

BASIC CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS PLANNING

Cities are already familiar with emergency planning because they have had to respond to a variety of adverse conditions that disrupted city operations, residents and businesses, and overall may have jeopardized the city's reputation. Some cities have even gone through a formal contingency planning process in preparation for Y2K.

Crisis communications, although part of emergency planning, is one aspect that may need more city attention. The League of Minnesota Cities recommends that cities develop and implement a thorough crisis communications plan; however, we recognize that the process is very time consuming and that not all cities have the necessary resources to undertake such a project.

This guide contains simple steps cities can take to prepare for crisis communications, at a minimum, to protect the city's interests and reputation. This basic process is designed to be completed in a one-hour city council session. To facilitate a short and efficient meeting, councilmembers and staff should review this handout, including attached case studies and scenarios prior to the meeting. At the city council meeting, council members and staff should walk through the scenarios beginning on page 27, and then should review the checklist on the inside cover of this guide.

At the meeting, city council and staff can walk through the steps discussed in this guide and develop scenarios more closely related to your city's circumstances. In effect, this group of city councilmembers and key staff would constitute the city's crisis response team, which is responsible for developing, reviewing and updating the crisis communications plan.

The city council should undergo this process once a year, at a minimum, to make sure the information remains accurate, and to add knowledge of new risks for the city as they become evident.

For questions about this guide contact League communications staff.

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Overview

Establishing key audiences

Identifying communications
vehicles

Choosing a spokesperson

Drafting key messages

Organizing and updating
information



Establish who are the key audiences.

Targeting information to the city's key audiences is one of the most important things a city can do to effectively communicate once a crisis develops. Identifying key audiences should be done well in advance of the crisis. After the crisis has occurred, the city can determine if the key audiences have changed from the planned scenario. Keep in mind that the city's audiences may change at different stages of a crisis.

In general, the three key audiences for a city in a crisis are city residents, city employees, and the media. However, a crisis may have county, state and national implications, which changes the audience focus. Therefore, it is important to list all the possible key audiences related to any crisis the city may face.

One of the most important audiences in a crisis is city employees. At any one point during the crisis, they may be the first direct contact with city residents and the public in general. Although it is important to keep them informed, it is also important to convey who the city spokesperson is and to channel all media information requests to this person. The media is a key audience for the city as well as a vehicle that can be used to communicate the city's message to the other key audiences.

Some of the possible audiences for a city are listed in the sidebar. As part of this crisis communications process, it is helpful for the city to identify key audiences for its own circumstances and possible crises. Collect and list contact information for all of the city's key audiences. For example, compile a list of the agencies the city would have to deal with in a particular crisis and include all their contact information.

Possible key audiences

- City residents
- City employees
- City businesses – Chamber of Commerce
- Residents of neighboring cities
- Neighboring cities with mutual aid agreements
- Contractors and vendors working with the city
- Regional and national residents
- Media – local
- Media – regional
- Media – national
- State of Minnesota DEM
- Governor – emergency declaration
- Federal agencies – FEMA, Small Business Administration, etc.
- Interest or volunteer groups/associations
- Other city-specific

Establish how to communicate with key audiences.

There are multiple ways to communicate with key audiences. In the event of a crisis, it is very important to have contacts from local newspapers, radio, and television. These three mass communications vehicles will ensure the city's message is heard by a wider public. For this reason, establishing a relationship with the media before a crisis occurs is very important.

If the city doesn't have an ongoing relationship with the media, at a minimum it should keep a list of all the media outlets servicing the area. These may include radio and television stations as well as newspapers. The list should include the name of the contact person, and a telephone, cell phone, fax number and/or e-mail addresses, for each media outlet organized by geographical area, keeping the local media at the beginning of the list.

By establishing an ongoing relationship with the media, the city will be ready at the time of a crisis to initiate the first contact instead of reacting to a report or inquiry from the media. Some key elements of a good relationship with the media are acknowledging time schedules and deadlines, and providing accurate information as the crisis develops. To control the information flow, the city should channel all information through one person to make sure the city is speaking with one voice. Overall, establishing a relationship with the local media will help the city be more prepared to handle crisis situations.

The city web site is another good vehicle to release accurate, up-to-the-minute information for the public in general as well as for city employees. This is especially true when the city has the capability to post and update the information internally. The city should also use e-mail to communicate with employees and look for alternative ways to share information with city staff without computer access.

Looking at the communications vehicles listed in the sidebar, think about the applicable ones for your city.

Communication vehicles available to cities

- Radio
- Television
- Newspapers
- City newsletter
- Meetings and briefings
- Mail letter from the city
- City web site
- E-mail message from the city
- Fax letter from the city

Choose a city spokesperson and prepare him/her to speak on behalf of the city.

The city spokesperson's main role is to channel information regarding a crisis or event to key audiences. The spokesperson should be authorized by the city council to make statements to the media, employees, and other audiences regarding the crisis. The city should have one main spokesperson, and may have several other spokespersons depending on the nature of the crisis; however, the role of each spokesperson should be clearly established. Ultimately, it is most beneficial to have just one spokesperson in a crisis response team. By having one spokesperson, the city gains better control over the accuracy, delivery, and timeliness of the information release to key audiences.

Typically, the city spokesperson is the mayor or city administrator/clerk. A city may consider having councilmembers and other city management, such as the city's police chief, public works director, community development director or communications person, serve as part of the crisis response team. The city crisis response team would establish the communications steps to follow in a crisis and would serve as backup the spokesperson. This team is also responsible for training the spokesperson on how to communicate with the city's key audiences during a crisis.

Another aspect of spokesperson training is to anticipate the questions the media may ask. This is helpful because it allows the spokesperson to think about how to answer the tough questions, introduce the city's key messages in statements to the media, and make sure the city's message comes across clearly.

The sidebar has some common questions the media may ask in any crisis. The response team should develop its own list before a crisis and should update the list when a crisis arises. The spokesperson should be familiar with these questions before answering a media inquiry or briefing. The purpose of developing these questions is to prepare answers that reflect the city values and key messages.

Questions the media may ask during a crisis

- What happened?
- How severe were any injuries?
- Did the city know about the condition/problem?
- Who is responsible for the condition/problem?
- Has the condition/problem ever happened in the city before? How long ago?
- What could the city have done to prevent the condition/problem?
- What is the city doing to alleviate the condition/problem?

Develop key messages and pre-gathered information on the city.

An important step in preparing for a crisis is to develop key messages that can be used to stress city values in a time of crisis. For example, a key message may be that the city is concerned about safety. This is a broad message that may work for a number of crises and has implications in most aspects of city business.

Possible key messages

- We value safety
- We value life
- We value city employees
- We value our business partners
- We value the environment
- We value community involvement
- We thoroughly investigate incidents
- We support schools
- We support a drug-free, harassment-free work environment
- We are responsive to citizens' needs
- We are fiscally responsible
- We anticipate and prepare for potential crises
- We strive to share information and communicate with the community
- Our thoughts and prayers go out to the victims of this tragedy
- We are doing all we can to ensure this never happens again

From any of the key messages listed in the sidebar, a city can elaborate on a message related to the actual crisis. In order to develop messages related to an actual crisis, the first step is to get the facts to understand what's happened, what's being done, what can be done, and why. For example, "the city of Mosquito Heights values safety in all its operations, and for this reason the city's snowplowing policy includes safety training for public works employees. However, in view of this accident, the city will be reviewing snowplowing procedures and will conduct additional employee training to minimize the chances of a repeat accident."

It is important to tell your audiences what you know when you know it, and what steps you're taking to fix problem, (assuming there is a city-controlled issue). Carefully craft a message that includes just the information that tells the story without including speculation or irrelevant information. The message should include information that answers who, what, when, and where. The key in drafting the message is to provide the appropriate information when it becomes available. For example, a city may not be able to provide much information to the media regarding a pending lawsuit where there is privileged information or a gag order. However, the city should still respond to the media and explain why it is not possible to release the information. By doing these things, the city will be viewed as a reliable source of information as well as responsive to the media and the community.

In preparing for a potential crisis, the city should gather city information pieces that reflect the city's vision and key messages. Documents that can be used when responding to a

crisis include information on safety records, policies and procedures, a city map, demographic information, city services, number of employees, and contact information for the spokesperson and crisis response team.

After the crisis has passed, it is sometimes beneficial for the city to tell its key audiences how the problem was resolved. For example, plan to send a press release a year after a devastating tornado telling residents what percent of the affected buildings have been repaired/rebuilt. The city may also want to dedicate a section of its newsletter or web site for a progress report.

Compile a crisis response folder.

A key element of crisis preparation is organizing the information to be readily found in the event of a crisis. The best way to accomplish this is by compiling the information in a three-ring folder, making sure that copies of the folder are located at several different locations and that each member of the response team has one at his/her work station and home.

Keep information updated.

Finally, this short process is most helpful when the information contained in the folder is kept updated. The information in this folder should be reviewed on a regular basis, at least annually, or whenever there is city councilmember or key staff turnover.

The crisis response folder should include:

TAB ONE

- List of emergency phone numbers for the crisis response team
- Spokesperson name and contact information
- Name and contact information of alternate spokespersons and the conditions that would make them a spokesperson

TAB TWO

- City's possible key audiences
- City's key messages
- City informational materials

TAB THREE

- List of media contacts
- Sample press releases (see Communications Tools p. 10)

TAB FOUR

- Crisis scenarios (see pp. 27-32)

Communications tools

Press releases

- Message
- Format

Press conferences

- Materials
- Tips for before, during and after the press conference

Interviews

- Using key messages
- Handling misquotes and other problems
- Speaking on- and off-the-record

Press Releases

Press releases are useful when a city wants to convey certain information clearly and on the record. Press releases should be distributed by hand, by fax, or electronically to all local media outlets, and, if appropriate, to regional and national media in the area. If the city has a web site, post the press releases immediately.

The message

The most important part of a press release is the message, the essence of what the city wants to convey. Journalists will typically summarize information about a situation in as little text as one paragraph. The headline writer will then give the story a title that could be as short as two words. Through press releases, the city can suggest the title of the story and provide the facts of the situation, instead of relying on a reporter to dig out the details from a mass of information.

Press releases that read like a news story are more likely to be picked up by the press. Similar to a straight news article, a press release is written with the first paragraph being the “lead,” and contains the most important information; subsequent paragraphs expand on that information and give more detail in decreasing order of importance. The least important information is at the end.

In the first paragraph, make sure to include the name and phone numbers of a person the media can contact for clarification and expansion. If appropriate, include the different ways the contact person can be reached, including cell phone and home phone numbers.

The format

The sentences and paragraphs in a press release should be short so they can be quickly reviewed by an assignment editor or a reporter, and they should contain no jargon, abbreviations, unexplained details, or cliches. You may use quotes, but it is more usual to find these in the second or third paragraphs.

Elements of a press release

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

WHO: Who is the subject of the story?

WHAT: What exactly is being announced?

WHERE: Where is or was it happening? Where is the predicted danger?

WHEN: When is the event taking place, or when is something expected to happen?

WHY: Why is the information important? How is this significant? What is the reason for issuing the press release, and the reason for the city’s involvement in this situation?

The standard press release contains the following information at the top of the release:

- The date the release is being put out.
- A contact name, phone number, fax number, and e-mail address.
- A release time. Most often, city news releases are sent and can be used immediately, so write “For immediate release.”
- A headline, summarizing the news of the release. The headline should get attention and be capitalized.
- A dateline, capitalized, beginning the first paragraph that states where the news originated.

Sample press release

[Use city letterhead]

Date

For immediate release

Contact name
Phone, cell phone
Fax
E-mail

PRESS RELEASE

Title of your release: this should briefly describe the main point

[CITY, date] – Double-space your press release. Make the first paragraph your most important and include the who, what, where, when, and why.

Following paragraphs should explain in more detail why you are sending the release. Include quotes from city officials, data that supports your point, next steps, etc.

###

Optional – brief, separate paragraph with any additional contact and background information or reports available.

Press releases are typically typed, double-spaced, with wide margins, and run one to two pages. If there is more than one page, type “more” at the end of the first page. At the end of the release, type ### to indicate the end.

Press releases can be sent to the attention of an editor, an assignment editor, or a reporter. If possible, it is good practice to follow up on the press release with a phone call to ask if the recipient got your release and would like additional information.

Press conferences

In a fast-moving situation, such as a catastrophic event where many reporters are on site seeking information, a press conference may be the best tool to disseminate information. The best time to hold a press conference is when there is important news to report and lots of reporters clamoring for the news.

Press conferences are an effective way of disseminating information because they group a number of news organizations in one place and, therefore, can help disseminate information to all target audiences. To make sure certain target audiences receive the city's message, one-on-one interviews with specific media representatives can be arranged after the press conference.

Materials for a press conference

Background materials should be prepared and enough copies should be made for reporters. The names and titles of persons speaking at the press conference should be clearly identified in the handouts. The material can include situation reports and video material of the situation, which may be duplicated for distribution. In addition, the city should consider providing materials that contain information about the city, such as maps, demographic information, businesses and utilities in the area, etc., if pertinent to the topic.

Whenever possible, it is recommended the city **prepare for press conferences** by doing the following:

- Decide what the spokesperson will say in the opening statement.
- Write talking points for the spokesperson for the opening statement, focusing on making only three points. More than three points can make the message unclear.
- Identify possible questions that might be asked and appropriate responses to each question. This is also your opportunity to prepare how the city will respond to questions it is unable to answer.

Elements of a press conference

The "5 Ws" should be clearly stated:

WHO: Who is giving the news? Name the spokesperson on behalf of the city.

WHAT: What is exactly being announced? The information provided must be as detailed as possible.

WHERE: Where is the event, or where is the predicted danger, or where is the problem exactly?

WHEN: When is the event taking place, or when is something predicted to happen?

WHY: What is the reason for having the press conference? What is the reason for the city's involvement in this situation?

- Stage a mock press conference before the actual conference, if time permits. City staff can act as reporters, which allows the spokesperson practice responses to possible questions.
- Choose date, time, and location carefully not to conflict with other events the media may be interested in covering. Mid-morning or early afternoon is often the best for the various news' deadlines. Another consideration is meeting the technical requirements of the media, whenever possible, such as lighting platforms, special power, translation, and mult-boxes (audio equipment that has a single input and multiple outputs that go to recording devices.)
- Determine whether to use visual aids.
- Notify reporters if they are not already on-site. You may want to telephone reporters, announce on a news wire service, or send a fax or e-mail including the topic of the press conference.
- Think about alternative locations to hold the press conference in case something goes wrong with the designated location.

During the press conference the city may do the following:

- Have a sign-in sheet for the press.
- Let reporters know at the beginning of the press conference how much time is available.
- Keep the press conference and statements short.
- Allow time for questions.
- Tape the remarks made by the spokesperson so that they can be transcribed for a permanent record, if possible.
- The spokesperson should admit if he or she doesn't have an answer to the question, but should promise to get back to the reporter before the story deadline.

After the press conference, the city should send handout materials and a transcript (if one is available) to any media organization that could not attend but has an interest in the story. In addition, fulfill the promises made at the conference for additional materials or responses to unanswered questions within deadline times.

Interviews

In dealing with the media, an immediate response is often necessary. However, immediate response does not mean that a reporter's question should be answered on the spot, right after the phone rings.

City officials should take time to prepare a statement, learn about the issue, collect background information, etc. to be able to convey the city's message effectively whether for a live on-camera or radio interview, or a newspaper story.

The following questions can help to promptly and effectively answer a reporter's inquiry:

- What is the story about? Is he/she investigating a problem and what angle is he/she taking on the story?
- What type of information is he/she looking for — reaction, background, authentication?
- Who else has he/she talked to or is going to talk to?
- Who is the reporter and what's his/her area of specialty? This will determine how much additional information you may have to provide, and the degree and manner to which you respond to the questions.
- What is the deadline for the story? Arrange a time you can call him/her back.

Using key messages

In some cases, such as employment decisions and lawsuits in progress, the city's ability to release information is restricted. Because the issues may be very complex it is advisable for the city to seek legal advice and agree beforehand which questions or issues would be best handled by the city and which would be best handled in cooperation with legal representatives.

Dos and don'ts of dealing with the media

DO

- Be honest and accurate.
- Admit when you don't know an answer, offer to get one and do so promptly.
- Correct mistakes immediately.
- Avoid using jargon. Speak in plain language.
- Assume that everything you say is on-the-record.
- Be as open as possible.
- Call reporters if a story appears that is inaccurate. Politely point out what was wrong and substantiate it.
- Return phone calls in time for reporters to meet deadlines.
- Try to provide the information reporters want.

DON'T

- Say "No Comment".
- Be unresponsive.
- Lie, guess, improvise, or speculate.
- Try to put a comment "off the record" after you have said it.

By responding with “no comment” the city makes a negative impression and insinuates guilt or secrecy. To avoid doing so, the city can use key messages to complement the answer to a question that may be inadvisable to answer directly.

For example, when a reporter asks the spokesperson the nature of a complaint against a city employee, the answer may be as follows: “A complaint against a city employee has been filed, and the city is making every effort to thoroughly investigate the complaint. When the investigation is completed, taking all the facts into account, and a decision has been made, the city will be making the findings public. In compliance with Minnesota law, the city cannot provide any more information about this complaint.” The city’s key messages in this case are: investigating thoroughly; dealing with issue fairly; abiding by the law.

Some other statements a city can make in place of “no comment” are:

- We’re investigating to determine exactly what happened.
- I don’t think it’s appropriate for us to speculate on the circumstances at this time.
- We want to assure the community we’ll keep you informed as our investigation progresses.
- We take these issues very seriously.
- We have a very clear policy on [blank]. If a violation has occurred, we will take swift action.

Misquotes, Mischaracterizations & Bias

If you feel you are unfairly characterized or misquoted (and the misquote alters the intent of the original statement) in a story, or there are other specific problems with the story from your perspective, it may be advisable to meet with the editor/editorial board.

This is especially important if there is an issue with reporting over a period of time, such as possible bias against your position. If you feel that there is a bias on the part of the reporter, it is best to tread lightly. It’s best to approach a meeting with the editor as an opportunity to better explain your

position, than to directly raise a concern about bias. Reporters and editors pride themselves on presenting balanced coverage.

Another circumstance that should prompt a conversation with the editor is if the paper does not contact the city for a quote or an opinion when the other major players in the case are contacted. Even if this happens once, it is best to contact the editor and let him/her know that you would like to contribute your position to the discussion. A phone call should suffice the first time around. If the situation continues, a meeting may be necessary.

Speaking on- and off-the-record

When speaking with the media, it is always on-the-record unless you previously agree otherwise before you begin speaking. Most often, speaking to the media is done on-the-record unless there are some very specific reasons to speak off-the-record.

When speaking on-the-record, everything you say to a reporter may be used and attributed to you by name. Although seldom used, officials may speak off-the-record to provide context for an issue when a reporter appears to be off the mark on a story and some reason prevents the official to put the information on-the-record. Keeping the privacy of a person may be a reason for speaking off-the-record.

When speaking off-the-record, the reporter cannot use any of the information you provide. This information is only for the reporter and cannot be made public in any way. However, if you want to make sure the information is not printed or attributed to you, do not share it with a reporter. Journalists can often get the information confirmed by other sources.

Accident in city facility

In January 1999, a 6-year-old boy died after falling through an opening in the bleachers of a city ice arena in Hutchinson. The boy slipped and fell through the space between the seat and the floorboard, dropped eight feet and landed head first on the concrete floor. He was rushed to the hospital and later died from severe head injuries. This tragic accident generated a flurry of media coverage.

The city of Hutchinson decided to temporarily close the Hutchinson Civic Arena. This was done to allow time for inspectors to evaluate the safety of the spectator bleachers in light of the accident. The city requested the State Building Department to assist in the inspection and evaluation process to determine safety issues.

Because this accident happened during hockey season, the city carefully considered reopening the arena. The city announced that the facility would reopen when it was as safe as reasonably possible for spectators. When the arena was reopened, the city took temporary safety measures, such as installing boards to close the gaps and attaching netting to the back of the bleachers.

The bleachers in question were about 20 years old, and were grandfathered into the new building code that called for enhanced safety standards. Two weeks after the boy's death, the city of Hutchinson removed the bleachers. This was done after a report concluded the bleachers were not structurally sound.

This accident prompted a grassroots effort to deal with substandard bleachers throughout the state, and later drove legislative action. A bill was passed requiring cities to comply with new bleacher safety standards by January 1, 2001. This bill was later amended and the deadline was postponed to 2002.

Things to think about

- What did the city do right?
- What would you recommend the city do differently?
- How would you respond to a similar case in your city?
- What communication vehicles would your city have available to communicate in a similar case?

Target audiences

The city's target audience was primarily city residents, but since the arena was used by residents of neighboring communities, they were also a key audience. The city used the media to get its message out, by responding to inquiries and later sending out press releases. Another key audience was city employees. It was crucial for the city to make sure its employees knew what was happening because of the sensitive nature of the accident and the possible liability issue it presented for the city.

Key messages

The city administrator used three key messages in the city response to the media. First he acknowledged it "was a tragic accident and we feel very badly." With this statement, the spokesperson was stating sympathy rather than regret, which does not constitute an admission of liability by the city.

Secondly, he stated the city was gathering information about how this fatality occurred, and that police department and parks and rec employees were investigating this accident. And third, he said the city was committed to ensuring that this type of accident would not occur again and explained actions being taken to protect the safety of spectators.

The mayor also played a role in reinforcing the city's message. Along with the city administrator, he reiterated his concern for the family and extended condolences on behalf of the city. They emphasized that the city was doing everything to investigate the accident and that a police report would be sent to the city attorney once the investigation was completed.

In the following days, the city summarized the steps it would take following this accident, such as temporarily closing the arena and requesting an investigation from the State Building Department. Later, the city reopened the arena, keeping the bleachers in question off-limits to spectators, and informed the community there would be limited seating at the arena. Finally, the city released a report that concluded its bleachers were not structurally sound, and moved to replace the structure.

It was important that the city referred only to the facts of the accident and the investigation in all its communications with the media, and didn't make the bleachers' compliance with the State Building Code the focus of media attention and a defense for this accident.

Communication vehicles

The city responded to the media using the city administrator as the spokesperson. Ice arena employees as well as police department staff knew that the administrator was the city spokesperson, and referred all media inquiries to him.

The media contacted the city shortly after the accident took place. The media also contacted League of Minnesota Cities Insurance Trust (LMCIT) as the city's insurer. The city, in cooperation with LMCIT, responded to all media inquiries with a number of press releases. Press releases were also sent out at every step of the process, keeping communication with the media proactive. These press releases were also circulated among city employees to keep them informed of the city's position and the steps the city was taking.

Natural disaster

On March 29, 1998, a rash of seven tornadoes swept through southern Minnesota. The historic city of St. Peter was the hardest hit by an F3 level tornado that ripped through its midsection. Two were killed, at least 36 other people were injured, and hundreds of homes and businesses were damaged and destroyed, including many historic buildings.

The response from the city followed the city's emergency plan and the process towards recovery began right away. Forty municipal utility companies worked to restore power to St. Peter; however, the system that provided power to all residents took weeks to rebuild. The city also had to contend with fires in damaged buildings and natural gas leaks.

Many shelters were opened by the Red Cross to take care of the affected residents. Help came from all over the State and volunteers arrived to help with the cleanup process.

The city set up an emergency operations center to coordinate the response and recovery effort.

Target audiences

In this case, the city needed to inform not only its constituency, but also the city employees and emergency responders, state and federal authorities for help and aid, and neighboring local governments to activate mutual aid agreements. The city also needed to put special emphasis on informing residents about the response and recovery effort.

The city's success in dealing with the emergency was directly related to how well the city disseminated information. The most efficient and effective way to disseminate information to the public in an emergency is through the media. Therefore, one of the first phone calls made by the city spokesperson was to the local media.

Things to think about

- What did the city do right?
- What would you recommend the city do differently?
- How would you respond to a similar case in your city?
- What communication vehicles would your city have available to communicate in a similar case?

Key messages

Although the facts of the recovery efforts should prevail, it is still important to include the city's key messages in statements to key audiences. In this case, the most effective message for the city's constituency was that the city had prepared for this type of emergency and that an emergency response plan was being followed. These key messages were also used in interactions with the media.

As part of the city's emergency planning process, the city had prepared key messages to be used in response to an emergency. The city also prepared sample Q&A's that anticipated questions from the media.

In the direct aftermath of the tornado, the city communicated with residents on those issues that were of immediate need, such as food, shelter, how to dispose of debris, recycling, etc. As the emergency progressed, other kinds of concerns were addressed, such as where to take complaints and problems with insurance companies, etc.

Communication vehicles

Because electrical power was out in the aftermath of the tornado, radio reports played an important role in informing city residents. The city also regularly distributed updated information to the Red Cross volunteers running the shelters to share with the affected residents. Also, emergency response personnel became critical in keeping residents informed of the efforts.

The city also dealt with the lack of communications infrastructure by partnering with Cub Scout troops and Red Cross volunteers to door-knock and leave flyers announcing the daily updating meeting held at a church that was not damaged. At these meetings, residents and concerned volunteers received a daily report on the recovery and helpful information on coping with the emergency.

Later on, as electricity and equipment were restored, the city

began sending a broadcast fax, *Hot Sheet*, that answered those most commonly asked five to ten questions regarding the emergency, the recovery and reconstruction of city facilities. This broadcast fax became so popular that city has continued it to this date, expanding it to include information about city services, what the city is doing, issues and projects. And the St. Peter *Hot Sheet* is now also available on the city's web site.

In emergencies like this one, media inquiries are almost immediate and the response has to be too. Maintaining good media relations is crucial and communication between city officials and reporters is critical during and after a disaster. The conduct of staff and emergency personnel in these situations has a large impact on public perception of the disaster. Although the St. Peter city administrator was the city spokesperson, other city emergency personnel answered media requests for information on the spot, which was reasonable in this type of situation. The mayor also played a great role in disseminating information to residents and the media.

Although the city's response at the beginning was reactive, it turned proactive to help its constituency cope with a disaster. (The more proactive the effort, the more information can be disseminated and the more control the city maintains over the information.) The city chose to get information out to the media via press releases and press conferences, and the information was also posted on the city web site. The city also developed situation reports that were updated and distributed frequently to reporters.

Controversial issue in front of City Council

In June 2000, the Hugo City Council passed a resolution upholding the general prohibition on custom process and slaughterhouse facilities within the city of Hugo and declined to adopt an ordinance to permit their operation or establishment. Prior to passing this resolution, the city held a public hearing to consider the draft ordinance regulating slaughterhouses as required by Minnesota Statutes.

The slaughterhouse had been in operation illegally in Hugo since 1992 at a 20-acre farm and in recent years it was used for Asian and African religious ceremonies. The city took action after recording a number of concerns about dramatic increase in traffic and complaints of nuisance to neighbors.

Although the slaughterhouse operation within the city of Hugo according to the city code was illegal, the zoning issue became highly controversial and mobilized a number of residents, the media and even animal rights organizations such as Defending Farm Animals, Inc. The point of view opposing the slaughter facility claimed inhumane treatment of animals, increased traffic volume, danger to public health, improper zoning for a commercial business in residential area, and contamination to wildlife ponds. Other members of the community argued for keeping the slaughterhouse open, because they claimed it served to carry on Hmong religious and cultural traditions.

Target audiences

City residents, businesses, and the media were the most important target audience in this case. Local and regional media as well as concerned animal rights organizations were also interested and attended the public hearing.

Key messages

By preparing well before the public hearing, and setting and enforcing ground rules, the city projected a good image to the media and constituents. As a result of the preparation, the city

Things to think about

- What did the city do right?
- What would you recommend the city do differently?
- How would you respond to a similar case in your city?

was fair, well-organized, and respectful of opinions of all community members.

Communication vehicles

In this case, the public hearing was the primary communications vehicle because the city needed to have a fair and open process for all people to share their views with the Council. Although public hearings are mandated by Minnesota Statutes as part of the process of considering a zoning ordinance, the city took additional effective measures to ensure that all opinions were heard. After the city gave notice of the public hearing, it quickly became clear that this Council meeting was going to be well attended and that the diverse opinions in the community could make this meeting hard to control.

The city prepared to maintain control over the meeting to ensure all public input would be received by:

- Developing ground rules to allow all opinions to be heard. These ground rules served as guidelines for taking public comments, including that anyone wishing to state an opinion would:
 - Have only one opportunity to voice their opinion.
 - Sign up prior to speaking.
 - State name and address when addressing the Council.
 - Observe basic rules of public decorum such as no foul language.
 - Limit comment time to three minutes.
- Distributing the ground rules to the public prior to the beginning of the meeting.
- Emphasizing the ground rules by having the mayor repeat them before taking public comment.
- Paying attention to logistical issues, such as allowing for enough seats, setting up TV monitors, and putting out extra chairs to serve as overflow seating.

City is affected by known natural disaster

The city of Mosquito Heights has been fighting the rising Mississippi River. All predictions indicate that the flood will affect a large area of the city. The city has been busy implementing its emergency plan, which at this stage includes sandbagging and other methods to try to keep the waters from reaching the downtown business area where city hall is also located.

The city needs to prepare the community to respond to an eventual flood. A large number of volunteers are needed to help prepare. The city also needs to assess if it has enough emergency response personnel and equipment to respond to its own needs and to assist in mutual aid agreements with neighboring communities.

Since city hall will probably be directly affected by the flood, the city administrator has established an emergency coordination center away from the likely flood area.

1. Who are the city's target audiences?

Think about who would need to know about flood management plans and how the community would respond to the eventual flood. Also consider the city's interaction with neighboring communities.

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2. What are the key messages for each audience?

Think about the most important things the affected parties need to know, and what the city would need to convey to entities and others that may be able to help.

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3. How can the city reach each audience?

Think about ensuring that communications with target audiences are not interrupted when the flood affects city hall.

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The city of Mosquito Heights loses its fight. The water rises above the sandbags and other protection and floods a large area of the city. The area most affected includes the downtown business area where city hall is located, as well as an adjacent residential neighborhood.

1. Who are the target audiences for the city given the new circumstances?

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2. What are the city's key messages for each audience?

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3. How is the city going to disseminate information to the target audiences?

Think about the best way to communicate with the target audiences.

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After a couple of days of flooding, the water recedes and the city begins the cleanup effort. The city has been communicating with all its target audiences on a regular basis so everyone is prepared to help. The city begins the process of inspecting buildings and accounting for damages and losses.

The city wants to continue to garner support and assistance from other communities as well as from local entities.

1. Who are the target audiences for the city?

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2. What are the city's key messages for each audience?

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3. How is the city going to disseminate information to the key audiences?

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City is named in a lawsuit

The Mosquito Heights city administrator has just received notice that the town newspaper filed a lawsuit against the city alleging an open meeting law violation. The newspaper editor argues that a closed City Council meeting should have been open to the public. The meeting was closed to talk about a case of employee misconduct. The City Council had checked with the city attorney prior to closing the meeting, and had been assured that under the circumstances the Council could meet in private.

In this closed meeting, the City Council learned that a supervisor had been accused of sexual harassment by another employee, and that since then, the city had received other complaints from previous employees alleging that the misconduct had gone on for years.

The mayor receives a phone call from a reporter asking questions about the lawsuit filed by the newspaper and regarding the employee misconduct case. The mayor knows she can give little information about either case, but she also knows that she should not answer with “No comment”. The mayor asks the reporter about his deadline and when would be a good time to call him back, and then immediately calls the city administrator and the city attorney to get their view on how to handle these calls.

1. What are the key messages the city of Mosquito Heights can use in responding to the media?

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2. What should the mayor say regarding the alleged open meeting violation? What should the mayor refrain from saying regarding the alleged violation?

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3. What should the mayor say regarding the employee misconduct case? What should the mayor not mention regarding the employee case?

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A couple of weeks have passed. The City Council makes a decision regarding disciplinary actions against the employee for misconduct. After the City Council meeting, members of the media want to get the mayor's reaction.

1. What are the key messages the city should use regarding the employee misconduct and discipline?

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