

Crisis Communications Toolkit for Philanthropy



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Introduction

A good crisis communications plan is built on six pillars: Goals, Audience, Messages, Methods, Outreach and Media. Identifying these pillars allows you to then develop your timeframes and budgets. When a disaster strikes, a crisis communications plan that uses these pillars will allow staff to communicate clearly, concisely and in ways that match your organization's and community's needs.

This toolkit is intended for staff at philanthropic organizations to help develop and enhance a crisis communications plan that facilitates stakeholder communication before, during and immediately after a disaster.

By building the plan during "blue sky times" (when everything is good/normal), you will be able to quickly, efficiently and more effectively implement and adapt your plan to support your organization's response to a crisis or disaster or "gray sky times." Well-crafted plans mean you can put more energy into addressing the needs of your constituents during a disaster.

Not all parts of this toolkit will apply to every organization. We encourage you to select pieces that will help create a new organizational plan or fill gaps in an existing plan. In places where an organization is already proficient, consider how you can share that proficiency with other organizations in your network.

Blue Sky Times

When things are moving along well, and there are no storms on the horizon, your organization should take advantage of these times to perform a threat assessment and use the results to develop a crisis communications plan. Some of the things to do during blue sky times include:

- Create your crisis communications team. Depending upon the nature of your organization you may have a separate group assigned to manage a crisis including senior management, executive team, board members, etc. The crisis communications team should include a representative from that group plus your communications and information technology staff (or representatives of those groups depending upon the size of the organization.) A representative of the crisis communications team – probably the lead communications staff member – should also sit on your crisis management team.
- Identify the immediate responsibilities for each member of the crisis communications team – especially those who will make statements on behalf of the organization.
- Establish a timeline that will indicate what will be done, when and by whom. This should include how often your crisis communications team will meet and how they will communicate internally.
- Perform a Hazard, Vulnerability and Risk Assessment (HVRA) or Threat Assessment (see below).
- Identify the goals of your crisis communications plan.
- Recognize your internal and external audiences.
- Identify the networks in which your organization participates or has access to.
- Create a database of key messages and messaging templates to provide quick access to crisis and disaster communications.
- Determine your communications methods and ensure you have approved policies, procedures and guidance about who can speak on behalf of the organization and what can be said.
- Ensure that you have included backup communications methods in case your preferred means of communicating with your constituents are not accessible.
- Outline your organization’s preferred timeframes to communicate with each audience.
- Build relationships with local, regional and national media for quick access to known contacts during an emergency.
- Identify and build relationships with the designated public information officer(s) at emergency management agencies for the areas in which the organization operates.
- Create mechanisms to establish a disaster fund. Often immediately after a disaster, there will be a lot of interest in donations to support relief and recovery. If you do not have a standing disaster fund you may want to launch a disaster-specific fund in the wake of the crisis. However, it is useful for as much of that work – including creating communications materials – to be developed in advance. For more information, see the Center for Disaster Philanthropy’s (CDP) [Setting Up a Disaster Fund toolkit](#).
- In addition, set aside funds to ensure you have access to additional resources during gray sky times. These will help cover increased staffing and operations costs. For crisis communications, this could include press release distribution, advertisements, graphic design, web hosting and increased staffing.

HVRA and Threat Assessments

The first step in initiating a communications plan process is to undertake a threat assessment (Figure 1). A threat assessment provides a base to the six pillars of a crisis communications plan: Goals, Audience, Messages, Methods, Outreach and Media. A skyscraper is built on bedrock; similarly, you need a crisis communications plan built upon your HVRA or threat assessment.

This assessment can be as simple as a two-axis, four-quadrant graph or as complex as a full HVRA where you evaluate multiple hazards, assess your organization's vulnerability and determine your residual risk to any particular hazard. When using a four-quadrant graph, you identify each threat and then determine its level of risk and the probability of an emergency. You then plot it on the graph accordingly.

For example:

- A severe earthquake in Los Angeles is a high-risk event that has a high probability of happening. It would go in the top right corner of the grid below.
- A tsunami in Montana is a high-risk event that has a low probability of happening. It would go in the top left corner.
- A snowstorm in Alaska is a low-risk event that has a high probability of happening and would go in the bottom right corner.
- A landslide in the uninhabited middle of the Mojave Desert is a low-risk event that has a low probability of happening and would go in the bottom left corner.

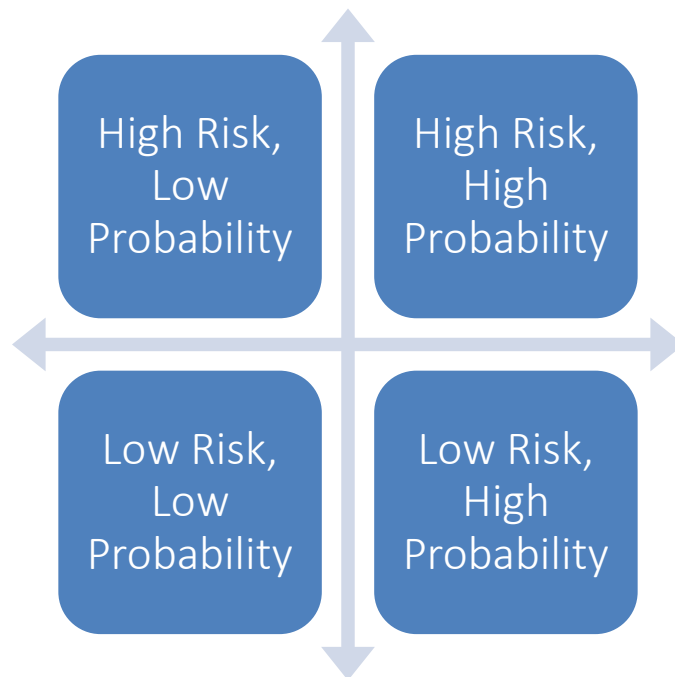


Figure 1 A Basic Four-Quadrant Threat Assessment.

A full Hazard, Vulnerability and Risk Assessment (HVRA) often uses a tool such as the one developed by [Kaiser Permanente](#) that assigns a numerical rating to each potential threat. An HVRA can be greatly enhanced by coordinating with an emergency management or business continuity expert. No matter which method you choose to perform a threat assessment, you need to include the following types of hazards:

- Human-Caused (Building Collapse, Vehicle Incident, etc.)
- Climate and Weather (Severe Weather, Climate Change, etc.)
- Natural Disasters (Earthquakes, Landslides, etc.)
- Financial and Societal (Market/Investment Failure, Major Societal Shift, etc.)
- Technological (Critical Infrastructure Failure, Cyber Attack, etc.)
- Reputational (Financial Mismanagement, Board/Employee/Volunteer Misconduct, etc.)

Post-Disaster Follow-Up

After a disaster, it is important to assess and follow-up on what went well and what needs improving. This will help position you to respond to the next disaster.

Using Analytics

One of the most helpful tools to identify how well your crisis communications methods are working is the use of analytics – tracking user types and behaviors. The most common program used is [Google Analytics](#), but there are many others available. Analytics software can tell you the demographics of people who visit your website, what types of interests they have and how they behave when they arrive on your website. By better understanding your website’s organic traffic, you can refine your audiences and better tune your messages to meet their needs and interests.

Post-disaster, assess what your traffic patterns were like on the website and in your social media.

- Did you see an increase in the number of visits to your website? Did these coincide with any actions taken that day (i.e., press release, press conference, appearance on a news station)?
- Did more people begin following you on social media and/or interacting with your content (i.e., leaving comments, sharing, linking to your site)?
- What were the most common search terms people used to get to your website? You can embed these in your website code and language to increase search engine optimization.
- How long did people spend on your page?
- Which pages had the most hits?

The Six Pillars of Crisis Communications

Goals

When developing an effective crisis communications plan it is crucial to consider what the goals are for your crisis communication plan. Your goals will generally be the same, no matter what crisis or disaster the organization faces. Involve all potential audiences when developing goals to understand what they will need from the organization during a crisis.

Use the HVRA/Threat assessment to help identify primary goals or use a basic [Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities and Threats \(SWOT\) analysis](#). Ideally, a discussion of threats could be done with multiple members of the community including staff, board, volunteers, grantees and clients. Each person will bring a different perspective. Some of the questions to ask yourself when developing goals include:

- What information are we trying to provide to staff and board about key issues?
- How do we want to communicate with grant recipients to check on their status or needs?
- In what ways will we have to communicate with other philanthropic organizations about unmet needs or requests outside of our areas of expertise?
- Are we providing information to funders to keep them engaged or to raise more money?
- Will we be sharing external information with our network or providing information from our network with external groups?

Audiences

Once you know your organization's crisis communications plan's goals, it is time to identify audiences. Depending on the disaster or crisis that an organization encounters, you may need to reach out to all of your audiences or only a select few. Organizations should develop both internal and external plans as messages and needs will be different for each audience.

Internal Audiences

These are groups of people who are directly associated with the organization and who (in general) can be reached through methods that do not rely on external channels.

- **Employees:** People who work for your organization under a direct employment contract will want to know your organization's current status, any changes to your operations because of the disaster or crisis, what your organization is doing to respond and what you expect from them during the coming days and weeks.
 - You should also have a [Continuity of Operations \(COOP\)](#) or business continuity plan that includes up-to-date primary and alternate contact information and emergency contact(s) to ensure the safety of your employees. Your employees also need a way to ensure they can get information if your office is inaccessible or otherwise unavailable.
- **Donors:** Not every philanthropic organization will need to communicate with their donors. However, many (especially community-based foundations) will have a large donor base that will expect to receive updates about what your organization is doing. Most donors would generally fall into the category of an external audience, but major donors as an "internal audience," and communication with them is a priority.
- **Volunteers/Committee Members:** During a crisis or disaster, your volunteers or committee members will want to know how they can contribute and what the organization is doing. In particular, they will want to know what they can do to support the organization and help in the crisis or disaster relief effort.

- **Families of Employees:** While not usually a primary focus, this group will need regular communication especially if a crisis or disaster has directly affected a work site or other facility. Even for organizations that do not have these locations, contact with families will help them feel included and reassured that they have not been forgotten when employees are working to respond to the crisis or disaster.
- **Contractors, Vendors and Suppliers:** If a crisis or disaster directly affects your organization, especially your offices or other locations, don't forget to communicate with contractors. They may be custodial staff, maintenance companies or even vending machine contractors. Specifically, they will want to know if their contract with you is affected, and if so, in what ways.
- **Management:** This group is the one responsible for the day-to-day response to a crisis or disaster. This group likely includes the CEO, the CFO, the COO and other senior day-to-day leaders who have regular day-to-day leadership roles.
- **Board of Directors/Trustees:** As the group that is ultimately accountable for the work of philanthropic and non-governmental organizations, the board of directors must be in constant communication with the executive group to ensure that the organization is meeting its goals and accountability responsibilities.

External Audiences

These are groups of people who interact with but are not directly part of your organization. They will require a broad set of communications methods.

- **Customers/Clients:** If your organization traditionally offers products or services, you will need to ensure you have regular communication with them about the status of your products or services – particularly if they need to consider alternative sources for those products or services. This could include publications, webinars or consulting services.
- **Grant Recipients:** As a granting organization, philanthropic organizations need to ensure that they communicate clearly, concisely and consistently with grant recipients, especially if a disaster or crisis has directly impacted the philanthropic organization. Grant recipients will want to know the status of their pending grants and funds not yet received. It is also essential to have ongoing communications with grant recipients in the affected area to assess whether additional funds will be necessary and get updates from those working on the ground. The disaster may also affect grantees. Support your grant recipients and alert them of any delays in delivery of services or changes in activities.
- **Partner Agencies:** Philanthropic organizations are part of a broad network of organizations that share information and provide support while working in their areas of specialization. Although your specific organization may not be able to meet a particular need arising from a crisis or disaster, other organizations in your network might have the expertise and knowledge to fill those gaps. Consider building relationships during blue skies to allow for back-office support, financial management or administrative services during a disaster.
- **Government Organizations and Emergency Management Offices:** Although philanthropic organizations may not be able to fund government or emergency management work directly, they could lead philanthropic organizations to operational organizations that need funding. Government and emergency management organizations have a good understanding of the work on the ground and may funders with organizations that need funding.

- **Local Residents:** If the philanthropic organization is associated with a commercial or industrial business, there may be confusion between corporate giving staff and the business unit. As such, there may be a need to communicate with residents in the area surrounding the commercial or industrial operation or to direct residents to the correct safety messages on the business page. For example, if there is a chemical spill, residents may find the company's charitable giving or foundation website and look for information there about evacuations and dangers. This page should direct to the main company page where most messaging is likely to occur.
- **Survivors:** This group is a challenging group to communicate with as philanthropic organizations want to provide information without seeming to take advantage of the crisis or disaster. Communicate very clearly and directly while referring them to local authorities for specific information. Use your organization's communications channels and resources to highlight trusted local resources.
- **Media:** When used effectively, the media can be a powerful force in sharing your organization's message. Building and maintaining a relationship with the media by communicating regularly, openly and honestly with them will help ensure that your message will be conveyed accurately and completely when necessary.

Other Audiences: During a crisis or disaster, another audience may emerge that you had not anticipated. You will have to understand this new audience's needs and how best to share information with them during this time.

Messages

Once you know your goals and your audiences, you can start focusing on the messages and methods of communicating with those audiences. Although specific messaging will change depending on the crisis or disaster, there are many things that you can build into your plan now to speed up your communications during crises or disasters.

Key Messaging

It is not possible to have messaging ready in advance of every imaginable crisis or disaster. However, you can have some key talking points to help you craft your messages. Some of these will be generic messages that can be used quickly for immediate responses. For example:

"{Philanthropic Organization} is committed to the health and well-being of people and to support {cause} during crises and disasters."

However, don't plan to use these messages for an extended period. Specific and tailored messages will be necessary as the crisis or disaster continues.

As a philanthropic organization, you may have a plan to establish a fund for a specific group of people or in response to a particular crisis or emergency.

"{Philanthropic Organization} is preparing to launch a fund to help raise money in response to {crisis or disaster}. You can visit {website}, call us at {phone number} or watch our social media accounts to learn more about this fund and how you can help."

You will also want to have a set of messages for communicating with internal audiences about expectations and the organization's work.

"We are committed to caring for our employees and their families while we respond to {crisis or disaster}. We know there will be extra work to be done over the coming days and weeks, and we appreciate the hard work of our employees and the sacrifices of their families to support our response."

You can prepare to facilitate information sharing among local, regional, national and global networks. This messaging will help your partners understand that you are open to sharing and exchanging information regularly.

"{Philanthropic Organization} will be hosting a funders' call every {weekday} at {time}. If you want to participate, please contact {email} for more information."

Beyond your key messages, it is vital to have someone on your incident management team trained and proficient in communications and incident-related messaging. Plan to update your messaging and communications as disaster response and conditions change.

If you establish a fund or release money from an existing fund, your funding committee needs to keep your communications team informed. As money is released or new funds are developed, your communications team needs to ensure the information reaches the right people.

Having a database of key messages that focus on your organization's roles and goals will help facilitate communication during a disaster or crisis. By working with your communications team to have pre-cleared messages available, you can ensure that your crisis communications are quick, effective and in line with the goals, messaging and branding of your communications department.

Messaging Mistakes

There will be times during a crisis or disaster when you may not get your messaging entirely correct or make a mistake in your choice of words. Errors in messaging are not uncommon, especially when moving quickly in response to an active and dynamic emergency.

Be open and honest about what exactly happened. Explicitly identify the error, convey why it was wrong and share what your organization is doing to correct the mistake.

Mistakes may be memorable, but it is the organization's response that defines what people will remember.

Methods

There are many ways to communicate your messages. Some have been used for decades or centuries, while others are much newer. A comprehensive approach will help you reach as many of your audiences as possible. To understand which methods to use with which audiences, it is important to understand each method's reach and scope.

Being a Trusted Resource

Before a disaster strikes, make a deliberate effort to ensure that your organization is a trusted source for accurate information. Building trust means sharing information about your organization and the work you're doing, and resources from other organizations such as grant recipients, peers and other reputable sources. Share timely and accurate information during crises and emergencies that are relevant to your audiences and locations. Doing so will help ensure that your messaging reaches the right audience(s) when it is most important.

Social Media

The use of social media channels to distribute your message has the advantage of speed and immediacy. Social media allows you to share current information quickly and for that information to be shared widely by those who follow your organization and by your followers' followers. A community can share photos, videos, documents, links to webpages and other media formats in a single place.

Many organizations work with limited communications resources, and social media can take a significant amount of effort. One of the best ways to multiply your results without multiplying your efforts is to use scheduling applications that allow you to create a single post for multiple platforms simultaneously. You can schedule posts for delivery at a specific time, enabling you to schedule regular content updates in advance.

Social media provides a significant amount of options for sharing information. However, it is limited by the need for a message recipient to have opted to receive messages from a particular organization. With most social media, a person must first join the social media platform and then choose to "follow" or receive messages from a specific organization.

The use of paid advertising can help overcome some of these limitations to social media, however, the choice to use paid advertising should be weighed against the need to share messaging with a wider audience. Social media also requires technological fluency, which can limit its adoption by people who are not as technologically adept, or who cannot access the technology in their native tongue.

When using social media, your organization needs to have an unambiguous policy about who is permitted to speak on behalf of the organization and the permissible use of social media by employees, management, contractors, and others associated with the organization. Some excellent example social media policies can be found here:

- Greater New Orleans Foundation – [Sample Social Media Policy](#)
- Bloomerang – [Nonprofit Sample Employee Social Media Policy Template](#)
- Chron.com – [Examples of a Social Media Policy for Non-Profit Organizations](#)

Websites

Your organization’s website can be a useful communication tool for sharing updated and confirmed information about what your organization is doing. Using your website to share information is best after the beginning of an emergency, crisis or disaster – when timeliness is less important than accuracy. Websites are especially effective for long-tail information: research, commentary and other information that has a long lifespan and will be useful for years beyond the date it is published. Websites are also good places to host large documents that are not suitable for social media. When your organization responds to a crisis, highlight what your organization is doing on your homepage to make it easier for donors, grantees, clients and other stakeholders to stay informed.

Blogs

If your organization has a blog, this can provide many opportunities to keep your community informed during a crisis. You can offer regular broad situational updates such as CDP’s [“What We’re Watching”](#) weekly post. Also, consider blog posts to share your organization’s response to a particular crisis or disaster and create calls to action in response to ongoing events.

One of the most effective ways you can use your blog is to invite guest contributors who provide additional perspectives in times of disaster. This could help connect you with a new audience who were unaware of your work and also may free up staff to focus on the needs of your grantees and community.

News Releases

Use news releases to share vital information or statements that reporters can use for a story and as a source of reliable information. Your organization can have news release templates with key information to be filled in as necessary to help reduce the amount of time it takes to get a news release out.

“Because of {Disaster/Crisis/Emergency}, {Organization} has established a fund to {Describe purpose of fund}. Donations can be made at {donation website} and more information can be found at {fund web page}.”

“Because of {Disaster/Crisis/Emergency}, {Organization} will be {identify actions to be taken} in order to {identify results of actions}. We are accepting donations at {donation website} and more information about our organization can be found at {website}.”

A well-prepared press release helps journalists write complete stories (including quotes and relevant information) without seeking further information.

Although press releases can help broaden information dissemination, they have become less effective: As the number of journalists continues to decline, there are fewer people to see the releases, much less follow up on them. They are also limited in their effectiveness as they rely on a third party – the media – to share the information and messaging. As a result, news releases are best used as part of a multi-channel messaging push and not by themselves.

If you have built up contacts with the media ahead of time, send your press release to them and follow-up with a call or email. There are also press release distribution programs that are available to help get your press release before a broader audience for a fee.

Direct Email

Many organizations maintain a list of donors, supporters, grant recipients, along with employees and others who have opted to receive emails. This list represents a large group of people already connected with you and is likely interested in how your organization's disaster response.

Direct emails are an excellent way of engaging with people and can serve multiple purposes:

- Keep your community informed about how your organization is responding
- Issue a call to action such as a request for donations or share information with a wider audience.
- Thank donors and share how their giving has had a tangible impact on the emergency or disaster response.

Direct emails should be used judiciously; too many may result in important emails being unread or the recipient unsubscribing from your list. Many email applications will also filter mass email campaigns into a separate inbox or even into the junk or spam folder, so users may not always receive these emails.

Press Conferences

You can hold a press conference to share timely events and newsworthy information and relevant to the disaster. If you are releasing information about something that happened weeks or months before the press conference, you may find that not many journalists will attend.

Press conferences are most valuable when your organization has extensive direct involvement or want to provide an opportunity for media to ask questions and learn more about what your organization is doing. News releases are better for simple announcements such as significant staffing changes or the creation of a new fund.

Just as with news releases, press conferences rely on third parties to communicate your organization's information, although you can share your footage and information about the press conference through your channels as well.

Webinars

Webinars can be a useful tool for sharing information and leveraging your organization's expertise as a reputable and trustworthy source for information during a disaster. Although webinars require some preparation, including seeking out subject matter experts and compiling questions for your guests, they can return significant dividends.

Set clear roles and expectations for your panelists, especially if you plan to give them unstructured time to speak versus asking specific questions. A guest who does not meet expectations can undermine the effectiveness of the webinar. CDP discusses talking points in advance with its webinar guests to help prepare them and focus the remarks. Amid a crisis, this feels hard to execute it helps keep the webinar on topic.

Webinar Structure

To make your webinar successful, there is significant work that goes into preparing the information in advance of the webinar along with preparing the moderator. By creating a structure and plan for your webinars ahead of time, it can help your process move quicker during a disaster.

The following is a rough outline of the structure CDP follows to create a webinar that could be adapted and modified to suit your own needs. The crucial piece is developing your plan in advance.

- a. Identify the topic and scope of the webinar.
- b. Create a list of key issues related to the topic that fit within the scope of your organization.
- c. Research topic and key issues to provide background information.
- d. Identify possible speakers. Who you choose will depend upon the message you are trying to convey. An academic may be able to provide context about the nature of the actual hazard that caused the disaster, whereas a representative from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) may be more appropriate to provide a status update on that specific disaster. If featuring potential grantees, determine if the possible perception of conflict of interest outweighs the information they could provide about needs and gaps. If you have had similar disasters, past grantees can highlight the importance of funding to help the community.
- e. Interview possible speakers to discuss key takeaways and potential questions.
- f. Identify potential external partners who could add value to the webinar. These partners could fund the staff costs of putting on your webinar or join as a co-sponsor to help distribute the registration information more widely.
- g. Write a script or key speaking points for the moderator. To make it easier on our moderators, CDP has standard language for our introductory and closing slides.
- h. Promote the webinar. CDP works with like-minded organizations to spread the word about the webinar and to reach a broader audience.
- i. Create a slide deck and other resources.
- j. Follow up with webinar attendees, speakers and partners to review points for improvement and follow up for future webinars.
- k. Create additional supporting documents and update existing documents based on new information in the webinar.

Disaster Communications System

Depending upon your organization's size, consider investing in a disaster communications system, especially if your office is in a high-risk area. These systems may be a complex automated notification and alerting system that can contact specific audiences with a specific message or check about their well-being. For smaller organizations, this system could be as simple as an out of state/region contact number where employees and volunteers can check-in and receive important messages.

No matter which type of system you choose to use, having a secondary way to communicate with your critical audiences is very important.

Townhalls

Townhalls can be an incredibly effective way of communicating, particularly with internal audiences – such as employees working together in the same physical location. These are excellent for sharing major policy changes or when something significant has happened or is about to happen that affects the organization in a significant way. This is also an opportunity for members of the audience to ask questions and get further information about the town hall's topic.

During COVID-19, as people began to work remotely in much larger numbers, these town halls and other in-person ways of communicating have been replaced by technology such as Zoom, WebEx and other applications that allow for both one- and two-way communications between audiences and organizations.

Other Communications Approaches

There are many other communications approaches such as online discussion forums, door-knocking campaigns, flyers and employee communication boards (both online and offline) you need to consider for your crisis communications plan.

Embedding a communications expert in your crisis response team will help your organization identify the best way to communicate rapidly and efficiently with your community members during a disaster, depending on your audiences and circumstances.

Foundations of Crisis Communications Plan

Timeframes

When considering your crisis communications plan, include specific timeframes to communicate with certain audiences. The need for these timeframes may vary between disasters or crises, so there may be different timeframes or plans depending on the crisis or disaster. You may have separate timeframes that apply to each of your pillars.

In general, organizations should always reach out to employees and volunteers first (including the board of directors). This outreach is primarily to ensure their well-being, especially if they live in the affected area, and ensure that employees and volunteers are aware of the organization's activities and the expectations that the organization has of their employees and volunteers in the coming days and weeks.

The timeframes should also include specific goals for communicating with other organizations and in what order. Include employees and volunteers, partner organizations and funders or grantees in your communications plan. Other audiences, such as the media or the general public, may or may not need to hear from your organization, depending on how you have been affected or how you are (or are not) responding to the crisis or disaster. When considering timeframes, consider the lead time needed for third-party providers such as radio, television and print journalism, as well as advertising.

What is a Reasonable Timeframe?

This is a question that is often asked, especially by organizations that do not usually have to use their crisis communications plans or have never used one before. Some examples to consider include:

- **When announcing a new fund or initiative in response to a crisis or disaster:** Plan to announce the launch of a new fund as soon as you have decided to create the fund. Your internal decision-making process about a new fund should include a discussion about who among your audiences need to know and how best to reach them. Even a short message that links to further information that is released late at night could go a long way.
 - “{Organization} has launched a fund/{name of fund} in response to {crisis or disaster}. Further details will be announced {date –within 48 hours} and you can view details on our website.”
- **When responding to a political crisis:** In recent years, customers, donors, grant recipients and the general public have come to expect organizations of all types to make public statements, particularly on major societal concerns such as racism. This is a decision that involves the board of directors/trustees to ensure that the statement is consistent with the organization’s mission and purpose. Share your statement with employees/volunteers/committee members in advance of being released to the public. Ideally, this will be released within five days of identifying the crisis.
- **When communicating with employees after an external crisis or disaster that affects your organization:** Communicate with your internal audiences as soon as possible after the immediate danger has passed:
 - “We are aware of the {incident/crisis/disaster} that has happened in {location} and we are committed to supporting our employees, volunteers, trustees, the board of directors and other people in our organization. Please contact {phone number/email} to advise us if you need assistance and whether you are available to support our work.

- **When communicating with external audiences after an external crisis or disaster that affects your organization:** Plan to issue an initial communication within 12-24 hours:
 - “After the {incident/crisis/disaster} in {location}, we continue to operate normally and are actively seeking ways to support the response, relief, and recovery in the affected area(s).”
 - “As a result of the {incident/crisis/disaster} in {location}, we have had to adapt/cease our operations. {Explain adaptations here if necessary}. We are working on restoring our operations by {explain restoration activities}. We do not have an estimate for when we will be able to resume normal operations/ We are anticipating being able to restore services by {provide estimated time frame}.”

Budget

If any of your planned crisis communications will require additional staff hours, advertising costs or other additional funds, then include these in your crisis communications plan and your annual budget. Clearly indicate who can authorize these additional expenditures and include maximum authorization amounts to ensure they fit within your budget. When estimating, be sure to include statutory, regulatory or contract requirements for overtime and other necessary costs. Some additional considerations include boosting social media posts, paid placement on search engines or even costs for submitting a news release to a wire service. Include all of these when budgeting for your crisis communications plan.

Other Useful Information

Outreach

When your organization issues any type of communication or message, be prepared for two-way communication and feedback. Whether the feedback is positive or negative, it is important to listen carefully to ensure your message is being received as it is intended. Be prepared to adjust your outreach and communications methods. When you receive feedback, make sure you evaluate it in light of your crisis communications goals and be prepared to change your message, methods or another aspect of your plan.

Proactively engage with your networks and partners to help identify needs in affected areas. Even though the needs may not match your organization's ability to fund, sharing the information with your networks can help find funding for those needs. In the same way, you may find a need that your organization can support while other philanthropic organizations cannot.

When using social media, be aware that mediums such as Facebook and Twitter are designed for audience engagement. Ensure that your organization is monitoring conversations and comments on social media to determine if and how you need to respond to the conversation. People may be seeking information on how to find help during or after a disaster, and you can use your social media to redirect them to the appropriate agencies.

In the same way, members of a particular audience may want to contribute to disaster response, either in-person or through donations and social media can serve as an excellent way to direct people to a specific fund or local organization. People may create fundraisers for your organization, especially on Facebook, so considering having a system in place to monitor these activities. You want to ensure that you receive the funds and that the wording of the fundraisers matches your intentions.

The Power of Networks

Developing effective communication networks can enhance your organization's ability to respond effectively to a crisis or disaster and share information to as broad an audience as possible. Using the audiences mentioned above, here are some examples of how communication networks can effectively spread your message. Two examples follow for ABC and XYZ Philanthropic.

ABC Philanthropic

A tornado strikes the community where the ABC Philanthropic organization has its headquarters. While the ABC offices are unaffected, they reach out to their local employees and volunteers to check on their well-being and what needs they may have. Although all employees are uninjured, several have lost their homes and will need to rebuild like many others affected by the tornado.

One of ABC's employees identifies the need to exceed local building ordinances and improve resilience toward future tornadoes. Insurance and FEMA will cover rebuilding costs, but they do not cover improvements beyond the local building code.

ABC Philanthropic's funding committee reviews its community's needs against its existing criteria and determines that they cannot fund something like this. ABC alerts their regional and national funding networks about the critical challenges the community is facing.

Two philanthropic organizations from different states that received the news from the funding networks identify that they could contribute toward this need. These two organizations partner with ABC and local residents to create a fund to assist in retrofitting and improving structures to withstand future tornadoes. ABC in turn uses its contacts with local residents, government and media organizations to share information about the fund with those who are interested in making improvements.

XYZ Philanthropic

A grant recipient approaches the XYZ Philanthropic organization shortly after a major hurricane devastates multiple Caribbean countries. The grantee is working with a local company to provide solar and other off-grid electrical generation products to those in the affected area. XYZ reviews the request and finds that this is something they can support with their existing funding guidelines and realizes that they can have a much larger impact by sharing it with their network.

XYZ sends out information about the grantee's project, including XYZ's contribution through multiple communications channels, and manages to get national media coverage for the funding recipient their efforts. As a result of this media coverage, the local company is contacted by a competitor looking to support the project and increase the scope. At the same time, XYZ is contacted through its network of philanthropic organizations by another funder who offers to support the project.

Ultimately, through the act of sharing the information, four companies and six philanthropic organizations contribute to the project, allowing for a much greater impact than the original project.

Networks of audiences can be powerful methods for sharing information with different groups of people outside of a philanthropic organization's direct audiences. Developing and maintaining different networks of audiences allows a philanthropic organization to exponentially expand their messages' reach and the messages of others in their networks.

Media

Working with the Media

Prepare to work with the media before a crisis or disaster ever happens. Keep your primary media contact list up to date, including assignment editors, journalists and newsroom contact information as appropriate.

When a disaster or crisis is expected (such as a hurricane), notify your key media contacts about the appropriate way to reach your organization's press contact during or after the crisis.

Internally, your organization should have a designated person who handles all media requests. If someone else in your organization receives a media inquiry, ensure they know who to pass the request to for timely and appropriate action. This person is usually a member of senior management or a communications staff person.

During a disaster, amplify your organization's official messages through personal or local-level communications channels. You do not have to prepare your own messaging; it can often be enough to share your larger organization's statement, email or social media posts or direct your audiences to official communications sources.

During and after a disaster, ensure that you communicate regularly with your existing grantee partners – especially if they are in the affected area – to determine whether your organization can support them. Some funding recipients and community organizations may need urgent access to funds or other resources during and after a disaster. If you can, make your communications resources – both your platforms and your staff – available to affected organizations to support their needs during and after a disaster, especially when it comes to working with the media.

Ensure that your communications professionals and executive leaders are available to the media as much as possible. Journalists, especially in television, radio and online, have short deadlines to file a story. If your organization is not available or prepared to do a press conference when it is needed, issue a statement with a note on when a representative of your organization will be available for a comment or an update. Always include direct contact information of your communications lead on press releases or announcements.

When you speak with the media, ensure that you have a page of information that includes the important points from your statement and information that the media may want to know, such as what your organization is doing and how you are responding. Include contact information for people who are authorized to speak with the media such as your communications lead, president or other senior executives. This should be available as a handout at press conferences and reference for staff who are speaking to reporters.

If you are asked a question for which you do not have an answer, refrain from using the phrase “I don't know.” Instead, tell them that the information isn't available, or that you aren't sure of the exact number/detail/statistic they are asking about. Always respond to a question like this with a commitment to find out the information – and then follow through on that commitment.

If a media outlet requests a one-on-one interview with someone in your organization, it is okay to ask them ahead of time for information about the journalist conducting the interview and what their story is about. If time allows, you can also ask for a list of potential questions that your organization can be prepared to answer.

Case Studies/Suggestions and Ideas for Funding

Funders can help address communication needs by supporting new technologies, helping community foundations and other grant recipients develop communications skills in employees and volunteers and by supporting disaster-related communications expenses. Here are some examples:

Center for Disaster Philanthropy

CDP supported [Oxfam America](#) with a \$250,000 grant to adopt new technology and communications practices to safely access their constituencies during COVID-19. This grant focused on 16 countries in the Middle East, Africa, Asia and four areas in the United States with poor access to health care.

Charter Communications, Inc. Contributions Program

During Hurricane Florence, they provided \$1 million in public service announcement airtime to assist organizations with fundraising and awareness for Hurricane Florence disaster relief efforts.

Conrad N. Hilton Foundation and MacArthur Foundation

These foundations funded the Harvard Humanitarian Initiative to support the development of [KoBo Toolbox](#), a suite of tools for field data collection for use in challenging environments. The software, which is free and open source, is intended to improve communication and coordination between disaster responders.

Google Crisis Response Team

The team works to make critical information more accessible in times of disaster. This includes 1) creating a resource page with emergency information and tools, 2) launching Google Person Finder to connect people with friends and loved ones, 3) hosting a Crisis Map with authoritative and crowdsourced geographic information, and 4) public alerts – a platform to disseminate relevant emergency alerts to users when and where they're searching for them.

Jessie Ball duPont Fund

The Fund created a weekly funders conference call after the 2011 Alabama tornadoes. This practice inspired the [Council of New Jersey Grantmakers](#) to do the same when Superstorm Sandy struck in 2012. These funder briefings included representatives from the Governor's office, FEMA, HUD, emergency management, health care and mental health providers and other nonprofit leaders.

Microsoft Corporate Citizenship and Disaster Response Teams

They created [HelpBridge](#), a free mobile app designed to help people connect quickly with one another during times of disaster, discover and donate to organizations involved in disaster response work and find relevant volunteer opportunities. This cross-platform mobile application (Windows Phone, Android, iOS) provides individuals with the ability to send status updates to pre-selected contact groups via email, SMS, Twitter and Facebook. Through a phone's GPS capabilities, users can also choose whether to share their location in their alerts.

Disaster Playbook Strategies

The Disaster Philanthropy Playbook is produced by the Center for Disaster Philanthropy. It features strategies that philanthropic organizations of all types can use to enhance their responses to crises and disasters. This Crisis Communications Toolkit is designed to support foundations and other grantmakers in developing their crisis communications plan.

Please see the Disaster Philanthropy Playbook website at <https://www.disasterplaybook.org> for other strategies, innovative practices and lessons from other funders that help communities be better prepared when a disaster strikes.

We're here to help.

The Center for Disaster Philanthropy is here to assist you. Reach out to CDP's staff before or after a disaster strikes your community. We are ready to provide thought-leadership, advice on establishing disaster funds and connections to colleagues around the nation who can support and inform your efforts.



Connect with Us

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