

THE POWER OF WORDS: HOW EFFECTIVE ARE YOUR KEY MESSAGES?

A key component in creating an effective crisis communications plan is developing messages that can later be communicated during a crisis to residents, city staff or the media.

Once you've identified the kind of scenarios that could develop into a crisis within your city, you should develop the key messages you will use as a basis for responding. The messages you craft in advance may not precisely match the details of the crisis at hand, but it's much easier to adapt messaging you already prepared than it is to create new messaging on the fly – while you're immersed in responding to the crisis itself.

Consider possible questions that might be asked by the media and include those responses as part of your messaging.

It is important to consider how your response will be perceived or interpreted by the public and the media. This is better done before an event occurs, when you have time to thoroughly think through possible statements and assess how each could impact the public's perception in a real event. Your messages should be based on fact. Emotional context/empathy should be delivered when appropriate to convey a sense of accountability, compassion, etc.

Your messages should:

- Give details about what happened and the cause of the event, if possible.
- If the crisis includes victims, be sure your message conveys compassion, and that this feeling is expressed early in your message (so it's not perceived as a mere afterthought).
- Provide as much information as possible about the actions the city is taking to deal with the crisis. (There may not be a lot to say in the early stages, but provide what information is available.)
- If there is a danger to the public, explain what steps residents should take to protect themselves, and what the city is doing to protect them.
- Give some idea of how long it might take to resolve the problem.
- In cases of hurricanes or similar disasters, be sure to provide the public with precautions they should take to protect their homes, their businesses and their families.
- If possible, indicate when you will be able to provide a further update.

Even though your prepared messages are intended to serve as guidelines that will probably need to be adapted to actual events, it is important to have these early or "holding" messages. They will provide your staff with something to say early in a crisis, when there's not much known about the situation but you want to establish that your city government is in control. These statements will help make the media and public aware that the city is responding to the situation and working to resolve it.

While it's likely there will be few details early on about what happened, it's important that your city convey that it is on top of the situation. The holding messages should be seen as a starting point and will be adjusted as more details about the crisis becomes known. Keep all messages simple and easy to follow.

Stick to your message points and practice using them. Essential staff should be briefed on the details of message statements. Remember, you selected these key points when you had time to carefully consider

what your messaging should be, so avoid getting pulled off-message by reporters' questions in the heat of the moment.

Here are a few examples of effective holding messages:

"Our crews are on the scene and we've implemented our emergency response plan. Details of what happened aren't available yet, but we can assure the public that their safety is our top concern. We are doing all we can to ensure their safety."

"We are well aware of the allegations. We are currently looking into the matter. We promise we will provide an update as soon as we have additional information to report."

"We have seen the same reports as you. Our hearts go out to the victims. We are working to gather information about what exactly happened, and we expect to have an update for you shortly."