Crisis Communications Planning Guide

October 2020

Crisis Communications Plan

Plan Goals

- Define and assign the crisis communications team
- Outline roles and responsibilities for each member
- Detail steps to take in an event where crisis communications are needed
- Indicate contacts, available resources, and standard operating procedures
- Provide message development and delivery guidance
- Provide a platform for training, testing and improvement

Tips

- Aim for 20-30 pages
- Review and approve 1-2 times per year in conjunction with updates to continuity-of-operations (COOP) and/or disaster-recovery (DR) plans
- Keep a copy of the crisis communications plan onsite and offsite, electronically and in hard copy format

Crisis Communication Team

The crisis communications team (CCT) should fulfill three key roles: operations, communications, and subject-matter expertise.

The ideal team should consist of:

- Director
- Public information officer (PIO)
- Public relations/communications (if applicable)
- Department heads and/or leads
- Any other government officials who could play a role in media briefings

A crisis communications team leader (CCTL) also should be identified.

Crisis Team Responsibilities
Each role within the CCT should have a clearly defined set of responsibilities attached to it. Once the responsibilities associated with each role have been defined, team assignments should be made using job titles, not first and last names. Once a primary team member has been selected, a secondary, or backup, team member also should be added.

Plan Organization

The crisis communications plan should be divided into three major sections:
- Response: The steps required to deliver crisis communications
- Communications & Messaging Strategy:
  - Stakeholders (internal and external)
  - Communications methods
  - Message development and approval processes
  - Message distribution channels
  - Message distribution strategy
- Post-Crisis Plan Evaluation:
  - Review and evaluation strategy
  - Plan update and distribution process

Additional Considerations

In addition to the recommendations outlined above, agencies also may wish to consider the following when developing a crisis communications plan:

Sample or Canned Messages
Agencies may wish to develop a set of standard, or canned, messages for a variety of crisis scenarios to accompany the plan. This provides a template for messaging where details and information can be added and adjusted based on the situation and can help to expedite the message development process.

Crisis Severity Levels
When outlining scenarios in which the crisis communications plan is implemented, agencies should consider assigning severity levels to each scenario. Identifying the severity of a crisis in advance based on type can help guide response during plan activation.

Plan Uniformity
When developing a crisis communications plan, agencies should consider how that plan will work in conjunction with existing plans, including COOP and DR plans. Will they work in conjunction? Can the crisis plan be used outside of the activation of a COOP or DR plan? Agencies should strive for uniformity among these plans and all teams should understand how the plans work together, as well as separately.