *Immediately disseminating official information to the public and news media*
- *Effortlessly syncing information with the media to ensure accuracy*
- *Providing administrators and key city leaders with real-time notifications when press interviews and releases were distributed to the media on behalf of the department*

- *Dramatic reduction in calls to the 911 dispatchers from the media wanting additional information*
- *Personal, one-on-one communication between the public and the police department*
- *Reassurance to the public their belongings were being guarded while they were evacuated.*¹³

East Harlem, New York City - Gas explosion

Since the September 11th terrorist attacks, the city of New York has become one of the world leaders in emergency management. A recent gas main explosion in East Harlem offers a glimpse at the city's impressive crisis management structure. It also offers an example of how a major news outlet communicated with city residents through social media and the Internet.

On March 12, 2014, a gas main leak caused an explosion that leveled an apartment building and caused 2 deaths and 22 injuries in East Harlem. CNN covered the story as "breaking news" via its website, news blog, and television coverage. The [CNN website](#) shows the progression of the story as information was provided to CNN by the New York City police and fire departments, as well as the White House response, and the reaction of citizens at

As part of its crisis communication, New York City's Office of Emergency Management (OEM) created a specific website, East Harlem Explosion Relief and Recovery, for residents.

Read more about New York City's OEM crisis communication guidelines that were in play during this sudden event.

Additional social media resources which form an integral part of the New York City OEM crisis communication methods are:

- **Facebook:** <https://www.facebook.com/NYCEmergencymanagement>
- **Twitter feed:** <https://twitter.com/nycoem>, <https://twitter.com/NotifyNYC>
- **YouTube:** <http://www.youtube.com/user/nycoem>
- **NYC National Weather Service/OEM preparedness site:** http://www.erh.noaa.gov/okx/em2_winter.php

Endnotes

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Author's Contact Information

Mary L. Walsh

Climate Change Learning and Information Consulting
17 Dillingham Avenue
Falmouth, MA 02540
508.540.5990
Mlwals1@aol.com

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