Version 2.0 Crisis Communication Plan: Outline
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Overview

This document provides an outline for constructing a Crisis Communication Plan at ICPSR and offers a step towards identifying core components. The outline was developed to produce a plan that:

- Identifies procedures appropriate for an institution/subunit within a parent organization
- Supplements overall disaster planning of an institution/subunit within parent organization
- Facilitates organized and efficient communication during and after an emergency
- Provides guidelines for internal, intra-organizational, and external crisis communications
- Identifies staff and departmental units to lead the implementation of plan components

This outline is especially guided by and adapts language from: Louisiana State University Crisis Communication Plan, North Carolina State Crisis Communication Plan and “Write a Crisis Communication Plan” at Ready.gov.


Plan Components

Purpose: specifies the objectives of the crisis communication plan in preparing for and responding to an emergency and emphasizes the need for clear, concise, and correct information for staff and others affected by the emergency. Links: organizational documents that refer to crisis communications requirements (e.g., disaster planning policies, operational plans).

Scope: defines the internal, intra-organizational (if applicable), and external communications that will be required before, during, and after an emergency. Links: organizational procedures that refer or relate to crisis communications requirements.

Emergency Communication Procedures: provides a clear note (in ALL CAPS or bold) that the communication plan is NOT intended to change the way emergencies are initially reported, reminds readers that emergencies should be FIRST reported to the appropriate authorities (e.g. police, fire, ambulance), and includes the numbers for these authorities, or identity 911 as the method to contact first responders. Links: local contacts and information sources for emergency response.

Crisis Preparation: identifies the communications-related components needed to prepare for an emergency situation. Links: current procedures and information that enable or pertain to disaster preparedness.

Crisis Communication Role/Team: specifies staff with responsibility for communication in the event of an emergency. In larger organizations, there might be a crisis communications team, and in smaller organizations there might be a crisis communications role performed by an individual as part of the disaster planning and disaster response teams. The crisis communications team/role is responsible for developing and maintaining the Crisis
Communication Plan. The team should complement and overlap the membership of the Disaster Team, and meet at least annually to ensure that all players are aware of their responsibilities.

**Staff Contact Information:** requires that current contact information (phone, cell phone, email, emergency contact) for all staff be on file with a central authority, like Human Resources, and should be in multiple formats (password protected intranet, paper, etc.); and identifies staff responsible for the maintenance of this information.

**Staff Communication Procedures:** identifies recommended methods of staff communication in the event of emergency situations (mass email, call trees, etc.), and establishes relevant communication procedures (see Appendix B for how to build a phone tree).

**Intra-Organizational Communication:** identifies people within the organization that need to be contacted for coordination purposes (e.g. a subunit within a university contacting the university media relations/communication department).

**Emergency Numbers:** lists local and statewide resources.

**Crisis Communication Center:** identifies an alternate location for the Crisis Communication Team/Role to convene in the event of an emergency (that may also be the location of a alternate site, or meeting place for the Disaster Response Team).

**Communication Template:** provides a standard statement or communication, the format of which may be drawn up and approved in advance, with accurate details inserted at the time of the event. Templates may be drafted for both internal and external communication (see Appendix A).

**Plan Dissemination:** requires the communication of this plan in advance to staff and stakeholders, providing sufficient details in the event of an emergency.

**Crisis Response:** stipulates the procedures to follow after a crisis has been declared by the Disaster Response Team and the Crisis Communication Plan (or components of the plan) has been activated.

**Links:** current procedures and information that enable or pertain to disaster response.

**Emergency Action:** defines procedures for staff to take immediately to ensure the safety of colleagues, guests, or anyone else that may be in physical danger, this may include:

- Contact emergency authorities
- Contact intra-organizational departments to alert them of the danger

**Communication Team/Role Assembly:** stipulates procedures for initiating the communications role/team during a disaster response. The process will be determined by the size of the team.

**Staff Communication:** addresses initial communication to subunit staff or within the larger organization after an emergency response is initiated. The message(s) should clearly state how staff may be affected, and account for possible disruptions to communication channels (e.g. email is down). This may include one or more of the following immediate actions:

- Send a mass email to staff
- Activate the call tree (see Appendix B for how to build a phone tree)
- Contact appropriate departments within the organization
• Determine whether the activation of a crisis communication center is warranted

**Intra-Organizational Communication:** addresses communications by a subunit to a parent organization, including one or more of the following:

• Contact appropriate departments within the organization (if it was not done in the previous step)
• Contact appropriate departments concerning external communication (e.g. for a campus wide event, a university communication depart will handle some general external and media communication), and determine what if any external communication needs to originate from the subunit
• Contact appropriate departments to coordinate recovery efforts

**External Communication:** addresses communications to external organizations and individuals affected by the emergency (e.g. user groups, members) or involved in the emergency response (e.g., parent organization communication departments that will handle media and other external communications intended for a mass audience). This type of external communication may not need to take place immediately and should be carefully coordinated when it does. It should include:

• Partner/vendor communication may be necessary to facilitate external agreements (e.g. digital preservation backups, shared computing resources) or equipment and service providers (new computing equipment). This type of communication may be necessary to begin the recovery process
• Customers/user communication may be needed to inform them of the status of any service interruptions and when the unit will return to normal operations. This type of communication could be transmitted via email or on the website (see Appendix A), and may only be needed for extended service interruptions.

**Post-Event Evaluation:** guides the post-crisis appraisal process for the communications component of disaster planning. This evaluation may lead to a better, more efficient plan. **Links:** reporting procedures, documentation of emergency detection, assessment, and response.

• **Evaluating Feedback:** Solicit feedback from staff, and gather any feedback generated by the external communications
• **Debrief:** The crisis communication team/role should convene participants after the crisis ends to evaluate every action taken and the crisis communication plan itself.

**Maintenance:** explicitly commits the organization to ensuring that the plan works and is kept up-to-date. In addition to evaluating the plan after each emergency, the plan should be tested and evaluated annually, or as otherwise mandated by the Disaster Planning Policy Framework. **Links:** disaster planning policy framework, disaster planning and response training schedules, schedules for maintaining disaster planning documents.

**References:** provides citations for or pointers to key resources that were informed the development and application of the crisis communication plan within the disaster planning program. It may contain citations for these documents or point to a current list of relevant community standards and guidance. **Links:** cited resources, community lists of standards and practice.
References Used for This Outline:

Louisiana State University Crisis Communication Plan, 2007. [No longer available online]


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Appendix A. Heritage Microfilm Flood Update

The following text is from an email sent in response to the June 2008 flooding that occurred in the Midwest. The email was disseminated over the SAA listserv (and possibly others).

From: ___ [mailto: ___@newspaperarchive.com]  
Sent: Monday, June 16, 2008 10:22 AM  
To: ____  
Subject: Heritage Microfilm update

Dear Valued Client,

The situation in Cedar Rapids has reached levels never before thought possible. Flood waters surged past the 500-year flood line yesterday and continued to rise to catastrophic levels. A large portion of the downtown area is underwater and will continue to be so until the waters recede.

You may have noticed that our online newspaper archive, www.NewspaperArchive.com, is down. The infrastructure of our digital archives is kept downtown. While the servers are several stories above ground and are safe from the waters, power is and will be indefinitely out. Trucks with fuel for generators cannot get downtown, leaving us without even backup power in that building.

We want to assure all of our members that everything that makes our website and microfilm business possible is very, very safe. Besides our servers being on high and dry ground, our physical newspaper microfilm and papers are all kept in our Heritage Microfilm building, several miles from the river.

Please see our map here:  
http://maps.google.com/maps/ms?hl=en&ie=UTF8&t=h&msa=0&msid=110319903476428184338.00044f8be598ce0d34ba7&ll=41.979273,-91.676617&spn=0.06674,0.177841&z=13 for the location of our buildings compared to the flood level.

We ask that your thoughts be with the thousands of displaced residents, including many of our employees, as we work through these trying times.

We will send occasional updates to keep you informed of the situation.

Thank you for your understanding,

____

NOTE:

To read more about the historic flood in Eastern Iowa, please visit the website of the Cedar Rapids Gazette, our local paper and one of our publishing partners:

http://www.gazetteonline.com/  
And their local affiliated TV station, KCRG:  
http://www.kcrg.com/
Some takeaways from the email:

1) It is an excellent example of a communication that reassures user organizations while updating them on the status of the situation (access is down, but the servers are safe)
2) Provides a link to a Google map that illustrated the level of the flood in relation to the buildings where the servers were located
3) Linked to local media if users were desired more information
4) In addition to this email, the front page of the website was up and had a message on it communicating similar information

This email would be useful in drafting a template for external dissemination, as well as helping guide a Crisis Communication Team on what to include in such a communication.
Appendix B. Phone Tree

The following is from the American Association of University Women (AAUW). Although written for building a phone tree centered on advocacy, it may easily be adapted to building a phone tree for crisis communication:

How to Build a Phone Tree

Activate local activists easily by phone.
A phone tree is a prearranged, pyramid-shaped system for activating a group of people by telephone. Using the phone tree system will spread a brief message quickly and efficiently to a large number of people.

Uses
- Quickly mobilize members and/or supporters in emergency situations (for example, when a vote on key legislation is pending and a barrage of calls, faxes, e-mails, and letters are needed).
- Notify members of meetings, hearings, actions, and last-minute changes.
- Increase turnout by providing personal invitations to reinforce (e-)mailed notices.
- Save printing and postage costs involved with communicating brief notices by mail. (Phone trees are not effective tools for disseminating a high volume of information.)

Resources Needed
- **People**: A coordinator and a network of reliable people (Key Group—see sample) form the skeleton of the phone tree.
- **Time**: The coordinator will spend time organizing the tree. (This process should be done prior to serious activation of the tree.) Once set up, the tree reduces hundreds of hours of work to five to 50 minutes of involvement by each member, depending on the frequency and number of calls each member is assigned.
- **Money**: No money is needed aside from long-distance charges, where applicable. Use home telephones and cell phones at no additional cost.

Action Checklist
1) Make a list with current phone numbers of all the persons you want the tree to reach.
2) From that list, recruit a smaller group of people who will be responsible for calling and activating other members. This small group is referred to as the Key Group.
   a. Keep the Key Group as small as possible, since each group may be responsible for reaching people who in turn are responsible for reaching out, and so on. It is critically important that the members of the Key Group are reliable!
   b. Impress upon ALL participants the importance of completing all their assigned calls.
3) Divide the people on your list among the members of the Key Group.
   a. Consider assigning responsibilities geographically to reduce any phone charges.
   b. Try to limit calls to three to eight per participant so the phone tree won’t become too burdensome.
4) Make a chart of Key Group members and their assignments and distribute it to the Key Group. Be sure to include work, cell, office, and other numbers to locate members.
5) Ask key people to notify you when they are going out of town or will otherwise be unavailable. Have alternate Key Group folks that may fill in if someone is unavailable.
6) Hold message drills occasionally to test your phone tree for effectiveness and identify areas for improvement.

**Operating the Tree**

1) As coordinator, you will start the tree. Write out a brief script complete with the specific action each member needs to accomplish (calling their members of Congress, writing a letter to the editor, coming to the next planning meeting, etc).

2) Call the members of the Key Group using the script. Make sure that Key Group members understand what they need to do and the time frame in which they should do it.

3) Spot-check the tree’s effectiveness by calling a few people down on the list to be sure they have received an accurate and complete message. Also, you can prearrange with folks down the list to contact you once they have received the message.

4) Train the folks in your phone tree to keep trying each person on their list until they make contact. If a member of the phone tree cannot be reached, have the caller notify you as the coordinator so you may fill in or delegate the responsibility to another member.

5) Ask the membership chair to keep you informed of changes in branch membership so you can keep your communications network up-to-date.

**Key Points**

- Have an organization chart for your phone tree.
- Be sure that your Key Group members are reliable.
- Have multiple ways of reaching members (home, work, and cell numbers are key).
EXAMPLE PHONE TREE LAYOUT

COORDINATOR

KEY GROUP

Key Member #1

Key Member #2

Key Member #3

Key Member #4

Key Member #1 Contacts
1. Jo 555-3434
2. Beth 555-0786
3. Jill 555-5623
4. Linda 555-0401

Key Member #2 Contacts
5. June 555-0716
6. Betty 555-9812
7. June 555-1718
8. Alex 555-8833

Key Member #3 Contacts
9. Ruby 555-7786
10. Amy 555-9856
11. Robin 555-1887
12. Patty 555-9734

Key Member #4 Contacts
13. Lynn 555-6741
14. Molly 555-9802
15. Tara 555-1532
16. Denise 555-2834