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**STAYING AHEAD OF THE MESSAGE:**

**A GUIDE FOR  
COMMUNICATING  
DURING A CITY CRISIS**

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# Introduction

## WHAT'S INSIDE THIS GUIDE

Keeping residents informed through clear and accessible communication is one of the most important functions of city government. Disciplined communication is especially critical during a crisis.

This guide offers some tips and tactics for communicating to your city's residents and other stakeholders during and after a crisis. City officials can read this guide and get to know these concepts well before a crisis occurs to ensure readiness. *(Note: Because each crisis is unique, this guide might not address all specific steps needed to address a specific incident.)*

The League encourages cities to use this guide, as well as other sources, to ultimately create a written crisis communications plan (as your resources permit) that meets the unique needs of your city. The League can also provide helpful advice for this process.

## TO GET MORE HELP

If you have additional questions or concerns after reading through this guide, please contact the League of Minnesota Cities communications department for guidance. These services are free and available for all League member cities. For a crisis that is chronic in nature, or persists over a long period of time, the League might recommend that your city solicit the services of a public relations firm to help with your communication needs. In many cases, an initial consultation will be free to assess how their services fit your needs.

## WHAT DO WE MEAN BY A "CRISIS?"

For most, the word "crisis" conjures up images of natural disasters like tornados or floods. We often think of tragic events involving mass shootings or collapse of a structure in that same category.

While crisis communication is needed in those situations, for most cities in Minnesota, the definition of a crisis, though, is relative. Minnesota cities are more likely to face "self-inflicted" crises—those that are caused by the action(s) of an individual or a group of individuals affiliated with the city. Common examples include:

- Incidents that harm police/community relations, such as alleged inappropriate use of force or inequitable treatment of suspects.

**Effect:** *The incident could call into question the competence or the fairness of the department; damage the reputation of specific individuals or agencies; or hurt relationships and trust among residents and law enforcement, for example.*

*(Note: For different reasons, incidents when law enforcement officers are severely injured or killed in the line of duty can also define a crisis that affects police/community relations and should also be handled with care.)*

The League offers free communications guidance for its members; contact:

Don Reeder, Asst. Director of  
Communications for Public Affairs,  
dreeder@lmc.org or (651) 215-4031

- Incidents related to an individual's job duties, or a supervisor's oversight of those duties (including alleged misappropriation of funds, moral conduct, and violations of open meeting law).  
*Effect: These incidents can call into question the competence of the city; reinforce stereotypes about self-serving or dishonest government employees; raise the issue of unfair treatment of employees; and trigger possible privacy issues involved in release of private information, for example.*
- Misuse of social media platforms by city officials, which may include posting disparaging remarks about individuals or groups.  
*Effect: These incidents can damage the image of the city as a whole; damage constituent relations; and distribute incorrect information resulting in confusion among residents, for example.*
- Temporary disruptions in city operations that affect the water supply, power grid, etc. that may leave residents without critical services.  
*Effect: In addition to the possible impact on the health and welfare of residents who may be vulnerable to drops in these services, a serious failure may be perceived as ineptitude, laziness, or even heartlessness, for example.*
- Non-employment related incidents such as fraud or financial mistakes, violations of open meeting law, illegal or controversial behavior on or off the clock.  
*Effect: These incidents can call into question the competence of the city, create a hostile "us vs. them" relationship with residents, undermine trust in your city government, and reinforce negative stereotypes about corrupt government officials, for example.*
- Economic disruptions such as the closing of a major employer or economic driver like a factory, hospital, or tourism destination, for example.  
*Effect: These incidents and the economic insecurity that follow can cause a domino effect on a community's health, crime rate, and general resilience. Residents may look to city officials for reassurance and solutions.*

## Why it's so important to communicate in a crisis

Here are three outcomes that thoughtful communication tactics can help you achieve during a crisis:

### **1. To maintain safety and wellbeing of residents**

When public safety is threatened, residents should be informed of any possible risks or dangers, and updated when safety is restored. When resident safety is at stake, misinformation or a lack of information could put residents at risk (for example, if a resident drinks contaminated water that should have been boiled). Once a

crisis has passed, slowness or failure to communicate the end of a threat could cause unnecessary stress or precautionary efforts to be taken among residents.

### **2. To uphold your obligation to be transparent and accountable**

Transparency and accountability are two core values of the public sector. Being transparent and accountable inspires trust and confidence among residents that can endure well after a crisis passes. Transparent communication steps taken quickly during a crisis also help the city control or manage the narrative or “get out in front of the story” to make sure useful and accurate information is shared and the potential for rumor or innuendo is minimized. Failing to do so creates a communication vacuum that might be filled by inaccurate or slanted sources. Acting quickly and proactively also minimizes the impression that information is being suppressed.

### **3. To reinforce the image and credibility of city officials**

To govern effectively, city officials must have the trust of the residents they serve. Credible information shared during a crisis will reinforce the city’s image as a reliable, competent operation. If a mistake is made in communicating information, it is important for the city to admit the error and correct the information to maintain constituent trust and the credibility of communication in the future.

## **Communication tools you can use during a crisis**

The following list will help you identify the tools available to communicate effectively with residents, businesses, reporters, and community groups. Remember that these tools are vehicles for messages you have developed using other resources in this guide (see pages 3-4). When using any of these communication tools, consider accessibility issues among those users that may have sight or hearing disabilities, do not speak or understand the English language, or do not own personal communication devices (computers or smart phones, for example). You will likely need more than one approach.

### **TOOLS TO USE FOR THE MEDIA AND OTHERS**

- **Holding statement:** A tool for when you are engaging in crisis response, but cannot responsibly report out reliable information or key messages yet. Slight modifications to a pre-prepared holding statement can buy time to gather information and put together a plan while still keeping residents in the loop. A holding statement should acknowledge you are aware that something of concern has happened; express empathy for anyone negatively affected; indicate that you are working on resolving or addressing the situation; and identify when the next update will be made.
- **Press statement:** Ideally, about 1-3 paragraphs stating basic facts about what is known about the crisis, any action steps regarding what residents and others should take in response to the crisis, and who to contact or where to locate answers for questions

### ELEMENTS OF A PRESS RELEASE

Like a good news story, a good press release answers the “5 Ws”

**WHAT:** What is the nature of the crisis?

**WHO:** Who is involved, and/or affected by the crisis?

**WHERE:** Where is the crisis happening? Are there dangerous areas of the city resulting from the crisis?

**WHEN:** Is the crisis ongoing? When will it be resolved?

**WHY:** Why is the information being communicated about the crisis important? Why should residents be concerned, or not concerned?

that residents might have. The statement should be proactively distributed to local media, posted on the city’s website, and shared via social media, as appropriate.

- **Press/news release:** Unlike a statement, a press release serves a narrative function, telling a more complete story. In rare instances, newspapers will publish a news release verbatim. Though used less often with the rise of more interactive social media communications, press releases can be useful when a city wants to convey more detailed information clearly and on the record. The release sometimes includes a formal quote from the designated spokesperson. Like a statement, in addition to distribution to media contacts, news releases can also be posted on the city’s website and shared via social media platforms (e.g., Facebook and Twitter). It is also appropriate to distribute a news release during a press conference.
- **Press/news conference:** A press conference can be an effective tool if the city has interest from several media outlets. Information can be disseminated to a number of reporters at the same time, rather than through time consuming multiple one-on-one interviews. A press conference is also effective when information about a crisis is being updated frequently. The press conference spokesperson should be prepared to acknowledge what information is or is not or not yet known without providing speculation, and convey key messages effectively. When planning for a press conference, account for equipment needs such as multiple microphones and power outlets as many reporters rely on cameras and other recording devices that need power sources.
- **Media interviews:** Your city should prepare both for media calls requesting information or interviews about the crisis and/or reach out to local media (see more on page 6). Having a spokesperson be available for media calls allows you to help shape the coverage and ensure reporters have access to correct information. Identify a spokesperson who can deliver key messages and important information calmly and with confidence and empathy (see more about spokespersons on page 6). Be clear about what information is not yet known, and what information is private data .

### TOOLS TO USE FOR RESIDENTS AND OTHERS

- **Website homepage:** Posting official statements and important information on your website homepage can help people find consistent, accurate information they need quickly. Because this will be front and center on your website, ensure the information is accurate, official, empathetic when appropriate, and provides an indication of when the next update will be. Remember that, while most of your city’s residents likely have computer access at their homes or places of business, there is a segment of the population that does not, and will need to rely on alternative communication options. It is very important that, once homepage use is established, that information is updated frequently and consistently in order to meet audience expectations.

- **Website dedicated page:** In the case of a situation where there may be additional materials, several chronological updates you may want to timestamp, or if the event is a recurring topic of communication, it may make sense to have a dedicated webpage with a simple web address (e.g., [www.city.gov/fraudresponse](http://www.city.gov/fraudresponse)) to be a home for these materials. The page must be easy to navigate to from your homepage, frequently updated, and hidden when not in use. This page can also be used to archive and list appropriate or useful news clips about the crisis.
- **Personal phone calls:** It may be appropriate to make some proactive personal phone calls to stakeholders and community partners—particularly those most acutely affected or engaged in the crisis. Identify a spokesperson or appropriate leader who can deliver key messages and important information with confidence and empathy so that these partners can be informed and engaged.
- **Facebook:** Putting clear and concise information and messages onto your Facebook page with regular updates allows your social media followers and their connections to find and share your messages quickly. Have a social media policy in place ([see model social media policy from the League](#)) well before a crisis occurs, and have a plan for managing critical comments as well as questions the public may have. Consider updating and hiding outdated information from your city’s Facebook timeline.
- **Twitter:** Twitter can reach large audiences quickly with concise key messages, and can link to your website for more information. It’s important to take a measured, professional approach to managing all Twitter communication. During a crisis situation, assign a person to monitor the Twitter account at all times for resident questions, or responses to information tweeted.
- **Text alert systems:** Text alert systems can issue urgent updates to residents who have signed up to receive the service. Text alert services may benefit your city in crisis situations such as extreme weather, missing person searches, or active shooter situations.

## A media affairs primer

### WHAT MAKES THE MEDIA ‘TICK’

Working effectively with your local media is critical to resolving a crisis in your community. Local news outlets and their websites have broad reach throughout your community and beyond, and may be the best vehicles for getting information quickly to those affected by a crisis. The following includes insights and considerations for how the media do their work, and what that means for how you interact with the media.

- With the rise in use of web-based outlets, the notion of deadlines has been expanded into a 24/7 news cycle. Often, news content that would have previously been scheduled to appear in the next day’s or next week’s edition of a local newspaper is often posted as online content shortly after it is written. A reporter is motivated to collect as much information as he or she can, as quickly as possible, and then update accordingly.

## NATIONAL NEWS MEDIA

National and international media outlets are not limited by geography. It is common for major news agencies—like CNN, Fox News, or MSNBC—to seek stories from small, rural communities.

We are all familiar with what we call a “media frenzy” that involves local and national media. If that occurs don’t panic—and try to remember that local stakeholders (residents of the city and surrounding communities, local businesses, local news outlets) are still your primary audiences.

In case of a media frenzy, consider immediately seeking outside communications and media relations assistance from the League, or from a professional consultant.

- Public officials often try to avoid local reporters at all costs. Instead, city officials should develop a working rapport with reporters. While there indeed may be some bad actors in the world of journalism—just as in any other profession—the vast majority of local reporters are simply trying to do their job: getting an accurate story in a timely fashion to deliver to their readership, viewers, or listeners. Just like city officials, reporters have an important responsibility to your community.
- Reporters may be motivated by an obligation to hold government officials accountable, shed light on issues that are not easily witnessed or understood by the public, and ask tough questions that your constituents may be thinking. While this process may feel uncomfortable, these values may be very similar to why you are in local government, so consider seeing this process as the other side of the same coin. Just like city officials, reporters have an important responsibility to your community.

## ESTABLISHING MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS IN ADVANCE

Get to know news reporters in your community that cover the city beat. If they are new in their position, make a point of seeking them out, introducing yourself and your city employee colleagues, or even scheduling a get-acquainted meeting. Once proper introductions are made, make a point of being readily accessible to the reporter and be consistent in your accessibility. Some key elements of a good relationship with reporters are acknowledging time schedules and deadlines, and providing information as a crisis develops.

## ESTABLISHING MEDIA RELATIONSHIPS IN THE MOMENT

If the city doesn’t have an ongoing relationship with the local media, the city should be prepared at the time of a crisis to initiate the first contact instead of reacting to a media report or inquiry. At a minimum, the city should develop a list of all the local newspaper, television, and radio outlets that serve the community. The list should include the name of the outlet, reporter, or contact person; phone numbers where that person can be readily reached, ; and an email address. Though some incidents may pique the interest of national media, remember that local constituents—residents and businesses in your community—are first priorities when it comes to crisis communications.

## PREPARE FOR MEDIA INQUIRIES IN THREE STEPS

Before the media comes calling, there are at least three steps that the city should take:

### 1. Choose a single spokesperson

- ◆ The city spokesperson’s main role is to communicate information regarding a crisis to key audiences. The spokesperson should be selected by the city’s crisis communication team and should be authorized by the city to make statements on the city’s behalf. Inform staff, especially “front line” staff, who the spokesperson is.
- ◆ It is best for the city to designate only one spokesperson (typically an administrator, mayor, council member, police chief,



**QUESTIONS THE MEDIA MIGHT ASK DURING A CRISIS**

What happened?

When did the city know about the crisis?

Who/what is responsible for the crisis?

Has a similar crisis in the city ever occurred before? What were those circumstances?

What, if anything, could the city have done to prevent the crisis?

How is the city responding?

(If appropriate) Were there any injuries or fatalities?

**POSSIBLE KEY AUDIENCES**

City residents

City employees

City businesses, and business associations

Residents of neighboring cities

Neighboring cities with mutual aid agreements

communications director, or other department director). By having a single spokesperson, the city gains better control of the accuracy, consistency, delivery, and timeliness of the information released to key audiences. It will also help reporters and others seeking information or comment on a crisis to know who to contact. If more than one spokesperson is needed (depending on the nature of the crisis) the specific role of each spokesperson should be very clearly defined.

- ◆ When it comes to city legal matters, the city attorney is often called on to serve this function. If there is an additional spokesperson, please make sure that person refers legal questions to the city attorney.
- ◆ See the sidebar on this page for some common questions that might be asked by reporters during a crisis. The designated spokesperson should be familiar with these questions before addressing a media inquiry or briefing. The purpose of developing these questions is to prepare answers that reflect city values and key messages.

**2. Identify/prioritize audiences**

- ◆ Generally, the three key audiences for a city in a crisis are city residents, city employees, and others who do business in the city. Remember that local media outlets are a primary vehicle that can be used to communicate the city's message to all key audiences. When determining what to say, consider what information about the crisis is going to be most relevant to the key audiences. Key audiences may shift after an immediate crisis has passed.
- ◆ While it may be necessary to consider the national media as an audience, your priority is to keep city residents and other local stakeholders informed since they are your constituents, and the individuals and groups most directly affected by the crisis (see the list of possible key audiences in the sidebar on this page).

**3. Develop key messages**

- ◆ When preparing key messages about a crisis, make sure the information is relevant and equitable for people in your community representing all races, cultures, religions, genders, and age groups.
- ◆ Key messages are statements of fact that should be designed to inform, educate, and—in some cases—persuade, influence, and reassure. They should be developed by the designated crisis team, as appropriate, to emphasize information relevant to your audiences and should also be embedded with one or more core values that define public service in local government. (see sidebar on page 8). Key messages often contain multiple concepts, and should be carefully crafted to include the information that tells the story of the crisis, free of speculation or irrelevant information.
- ◆ It is important for the designated spokesperson to write or type out your key messages, and commit them to memory to the extent possible. Those messages will form the basis for the content of the interview. At a minimum, core values should

**POSSIBLE CORE VALUES TO INCLUDE IN KEY MESSAGES**

*(“We” refers to the city in these examples)*

We value safety and the safety of residents.

We value our city employees.

We value the environment.

We value community involvement.

We are responsive to resident needs.

We are fiscally responsible.

We anticipate and prepare for potential crises.

We strive to share information and communicate with the community.

We are doing all we can to ensure this never happens again.

be articulated as appropriate in every press conference, press release, or holding statement involving the city.

- ◆ It is suggested that all crisis communication related to events that may result in litigation against the city be vetted by a city attorney.

*Note: Review [Minnesota Statute 13.82](#) for law enforcement data practices and consult with your city attorney and HR professional to review what other data, if any, may be private under the Minnesota Data Practices Act.*

**PREPARE FOR THE INTERVIEW**

Having determined a spokesperson, identified key audiences, and prepared key messages, here are some tips that will help you, as the spokesperson, be prepared for an interview.

- When a reporter calls to request an interview, if you need a few minutes to prepare your thoughts or take care of some urgent business, arrange to call the reporter back at a time that better accommodates your time and stills serves the deadline needs of the reporter. If you are asked to grant an interview “at the scene,” tell the reporter that you need to step aside for a few minutes to organize your thoughts, as needed.
- In some cases, a city may not be able to release much current information to the public because of data practice concerns, attorney-client privilege, or because relatives of victims have not yet been notified. However, the city should still respond to the media and explain why it is not possible to release the information.
- Use the time before meeting with a reporter to anticipate questions, and sketch out possible responses to those questions with the help of the key messages you have developed.
- When you meet with a reporter, it generally takes a few minutes to arrange interview logistics—microphone and camera set-up, lighting, etc. Use that time to your advantage to talk to the reporter about interview content. For example:
  - ◆ Work toward a mutual understanding of what the reporter is seeking and what you can offer. What type of information is he/she looking for—reaction, background, authentication?
  - ◆ Ask the reporter any needed clarification questions. Who else have they interviewed, or do they plan to interview others? When will the resulting story be broadcast, or published?
  - ◆ Share useful background information that may not otherwise make it into the interview. Often that kind of information is included in the final edited report, even though it is not conveyed during the actual interview.

Remember, the League of Minnesota Cities and the League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust are always available to provide crisis communications assistance for your city—from strategizing, to helping write or edit key messages and press releases, to interview preparation. Contact the League’s communications department for support.

## DURING THE INTERVIEW—WHAT YOU SAY

- Deliver and repeat your key messages. If the reporter asks a question unrelated to one of your key messages, you are encouraged to still attempt to work elements of your key messages into your response, as appropriate.
- Admit when you don’t know an answer to a specific question, and offer to get the answer promptly. Even if pressed, it’s better to delay your response than to speculate or give incorrect information.
- Don’t ramble. Stop talking after your point has been made and allow the reporter to continue his/her questioning.
- In your response, repeat part of the question to make sure your answer fits into the correct context, and that the interview can be more easily edited—as needed—for clarity. For example, “We learned of the breach on May 1,” as opposed to “May 1st.”
- Do not offer a response to hearsay/speculation.
- Avoid jargon—unnecessary use of government-speak, including acronyms, which fuels the image of local government as a bureaucracy.
- Be compassionate and empathetic (as appropriate).

### *And remember:*

- You are always on the record. When speaking with reporters, assume it is always on the record unless you mutually agree otherwise. That means that everything you say to the reporter can be included in the news story and directly attributed to you. Sometimes, a reporter may ask to speak with you off the record to get a better understanding or additional context regarding a particular matter without identifying the source. It is recommended that you refrain, though, from providing comments off the record. Simply avoid saying anything that could cause additional trouble for the city if broadcast or included in print.
- Avoid using ‘no comment.’ Though you may frequently hear government officials utter the phrase “no comment” in an interview (at least in television and movies), it is advisable to use alternative phrases that do not project hostility, or an appearance that you are trying to hide information. Here are several alternatives:
  - ◆ “We’re investigating to determine exactly what happened ...”
  - ◆ “I don’t think it’s appropriate for us to speculate on the cause at this time ...”
  - ◆ “We want to assure the community we’ll keep you informed as our investigation progresses ...”
  - ◆ “Here are the facts about (the crisis) as we know them ... and here is what we do not yet know ...”

## SIGNS OF GOOD CRISIS COMMUNICATION

You're doing it right when:

Your messages are distributed by local media.

Your messages are informative and provide reporters with what they want to know and what audiences need to know.

Your messages are free of errors, speculation, and assumptions.

Your messages are consistent with previous information given by yourself and other city officials, and/or it is clear that information from previous communication has been updated.

Your messages show empathy or compassion for victims, when appropriate.

Your messages are respectful of privacy standards related to medical treatment, data practices, and ongoing investigations.

Your messages are available in multilingual formats to ensure that non-English speaking residents have equal access to information.

## DURING THE INTERVIEW— YOUR PHYSICAL BEHAVIOR AND TONE

- Be aware of your body language. Choose a physical posture that projects confidence, control, and credibility—not frustration or uncertainty. Unintended body language can distract from the focus on key messages.
- Project genuineness and authenticity—be conversational, rather than robotic and scripted in your messages and responses.
- Convey a sense of normalcy—an even-keeled tone will convey to your residents that the city is in control of the crisis. Though dealing with a crisis may be far from business as usual, it is important that those affected have confidence in your city's ability to deal with it.
- Be polite and professional—even though having to do a media interview is likely to be inconvenient during the time of a crisis, remember that reporters have a job to do and you have an obligation to keep all those affected by a crisis informed.
- If you are being interviewed on camera, remember to look at the reporter and not the camera. If, during the course of a pre-recorded interview, you need to stop talking in the middle of your response and start again, simply let the reporter know your intentions. It is the reporter's job to capture a clean and usable interview that requires minimal editing.

## After the crisis

### HOW DO YOU KNOW YOUR CRISIS IS OVER?

If your signal that the crisis is over is merely that the phone has stopped ringing, pause to consider whether there is more work to be done to create resolution for both the city and community stakeholders. Ensure that you have communicated with stakeholders what happened, what decisions were made, and why. Determine if anyone in the community been left out from your communications effort even though the crisis is over.

Also, proactively communicate about any next steps, and how the public can be involved, if appropriate. The resolution of a crisis is an opportunity to build trust by demonstrating follow-through in the weeks and months to come, and, if applicable, recognize what you are committed to doing better in the future. When the community understands what happened, why, and what steps the city is taking to improve, then you can comfortably start the process of getting back to a day-to-day routine.

### NEXT STEPS

Your crisis communication skills will build with each event. A review process with your team is an important step to translating these volatile and stressful situations into skills and resources you can use in the future.

Shortly after you've determined your crisis is over:

- Update documentation as needed to reflect what you've learned—any changes in your decision-making team, assignments, materials, template messages, etc.

- Review what went well and what didn't with key personnel in your city—this is a good time to think about constructive feedback, focusing on actions and not on specific individuals. For example:  
**YES:** "The key messages included in Mayor Bob's statement to the local TV station didn't adequately recognize the neighborhood's fears."  
**NO:** "Bob sounded like a robot who doesn't care about voters." One of these statements will lead to better emphasis on empathy in developing future key messages—the other may just cause conflict. Don't forget to extensively document what went well, and should be repeated in the event of a future crisis.
- Recognize that crises can quickly erode your physical and mental health as well as the quality of your city's workplace environment. Be sure to check in with yourself and others and address any needs for down time or mental health support services as is appropriate. The League's human resources team is available to provide further guidance in this area.

## COMMUNICATION TOOLS TO CONSIDER AFTER THE CRISIS HAS PASSED

- **Newsletter:** If your city has a monthly or quarterly newsletter, the timing will most likely not be appropriate for proactive or even reactive communication. However, if some time has passed and the crisis is still a topic of conversation, consider the merits of an overview of what occurred, how the city responded, and how it will operate moving forward.
- **Letter to the editor:** A letter to the editor from the mayor, or from city's official spokesperson may be appropriate after resolution of a crisis. For example, your city might want to officially thank city personnel and/or residents who have assisted with recovery and clean-up following a natural disaster.

## DID YOU WING IT THIS TIME?

Many steps to crisis communication can feel intuitive for some, but that is not the case for everyone. If you managed through a crisis without a formal plan, take some time to put together a simple outline to get started of what you did and when. This will help others to understand how they can contribute work to lessen your own obligation and ensure that simple but important tasks are not forgotten in a time of stress, among many other benefits of being better prepared.

If that seems overwhelming, consider putting together an outline of a particular element of your work, such as who your team is and when they were notified, or how to put together and distribute a press release on letterhead— that will help guide your city's response and give you something to build on.

By taking time to put together a crisis communication plan for your own city, you are providing reinforcement to help you and/or your team effectively communicate through a crisis in the future. It will reduce some of the time and energy required to assess, plan, draft, edit, review, and respond—giving you more time to keep your city operating smoothly even when problems arise.