



# Emergency Communications

## Organizing your public-facing responses

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**T**he Emergency Management Coordinator must organize all aspects of the local government's response to a disaster, including communications. The crisis communications plan must clearly designate the spokesperson and who is responsible for preparing the content. Every official must become fully versed in this plan upon election.

### Developing a Crisis Communications Plan

Most local governments need two related plans—one for issues that fall under the scope of the Emergency Management Coordinator and a second to respond to other issues. The individual responsible for communications will probably be the same. When the Emergency Management Coordinator is involved, the Communications Director serves on the Local Emergency Management Planning Committee (LEPC). Otherwise, the Communications Director will report to either the local government's top elected official or CEO. In either case, the Communication Director must be able to act immediately.


### Communications Planning

Determine who will be in overall command for each scenario and who will be the incident commander. Then identify who on the staff needs to be involved.

The Communications Director must develop factual, responsive messages for use by the organization and its representatives. All media and public inquiries should be referred to the authorized spokesperson. All other staff should be professional and helpful to the media by connecting them with the spokespeople but will neither speak to the media nor provide any information.

Do not release information until the crisis team manager has reviewed the situation and authorized the strategy. Quickly craft holding statement(s) to deliver interim responses. This demonstrates that local government is not stonewalling or being uncooperative.

1. "No comment" is never an acceptable response. If an answer is unknown or cannot be immediately answered, tell the inquirer you will get back to them, and do so. Let the inquirer know if the question cannot be answered due to a policy (e.g., sharing personnel information or HIPAA).
2. Personnel matters are to remain confidential except as required by the Open Public Meetings Act and the Open Public Records Act.

3. Communicate the scope and significance of the problems before promoting the solution. Once the solution is implemented, communicate the actions being taken to resolve the crisis. Avoid speculation or blame when little is known about the crisis's origins. Focus on mitigating the crisis and protecting public health and safety.
4. Keep in constant contact with key stakeholders: schools, utilities, hospitals, and neighboring towns.
5. Without guessing or speculating, create realistic, honest expectations of the actual risk and what the public can expect and whether protective actions are required. Do not communicate unverified numbers and quickly correct or clarify inaccurate/misleading statements.
6. Tap independent third parties, when possible, where their expertise is unique or pertinent.
7. Anticipate the needs of journalists, especially timeliness.
8. Designate a liaison to stay in touch with the victim's families. Show empathy for people and place their concerns above costs.
9. Ensure the quality of the communications itself does not become an issue. Stay on message.
10. At the end of the crisis, conduct a post-mortem evaluation: What worked well and what didn't? Were there any points of confusion? 

### 6 Communications Steps from the CDC

- **Be First:** Crises are time sensitive. Communicating information quickly is crucial. For the public, the first source of information is often the preferred one.
- **Be Right:** Accuracy establishes credibility. Information can include what is known, what is unknown, and what is being done to fill the gaps.
- **Be Credible:** Honesty and truthfulness should not be compromised during crises.
- **Express Empathy:** Crises create harm and suffering that should be acknowledged. Addressing how people feel and the challenges they face builds trust/rapport.
- **Promote Action:** Giving people meaningful things to do calms anxiety, helps restore order, and promotes a sense of control.
- **Show Respect:** Respectful communication is particularly important when people feel vulnerable. Respectful communication promotes cooperation.