Crisis Communications

Keeping Your Community Informed During Emergencies

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For a community considering an emergency plan, Victor Hugo’s admonishment is just as valid today as it was more than a century ago when he penned it. Make no mistake about it; whether it’s a natural calamity, such as an earthquake or flood, or a human one, such as sabotage, disasters occur with alarming regularity.

When an emergency situation hits, a well-constructed communications plan can mean the difference between a community in chaos and a community that overcomes adversity.

Known as “crisis communications,” these plans basically identify the who, what, where, and when of the situation and how this information is passed on to the public.

Be Prepared
The first step to effective crisis communications is to have a plan. According to the U.S. Department of State, “The key to effective crisis communication is to be prepared before a crisis occurs. Once an emergency happens, there is little time to think, much less to plan. Without a crisis plan, you can be overwhelmed by events.”

While it’s impossible to foresee the specifics of an emergency, system managers can take several steps, such as: (1) designate a crisis manager and a crisis team; (2) train team members about possible scenarios and actions they can take; (3) train staff; and (4) determine how to communicate information. (See the sidebar on page 22.)

For a water utility, the likely crisis manager will be the system supervisor or operator. This person should be comfortable in the spotlight and should be able to remain calm during stressful situations.

“The designated spokesperson doesn’t have to be a public speaker or media whiz,” says Barron and Whitesell, a Charlotte, North Carolina, consulting firm, in their Overview of Crisis Management, “but consideration should be given to the person’s ‘level-headedness,’ poise under pressure, ability to articulate complex ideas, and perhaps most importantly, knowing when to stop talking.” In very small communities, the crisis manager may need to be the mayor or other town official.

Members of the crisis team might include representatives of the county health department, law enforcement, emergency personnel, and utility systems. Each member of the team should possess contact information, including office, home, and cell phone numbers, for each of the other members.

The crisis team should collect information about potential problems and strategies for mitigating them. In California, for example, earthquakes are always a possibility. In Appalachia, earthquakes are unlikely, but floods are common. Consider the unique geography, climate, and other characteristics of your area when pondering these scenarios.

Training the staff is an often-overlooked component of crisis communication. But it’s usually

“He who every morning plans the transactions of the day and follows out that plan, carries the thread that will guide him through the maze of the most busy life. But where no plan is laid, where the disposal of time is surrendered merely to the chance of incidence, chaos will soon reign.”

Victor Hugo (1802–1885)
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U.S. Department of State

the operator or the janitor who discovers an emergency in a utility, such as a water or sewer plant. Post emergency numbers in a conspicuous place and maintain a manual that staff can refer to quickly. Run through mock emergencies on a regular basis so that employees know exactly what they should do in a crisis.

Finally, determine how you will broadcast the message to the public. The emergency alert system should be used if an evacuation is needed or a large-scale emergency is taking place. Other information may be circulated through the usual media (e.g., radio, television, newspapers). For the most severe situations, have a plan for setting up a media crisis center. This plan should cover having extra equipment and supplies ready, such as desks, chairs, phones, backup generators, and copy machines.

“Really, there is no such thing as not planning for crises,” says Jonathan Bernstein, president of Bernstein Communications, a national public relations agency specializing in crisis response, issues management, and litigation consulting. “If you fail to plan to minimize the damage from crises, you are, by default, planning to make your crises worse. In the wake of the events of September 11, any local leader who doesn’t immediately upgrade his or her community’s level of crisis preparedness should be retired to the nearest ostrich farm.”

**Remain Calm**

The hard work and time you put into your communication plan will pay off if and when an actual crisis hits.

The first step, once a potential crisis has been identified, is to contact the crisis manager and the rest of the crisis team. All should agree that an emergency situation has, in fact, occurred and that the communications plan should be put into effect.

Next, activate the emergency alert system, if appropriate, and get word to the press. Remember, if you don’t apprise the media quickly, they will get information from other sources. Set up a crisis and media center in a central place.

As soon as possible, get the government or agency leader and other top management to the crisis center, suggests the U.S. Department of State. “Cancel other plans. People want to see the leader, not just the public affairs staff. Having top management in front of the press during a crisis lends credibility and shows that the organization is not treating the situation lightly.”

Be prepared for an influx of people from a variety of media: TV, newspapers, magazines, wire services, and radio. Take care of their needs, such as parking, phones, Internet connections, electrical outlets, desks, and chairs. Keep a log of reporters, their questions and deadlines, and when you responded to them. Always answer press inquiries and return phone calls.

According to Barron and Whitesell, all messages should be:

- *Candid and forthright. Tell the truth. For competitive or security reasons, you may have to avoid telling all you know at that particular time, but never lie;*
- *Compassionate but realistic, no matter how bad the news;*
- *Targeted directly to specific audiences, regardless of*

**Tips for Effective Crisis Communications**

1. Have a crisis plan in place.
2. When a crisis occurs, go public immediately. Report what you know. Inform customers, staff, and the news media as soon as you are able.
3. Make sure that top management gets to the crisis site.
4. Update information about the crisis frequently.

Adapted from the U.S. Department of State
pressure applied by the media or others; and
• Clear, concise and free of technical jargon and ambiguity.

In the Talking About Disasters guide, the Federal Emergency Management Agency recommends “when you wish to deliver disaster safety messages to an audience, the messages should be worded in a positive manner that helps those hearing or reading the message know how to act.” Instead of saying, “don’t panic,” for example, say, “remain calm.” This allows those hearing the message to focus on what they should do. Offer reassurance that things are under control and describe what actions are being taken to remedy the situation.

During the emergency, it’s easy to forget the staff. Make every effort to keep them informed and provide for their needs.

Above all, remain calm and collected.

Analyze What Happened
In the weeks and months after a disaster—once some semblance of normalcy has returned—analyze the crisis plan and how it worked. “Carefully and rigorously evaluate all decisions and actions taken during the crisis,” Barron and Whitesell advise. “Determine what went right and wrong. Make recommendations so to avoid repeating errors in future crisis situations, and to avert developments leading to crisis situations in the future.” Learn from the experience and correct problems so that they don’t happen again.

After a disaster, water systems may wish to inform their customers about security measures. Following the September 11 attack, some communities have held public meetings. (See the sidebar on this page.) Another method for communicating this information is to include an explanation with the regular bill mailing or with the annual Consumer Confidence Report.

Don’t forget that a good plan is also a flexible plan. Even those who take Victor Hugo’s advice to heart and come up with a great crisis communications plan will be wise to heed the 2,000 year-old words of Roman philosopher Publilius Syrus: “It is a bad plan that admits of no modification.”

Public Meetings Calm Fear
In the wake of the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, as well as the ongoing concern with Anthrax, many people are concerned about what their communities are doing to protect the public. In Morgantown, West Virginia, city officials and emergency management personnel decided to hold a public forum to address these concerns.

Representatives from the Morgantown Utility Board, County Emergency Services, and the Health, Fire, and Police departments outlined safety measures and security procedures that they had developed.

“We took a fresh look at all our operations through the perception of the post-September 11 world,” said Tim Ball, Morgantown Utility Board assistant general manager, about the water system. “We pretty much locked the doors and turned on the lights. Our policy is, if it can be opened, it’s going to be locked.”

Ron Kyle, Monongalia County Emergency Services director, encouraged people to have an emergency kit on hand. “You all have a role to play,” he said. “In the event something were to happen, put on your radios, turn on your televisions. We will activate the emergency alert system and give you instructions on what you need to be doing.”

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