

**Key principles of public information officers: Be First, Be Right, and Be Credible. In other words, make sure the messages are timely, accurate, and useful.**

Communicating before, during and after a crisis is important – not only when working with the media, but also with staff, parents, community members and other stakeholders. The following is a seven-step approach to help Key Communicators to:

- Understand their communication role in an emergency
- Follow and support EPS policies and procedures
- Know what communication actions to take

Depending on the intensity of the crisis, it is possible that all of these steps could be taken within the first hours of a crisis and then repeated as needed during the course of the situation.

### **Stage 1: Learn of the Crisis**

The Public Information Officer (PIO) is informed of a crisis and confirms with the superintendent or the Incident Management Team they know the situation.

NOTE: Even if the situation does not seem like it could cause community or media attention, it is important that the Director of Communications and PIO be informed. Crisis situations can escalate very quickly, and it is extremely important that the communication team stay up to date on the situation.

### **Stage 2: Verify the Crisis**

The first step is to determine what has happened (what, when, who, how, why), by coordinating at the site of the incident and immediately identifying as many facts as possible:

- WHAT happened and WHERE did it happen?

- WHEN did this happen?
- WHO is involved?
- HOW did it happen?
- WHAT is currently being done?

When collecting the data consider the following:

- Do you have all the facts (to the best of your knowledge)
- What other information do you need to put the event into perspective?
- Has the situation been confirmed?
- Was your information source(s) credible?
- Is information consistent from several sources?

In some cases, the media may be alerted to the situation before all of these facts can be determined. The PIO will assess this information and after looking at the case methodically, will decide the communications strategy to use and the district stance.

All victims or potential victims should receive instruction about how to deal with the crisis. All victims should be provided an expression of sympathy and humanized response. Information about remedies to the situation should be given out.

This will be approved by the Superintendent, and as necessary, reviewed by the following:

- Deputy Superintendent
- Safety and Security Coordinator
- District Counsel

## **Crisis Situations**

Each crisis is unique, but there is an opportunity to become familiar with a variety of scenarios so that a potential crisis can be quickly recognized and addressed.

The district has identified a number of scenarios that could adversely impact safety of operations, safety of staff and students, and/or district reputation. These scenarios are not limited to but may include:

- Accident (vehicle/other)
- Facilities (power or other utility outage, fire)

- Inclement Weather (delays/closures/activity cancellations)
- Medical (possible contagion)
- Police Activity (police activity in school vicinity)
- Social Media (rumors/unsanctioned use/other)
- Staff Death
- Staff Misbehavior (illegal/under investigation/other)
- Student Death
- Student Misbehavior (threats/violence/other)
- Threat/Violence

## **Stage 3: Communication Management**

### **Message Development Assignments**

Within the communications department, 2022, the message development tasks are as assigned below. In a crisis all staff will be called to respond, but if someone is unavailable, there is cross training for all tasks.

- Talking points – Kathy
- Main messages and strategy – Kathy
- Timing and plan – Kathy
- Develop FAQ - Kathy
- Website and Social Images – Jennifer
- Press Release – Jennifer
- Social Media and monitoring – Linda
- BBC messaging – Jennifer
- Monitor media - all

### **Message Management**

- Schedule regular internal communication updates.
- Identify key audiences.
- Log all crisis inquiries from public and/or media.
- Select and/or assign spokesperson(s)

## Communication Logistics

- Identify main on-site contact.
- Establish a location for communications operation center.
- Set up a site for the media away from the incident if possible

### School crisis communications should be:

**ACCURATE** — while speed is important, accuracy in the information at the time of release is critical;

**TIMELY** — information should be released in a timely manner once it is confirmed as accurate; and

**REDUNDANT** — in terms of disseminating information, use multiple channels and mechanisms to reach parents in as many forums as possible.

Parents have some pretty simple and clear expectations in what they want to know when a school safety issue arises at their child's school. In your message, you want to acknowledge the incident and/or issues; explain how and why it happened; demonstrate an understanding of those affected; identify steps taken to help the injured or aggrieved; identify methods for obtaining input and listening to community concerns; and share the steps officials are taking to correct the problem and prevent reoccurrences.

In general, parents want to know two things after a high-profile school crisis:

- What steps did you take to prevent an incident of crime and violence?
- How well prepared were you to manage the incident that could not be prevented?

## Stage 4: Setting up the Media Area

Although the PIO may be in the middle of preparing an official statement or a press conference on a crisis, the media is not pursuant to the district's timetable. The PIO's first objective upon receiving word of a large-scale crisis is to set up a media area. The benefits of setting up such an area are many. The media area allows the public to learn as much as possible as quickly as possible, which could save lives in a crisis. It ensures the media are easily accessible and get

information at the same time– quelling any threat of favoritism. It also allows the PIO to control the situation and avoid potential faux pas which can arise from stressful situations. Finally, it keeps the media in a place where they cannot accidentally disrupt emergency operations if they are occurring.

The media area should have the following:

- Water
- Restrooms
- View of the scene or activity if possible
- Cell reception
- Background materials.
- The goal of the media area is to establish communication to the public through the media until the crisis ends.

This makes it easier on the district, media, and public, by keeping the media all in one place for information. Don't allow the media to interfere with operations – be very clear as to what is off limits but be as accommodating as possible.

## **Stage 5: Designating a Spokesperson**

The spokesperson is the face of the district during a crisis. They must be calm, cool, collected and a subject matter expert in the field which they are responding. In almost all situations, the Superintendent, an Assistant Superintendent, the Safety Director, or a selected Subject Matter Expert, should be the spokesperson for the district. The PIO supports the spokesperson in their role with information, setting up interviews, dealing with the media and other communications related tasks and will fill in as spokesperson when needed. In action, the spokesperson should be able to walk away from their primary job for ten minutes, get briefed, give the press conference and head back to their jobs. While they are on the podium, the spokesperson should always tell the truth in a clear and consistent manner. They should apologize if the district is at fault and show empathy for those affected by the crisis. While the spokesperson should always show empathy, they should never utter the words 'our thoughts

and prayers are with'... This is an overused term which has lost its meaning. Instead, they should utilize the following statements:

- "I've talked to the Superintendent or Board and they tell me that "
- "Tonight, we are doing everything in our power to help the people in who are affected by this crisis. We are doing and to help"
- "I spoke with the husband of who was killed this afternoon on the job, he is"

They should say these things only if they have done these things.

As the spokesperson speaks, they should stick closely to the talking points which have been laid out by the crisis communications team. For this reason, there should be ideally three talking points. This will keep the press conference on topic, so the spokesperson can get back to their crisis job. The crisis team should be prepared for difficult or hostile questions before the interview starts. The team should brainstorm to be prepared for difficult or hostile questions from the media. Never respond 'no comment.' There are plenty of alternatives. "Let me find out what I can for you." "We are looking into that, but do not yet have answers. "

For current 2021-22 EPS standards, the superintendent and the PIO will most often be the spokesperson.

## **Stage 6: Implement the Plan**

The message, when it is assembled and ready to go, should be sent to and approved by the Superintendent or designee. Once the message is approved, the sequencing of messaging is as follows:

- Board of Directors
- Executive and Academic Cabinets
- Administrators and Supervisors
- Staff
- Families
- Media

The initial press release should cover all pertinent releasable information which covers **who, what, when, where, why and how**. The release should include visual media if possible. The initial press conference should take place near the crisis site, ensuring the public knows what is going on during the crisis. The spokesperson should cover the basics, allow 2-5 minutes for questions and then get back to their other duties. The PIO should watch the clock to make sure the conference does not take up too much of the spokesperson's time, but also allow for reporters' questions to be answered. Make sure the podium, microphones and other equipment are set up before the spokesperson walks into the room. General messaging needs to address talking points, which are decided initially and updated as the situation changes.

- Talking points should stay apolitical. Information should be shared across all media platforms as needed.
- Use personal pronouns for the organization. "We are committed to ..." or "We understand the need for..."
- Acknowledge uncertainty. Sounding more confident than you are rings false, sets you up to turn out wrong, and provokes debate with those who disagree. It is better to say what you know, what you do not know, and what you are doing to learn more.
- Give positive action steps, instead of negatives (i.e., "Do not use elevator" and "Don't panic.") use positive messages ("In case of fire, use stairs," "Stay calm,"). Repeat the message. Repetition reflects credibility and durability. Correct information is correct each time you repeat it. Reach and frequency, common advertising concepts, tell us that your message is more apt to be received and acted upon as the number of people exposed to the message (reach) and the number of times each person hears the message (frequency) increase.

**Ongoing operational duties include:**

- Keeping up to date on the situation
- Ensure superintendent and Incident Commander (if EOC is operative) are in agreement with current messaging.
- Read statements if possible
- Remind school staff and volunteers to refer all questions from the media or waiting parents to the PIO

- Remind staff to refrain from engaging in social media and/or providing inappropriate information around the crisis
- Ensure announcements and other information are translated into other languages as needed
- Monitor news broadcasts about the incident. Correct any misinformation heard.
- Keep a log of media spoken to (appendix)

## Stage 7 Monitoring

As the crisis situation evolves, continue to monitor the situation to provide the most up to date information for all audiences.

### Review crisis coverage

- Review media outlets that have inquired about the situation.
- Review media within a designated area of the facility (distance depends on the nature of the event).
- Review national and business media.
- Conduct regular searches through Internet search sites for key words, such as the name of the school, the incident, people involved, etc.

### Identify story trends

- What is the main focus for the media?
- Is the focus changing?
- Are there patterns that indicate messages EPS should be focusing on or responding to?

## Stage 8: Post Crisis Communication

After the crisis, there is still a lot of communication which needs to be completed before the whole incident ends. Communicators need to deliver on their promises and supply additional information about the incident they promised during the crisis. This follow through helps the people who are affected by the crisis begin to build trust with the organization again.



The district needs to continually update the public on the status of the problem. How far away is the district from fixing it? What else needs to be done? Is it safe to return? What is the district doing to ensure it won't happen again? The amount of follow up is proportional to the size of the crisis.

Don't forget the employees: make sure they know what is happening to make it right. They are the districts greatest advocates.

In the post crisis strategy, communicators should look at the crisis as an opportunity to learn what went well– and what didn't. Find out what could have been avoided, what could have been prepared better and how the district response to the crisis could have been better. Incorporate what was learned into the crisis plan.

### **Best Practices**

- Deliver all information promised to stakeholders ASAP.
- Keep stakeholders updated on the progression of the recovery efforts, including corrective measures being taken and the progress of investigations.

## Appendices

### A: Incident Fact Sheet

An incident fact sheet provides a brief written overview of a subject; generally limited to one page. It is prepared following the '5 W's' format using headings, short phrases, key stats, etc. It is not necessary to write fact sheets in complete sentences. Write in the third person and in a clean and concise manner.

Today's Date and Time: \_\_\_\_\_

What Happened?

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When did it happen? \_\_\_\_\_

Where did it happen? \_\_\_\_\_

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How did it happen? \_\_\_\_\_

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Extent of Damage? \_\_\_\_\_

Why did it happen? \_\_\_\_\_

Outline main points. Begin with a sentence that IDs the main subject being covered. Conclude with a sentence or two about the significance and status of the issue. AVOID OPINIONS.

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**B: Media Log**

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Incident:** \_\_\_\_\_

Outlet	Reporter	Time	Topic	Spokesperson

### C. Immediate Response to Media Inquiries

Use this template if the media is “at your door” and you need time to assemble the facts for the initial press release statement. Getting the facts is a priority. The following are responses which give you the necessary time to collect the facts. Use the following holding statements for providing an initial response and follow with a news release statement using the news release templates, after the facts are gathered.

#### **If on the phone with the media:**

- “We’ve just learned about the situation and are working to get more complete information
- now. How can I reach you when I have more information?”
- “All our efforts are directed at bringing the situation under control, so I’m not going to
- speculate about the cause of the incident. How can I reach you when I have more information?”
- “I am not the authority on this subject. Let me have (name) call you right back.”
- “We’re preparing a statement on that now. May I add you to our distribution list?”
- “You may check our website for background information. I will add you to our email
- distribution list.”

#### **If in person at an incident site or in front of press meeting:**

- “This is an evolving incident and I know that, just like we do, you want as much information as possible right now. While we work to get all your questions answered, here’s what we can confirm right now...”
- Give instructions for any protective measures that need to be taken immediately.
- “At approximately (time), a (brief description of what happened).”
- “At this point, we do not know the number of (persons ill, persons exposed injuries, deaths, etc).”
- “We have a (system, plan, procedure, operation in place for just such an emergency and we are being assisted by (police, FBI, DHS) as part of that plan.”
- “The situation is (under, not yet under) control and we are working with (local, state, federal) authorities to (contain this situation, determine how this happened, determine what actions may be needed) and how this can be prevented from happening again.”
- “We will continue to gather information and release it to you as soon as possible. I will have an update within (amount of time). As soon as we have more confirmed information, it will be provided.”
- “We ask for your patience as we respond to this emergency. “

## D. Developing Messages

**Step 1:** Consider the following general factors:

- Target audience(s) (e.g., general public, health providers)
- Purpose of messages (e.g., give facts/update, respond to media)
- Method of delivery (e.g., TV interview, press release, radio)

**Step 2:** Consider the six basic emergency message components:

- Expression of empathy
- Clarifying facts: who, what, where, when, how and why
- What we don't know
- Process to get answers
- Statement of commitment
- Referrals (for more information)
- Next scheduled update

**Step 3:** Decide the three most important message topics you need to cover.

**Step 4:** Develop a complete key message for each of your three message topics.

In an extreme crisis, the following information should be provided to the public as soon as possible, in as much detail as possible.

A. What Happened:

- Nature of incident or emergency
- Location
- Time of occurrence
- Situation resolved or response on-going
- Cause (Until an investigation has determined cause with reasonable certainty, do not speculate.)

B. Current Response Actions- what actions have been/are being taken to protect health, safety and property?

C. Known Damages:

- Homes
- Businesses
- Government buildings
- Infrastructure – roads, bridges, parks, etc.

#### D. Casualties

- Number dead and apparent cause
- Number injured and nature/severity of injuries, and where transported
- Number missing and circumstances
- General identification of casualties – age, sex, situation (employee, homeowner, responder, etc.)
- Names of casualties – only released after next of kin have been notified

#### E. Evacuations:

- Areas and facilities evacuated
- Routes for evacuation
- Approximate number of evacuees
- Location where evacuees were taken if transported or directed
- Means of contacting evacuees

#### F. Shelter and Mass Care:

- Shelters open – name and location
- Approximate number of persons being housed in shelters
- Mass feeding site or other mass care facilities in operation – name, location, and number of persons being served.

#### G. Status of Utilities:

- Electric service
- Water/sewer system
- Natural gas

#### H. Road and Facility Closures.

#### I. Organizations Responding:

- Local government
- State agencies
- Federal agencies
- Volunteer groups

#### J. Areas to which access is restricted and the reason(s) for such restriction.

#### K. For ongoing emergency situations, planned response activities.

## **E. Media Philosophy and Policy**

The district fosters an open and honest environment in which to disseminate public information on a consistent and timely basis.

### **Building Relationships with the Media**

It is in the district's best interest to work with the news media. The roles and responsibilities of professional journalists are respected by the district, and it is our goal to establish and maintain a positive and professional relationship with them.

### **Responding to the Media**

The Public Information Officer (PIO), the superintendent and his designee(s), may respond to media requests for general information. Requests for documents shall be coordinated through the Public Records Request Department.

Members of the media soliciting district participation for topics pertaining to district-wide issues, on-camera interviews, editorial boards or similar activities, shall be directed to the PIO.

Unless the media requests to speak to a specific Board member, members of the media seeking official comments from the Board will be directed to the President, or in his or her absence, the Vice-President. Inquiries on matters within a specific district can be addressed by the Board member of that district.

Calls or messages from the media seeking information should be returned promptly, preferably within one hour.

The PIO shall be kept apprised of all communications with the media.

### **Disseminating Information**

Following any media communication, the department director or designee notifies the PIO, who promptly notifies the superintendent with details of the inquiry, the response to media, and when the information is scheduled to be printed in the newspaper, and/or to be aired through radio or television.

Misinformation shared with the media can have negative effects on the public, as well as on the district credibility and the credibility of the news media. Any designee should speak to reporters only about topics about which they are familiar and understand. When reporters' questions go beyond required expertise, never speculate and refer them to the appropriate source or the PIO.

## Interviews with the Media

During the interview, the spokesperson should:

- Make certain not to over-reassure. The objective is not to placate but to elicit accurate, calm concern.
- Acknowledge uncertainty. Offer only what you know. Show your distress and acknowledge your audience's distress. "It must be awful to hear that we can't answer that question right now..."
- Emphasize that a process is in place to learn more. Describe that process in simple terms.
- Give anticipatory guidance. If you are aware of future negative outcomes, let people know what to expect (e.g., school closed for a day).
- Be empathetic, not defensive. Say, "We are sorry ..." or "We feel terrible that ..." when acknowledging misdeeds or failures from the organization. Don't use "regret," which sounds like you're preparing for a lawsuit.
- Acknowledge people's fears. Don't tell people they shouldn't be afraid. They are afraid and they have a right to their fears. Don't disparage fear; acknowledge that it's normal and human to be frightened.
- Acknowledge the shared misery. Some people will be less frightened than they are miserable, hopeless and feeling defeated. Acknowledge the misery of a catastrophic event, then help move people toward the future through positive actions.
- Express wishes. Say, "I wish we knew more," or "I wish our answers were more definitive."
- Be willing to address the "what if" questions. These are the questions that everyone is thinking about and they want expert answers. Although it's often impractical to speculate when the crisis is contained and not likely to affect large numbers of people, it is reasonable to do so if people need to be emotionally prepared.
- Ask more of people. Perhaps the most important role of the spokesperson is to ask people to bear the risk and work toward solutions with you. People can tolerate considerable risk, especially voluntary risk. If you acknowledge the risk's severity and complexity, and recognize people's fears, you can then ask the best of them.
- Be calm and relaxed.
- Be truthful and stick to your expertise. Never use the phrase "no comment." If an answer is unknown, say, "I don't have that information in front of me. May I research it and get back to you?"
- Be genuinely concerned about the situation. Personalize your answers and express sympathy, if appropriate.
- Provide a solution. State exactly what will be done to correct the problem in accordance to the statement and/or media messages prepared by the crisis team.
- Remain gracious. If several reporters are requesting interviews, you may have to repeat yourself several times. Do not appear irritated.
- Avoid confrontation and do not be argumentative.



- Stay on message. Stay within the parameters of the approved media statement and media messages.
- Keep it simple. Make statements simple and direct; remember a reporter will likely pull one or two sound bites and not use every answer in its entirety.
- Avoid jargon. When speaking with reporters or the lay public, avoid the use of jargon and acronyms. Your mission is to convey information in a clear, concise way. If your listeners have to decipher industry speak, you'll momentarily lose their attention, and they may miss a key message.
- Use bridges to take control of the interview. If a reporter asks you a potentially sticky question, answer it, but bridge it to a message you want to convey. "Yes, but have you considered ..." or "No, but we've solved that problem through ..." Other suggested bridges include:
  - "What I think you are really asking is ... "
  - "The overall issue is ... "
  - "What's important to remember is ... "
  - "It's our policy not to discuss (x), but what I can say is ... "
- Watch casual remarks. Nothing is off the record even if you tell a reporter or group of reporters that it is. You should never say anything you wouldn't want quoted because those are usually just the juicy tidbits that will end up in print or on air.

Other helpful hints when interviewing with specific news mediums:

### **Television Interviews**

- Determine the format. Is the show going to be taped and edited, or live?
- Remember, every blink, "uh," and twitch is magnified on camera.
- If it is a one-on-one interview, look at the reporter or the camera operator. Don't look into the camera.
- Keep your answers brief and stick to your key points. The more tape they have, the less control you have over what gets on the air.
- In taped interviews try to remember to incorporate the question into your answer as a complete sentence.
- If you make a mistake, don't be afraid to ask to stop and start over (unless it's live).

### **Radio Interviews**

- Determine the format. A live interview is very different from a taped interview.
- Watch out for verbal pauses – "Uh," "Um," and "You know."
- Radio will not be as in-depth as print, so plan on providing brief, to the point, responses.
- Be careful not to repeat the negatives in a reporter's question.

## **Telephone Interviews**

- Know who is on the other end of the line.
- Ask whether you are being recorded.
- Ask when and where the information will be used.
- Spell out difficult names and technical terms and phrases.
- Limit the time available for the interview.
- Be certain to ask for feedback from reporters to ensure that they have understood your points

## **Dealing with a hostile interview**

- If you are interrupted, be polite, but assertive. Bridge to your point in the next questions.
- Don't let them misquote or put words in your mouth... restate your answer or message and correct the mistakes.
- If they shoot rapid fire questions... pick the low hanging fruit and avoid the rest.
- If they demand an answer, you don't have stick to your response.
- Stay on your message. Restate any question that could throw you off message. Say something to the effect of I believe what you are asking is: and then fill in your own version of the question.
- Identify 3-5 points you want to make (your talking points) and get those points across.
- Use easily graspable facts and figures.
- Never say no comment.
- Tell it first. (Meaning we need to tell our story before someone else makes it up)