COVID-19: Tips for Communicating with Stakeholders During a Crisis

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 crisis continues to rapidly evolve, and public safety agencies and the duties they perform are essential to keeping communities safe in these uncertain times. As a result, regular communication with internal and external stakeholders, including field and support staff, management, elected officials, citizens, neighboring agencies and the local media, among others, is critical to preventing the spread of misinformation within an agency and in the community it serves. Regardless of whether you already have a continuity of operations plan (COOP), disaster-recovery plan, or crisis communications plan, there are six steps you can take to maintain control of communications during the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond.

1. **IDENTIFY A CRITICAL COMMUNICATIONS TEAM.** One of the most important tasks during any crisis is to identify the team that will develop messages and communicate with stakeholders. This team should consist of various personnel—from managers and directors to frontline telecommunicators and support staff—to ensure that communications are appropriate for all stakeholders, both internal and external. To expedite this process, this team, based on the roles that need to be included, can be identified as part of any COOP.

2. **CONVENE A WAR ROOM.** Once the team has been identified, team leaders will need to establish a war room, or a regular meeting place for team members to convene. With COVID-19's person-to-person transmission challenges, agencies are urged to abide by social-distancing guidelines and will need to get creative with building their war rooms. Some suggestions for doing so include:
   a. Leveraging free or low-cost conference calling services such as FreeConferenceCall.com or Google Voice
   b. Choosing a virtual-meeting platform—such as Skype, Join.Me, Google Hangouts or Zoom—that can be used for free or at low cost to convene your team for file- and screen-sharing, or face-to-face interactions
   c. Set up a regular meeting schedule for team updates, message development, and distribution planning.

3. **ESTABLISH A COMMUNICATIONS SCHEDULE.** The first task for the critical communications team is to establish a schedule for communications distribution and stakeholder outreach. Communication schedules for internal and external stakeholders may be different, for example:
   a. Internal stakeholders should receive more-frequent updates regarding the steps that the agency is taking to protect essential staff in the building, those in support roles working from home, and field personnel, if applicable. Even if there are no updates to report, the team should aim to communicate with internal stakeholders at least once each day. In addition to regular communications, internal stakeholders should be made aware of the plan and schedule that the team establishes for communicating with the public, as well, in the event they are faced with questions.
   b. External stakeholders may require less-frequent communications. The frequency will depend on how the situation and/or response procedures change or evolve, but should occur, at a minimum, once every other day. All communications with external stakeholders should include links to communications channels, such as social media, as well as phone numbers and emails for designated points of contact.

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4. **DEVELOP MESSAGE TEMPLATES.** To streamline communications, the team should spend initial meetings developing messaging templates for both internal and external stakeholders. Having established messaging templates makes it easier to develop messages quickly and deliver messages in a timely manner. When and where appropriate, messages should include links to the Centers for Disease Control (CDC), World Health Organization (WHO) and other reputable resources for additional information.

5. **COORDINATE WITH OTHER AGENCIES.** Establish communications and work closely with other agencies in your jurisdiction, and in neighboring jurisdictions—including fire/rescue, emergency medical services (EMS), and the healthcare/medical community—to keep messages and communications efforts consistent and to avoid confusion or mixed messages.

6. **KEEP THE LINES OF COMMUNICATION OPEN.** During this time, it is imperative that agencies keep the lines of communication open, not only with other agencies, but also with internal and external stakeholders. Agencies can accomplish this by:
   a. Identifying a point of contact, or multiple points of contact, on the critical communications team to deliver outgoing communications and respond to incoming messages.
   b. Sharing communications channels, including phone numbers, emails and/or social media channels, in messages to stakeholders.
   c. Encouraging stakeholders to reach out to the point of contact with questions and establishing a return communications timeline, for example within one business day.

As we continue to deal with this ever-evolving public-health crisis, it is important that public safety agencies communicate with their staffs, field personnel, neighboring agencies, elected officials and the general public that they serve, reassuring them that they are taking precautions to protect everyone's health and safety and providing as much information as possible.

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