

APHA Affiliate Affairs

Strategic Crisis Communication for Public Health

Planning and Responding to Public Health Crises

Presented by Boundless Workshop
October 22, 2026

Please share in the chat:

- Name and state
- What are you hoping to walk away with from today's workshop?

Crisis Communication Planning

BEFORE
DURING
AFTER

Includes:

- **Pre-Crisis Preparation** (Teams, Roles, Protocols)
- **Active Threat Response** (Assessments, Messaging, Deployment)
- **Post-Crisis Evaluation** (Effectiveness, Outcomes, Changes)



Defining “Public Health Crisis”

An event or situation that has the potential to put many people's health at risk, physically or emotionally.



Public Health Crisis Examples

- Misinformation
- Media-related
- Emergency alerts and advisories
- Social epidemics
- Infrastructure-related

Crises can...

- ✓ *Overlap*
- ✓ *Have internal and external factors*



Tell us!

1. What public health crisis response have you or your association been part of?
2. What public health crisis do you foresee?



“Failing to plan is planning to fail...”



Section 1

Pre-Crisis Preparation **aka “BEFORE”**



BEFORE

Pre-Crisis Preparation

Building a Team

- Assigning roles and responsibilities
- Articulating expectations

Building Process and Protocols

- Contacting and assembling
- Parameters for responding



Building a Team

Crisis communication response teams have to coordinate internally and externally.

Team can include:

- Association staff and board members
- Association members with relevant expertise
- Members of partner organizations
- Community leaders
- Third-party contractors and SMEs



Team Roles

- Making the decisions and final judgments
- Interacting with the media, engaging on social media, communicating via established methods
- Directing and managing public engagement
- Coordinating partner and stakeholder information activities
- Developing content and material related to the public health emergency

Based on CDC CERC Crisis Communication Plans



Building Protocols

- Create team roster with contact information
- Document how and where the team will be contacted and assemble
(Who initiates, and how?)
- Share with team, board, partner organizations





WORKSHEET

Identify Your Team

Directions

1. Collect and write down contact information of the core members of your crisis response team. This could include key decisionmakers, external coordinators, internal coordinators, board liaisons, partner liaisons and others.
2. Ensure both primary and backup contacts are fully briefed on their responsibilities.
3. Use this model to build the team and add team members as needed.

Team and roles

Key decisionmaker (e.g., commander / lead)

Holds ultimate authority to activate the crisis plan, approve major expenditures and make final strategic decisions.

PRIMARY CONTACT

Name: _____ Cell: _____
Email: _____

Title (internal): _____
[e.g., CEO / Executive Director] Phone (Alt 1): _____
Phone (Alt 2): _____

BACKUP CONTACT

Name: _____ Cell: _____
Email: _____

Internal lead

Manages all aspects of the crisis response.

PRIMARY CONTACT

Name: _____ Cell: _____
Email: _____

Title (internal): _____
[e.g., Communication Manager / Director] Phone (Alt 1): _____
Phone (Alt 2): _____

BACKUP CONTACT

Name: _____ Cell: _____
Email: _____



WORKSHEET

Assemble Your Team

Team assembly protocol details and logistical guidelines

Clearly lay out how the response team will come together in the event of a potential crisis. Fill out the operational parameters below.

Initiation authority

Who initiates the response team assembly?

Specify the roles / individuals authorized to declare a potential crisis and trigger team assembly, e.g., Key Decision Maker, Internal Coordinator upon field report, etc.

Notification method

How will team members be notified?

Define the communications method, e.g., phone tree order, specific communications app like Slack/ Teams, mass text alert system, or automated pager.

Engagement location

Where will you engage IN-PERSON?

e.g., Main Office, Conference Room B

Where will you engage VIRTUALLY?

e.g., Dedicated Zoom link, phone bridge line, Microsoft Teams channel

Section 2

Active Threat Response **aka “DURING”**



DURING

Active Threat Response

Activating Response Team

- Assess threat
- Decide whether to act

Developing and Deploying Messaging

- Identify communication objective
- Know your audience



Review the Situation

Verify the source of crisis information:

Is it credible?

Can it be confirmed?

Goal:

To be responsive,
not reactive



Threat Assessment

ASK:

- Does the situation directly affect our association, and the people or communities we serve?
- Does it impede our mission?
- Does it pose danger or threaten to harm anyone? If so, who, and how?
- Do we have a necessary and credible role to play in addressing this situation?



Threat Assessment

- Do we have a responsibility to address this situation?
- Is there a potential risk to our people, operations, or reputation if we stay silent? If so, what is the nature of that risk?
- Is there misinformation spreading that we are well-positioned to clarify?
- Will our audiences or stakeholders (internal and/or external) expect us to address the situation?
- Do we have accurate, verified information to share?



**Directions**

1. Read through and answer the questions one-by-one.
2. Write down an explanation in as much detail as possible for the questions you answer "Yes" to.

Assessment questions

Note: If you answer YES to two or more of these questions, activate your crisis communication response protocol.

1. Does the situation directly affect our organization, the people or communities we serve, or our mission?

Y**N**

If YES, explain:

2. Does it pose danger or threaten to harm anyone? If so, who? And how?

Y**N**

If YES, explain:

3. Do we have a necessary and credible role to play — or a responsibility to address this situation?

Y**N**

If YES, explain:

4. Is there a potential risk to staff, organization members, operations, or reputation if we stay silent? If so, what is the nature of that risk?

Y**N**

If YES, explain:

5. Is misinformation spreading that we are well-positioned to clarify?

Y**N**

If YES, explain:

6. Will our internal and external audiences or stakeholders expect us to address the situation?

Y**N**

If YES, explain:

7. Do we have accurate, verified information to share?

Y**N**

If YES, explain:

*If NO: Wait to address until verified.

Threat Assessment

If you answer “Yes” to TWO or MORE questions...

→ **ACTIVATE** a response

If you answer “Yes” to only ONE question, and there’s no danger to the association or community...

→ Keep an eye on situation and reassess later



Develop Messaging

To create crisis response communications, know:

1. your communication objective
2. your audience
3. your call-to-action



Identify Objective

What do you want to achieve by responding?

Goal:

- *Reduce confusion*
- *Correct misinformation*
- *Demonstrate leadership*



Call to Action (CTA)

States what your audience needs to do in order to reduce risk for themselves and others.

If your audience takes away **one thing** from your communications, it should be your CTA.

- *Use the "One Action Rule"*
- *Remove obstacles to act*
- *Be specific with time and place*



What needs to be said?

Information should be framed from the perspective of your intended audience.

- What would they want to know?
- What's important to them in this moment?

Audience concerns:
How am I impacted?
Do I need to do anything?
What happens next?



Developing Materials

Before creating new content:

- Audit current materials and platforms before creating something new
- Assess if content you already have can be used to support your crisis response, either as-is or with updates



Deploying Communications

EXTERNAL

- “Choose your messenger”—a person or organization your audience accepts
- Especially important when misinformation is involved

INTERNAL

- Keep partners, board members, staff and other stakeholders updated
- Ask coalition partners for their alignment



Media Engagement

Practice interacting with the Media

- Announcements, clarifications, pushback
- Plan key points and how to redirect questions or statements

PRACTICE

PRACTICE

PRACTICE

*You **don't** have to have all the answers.*

*You **do** have to acknowledge and follow up.*





WORKSHEET

Key Questions to Define Objectives

Directions

1. Answer the following key questions.
2. Consider what other questions and answers may be in situation.

Why is this a risk, and how serious is it?

Who's impacted, and how?

What's the most important thing to know right now?

(This includes how your organization and partners are course-co of the conversation.)

What's being done? What happens next?



WORKSHEET

Developing Effective Messaging

To build a high-level narrative that is concise, clear and directive, follow the "What, So What, Now What" Model, also called the "reflective" model, because it guides the user to think about the next steps.

Directions

Answer the following questions in the most concise way possible.

What?

What issue or opportunity are you addressing?

Name the problem you are trying to solve or the gap you are addressing.

How does it connect to your audience's values?

Link the problem or gap to what your audience cares about.

So What?

What solution do you offer?

Determine clear, actionable recommendations that are practical and achievable.



WORKSHEET

Media Practice

Directions

1. Fill in what a reporter may ask or say.
2. Write out how you might answer. Prompts to help you get started are provided below.
3. Practice the response out loud by role-playing the questions and answers with another person.

Bridging

This is a pivot that can take you from an unwanted topic or question to one that will help you meet your messaging objectives as smoothly as possible.

Media statement or question

Your response

I can't answer that question, but I can tell you...

Reframing

Breakout Activity

Choose a group by topic and collectively identify an objective, an audience and a call-to-action.

- Vaccine misinformation (e.g., Measles)
- Food-related outbreak or recall (e.g., E.coli)
- Municipal water contamination
- Toxic chemical spill or leak



Section 3

Post-Crisis Evaluation **aka “AFTER”**



AFTER

Post-Crisis Evaluation

Reviewing

- Assess and address effectiveness and outcomes

Updating

- Edit your crisis communication plan based on what was learned



Evaluating Response

ASK:

- Was messaging effective?
- Was there behavior change?
- Were we able to track and counter misinformation?
- Did this increase or decrease public trust?

Assess:

- *Communication goals being met*
- *Delivery of key messages*
- *Accountability for missteps*



Update Response Plan

- Decide as a team how outcomes from recent crisis response should inform future responses
- Incorporate lessons learned into your association's formal response plan
- Redistribute to appropriate parties





Evaluation Exercise

Directions

1. After a crisis has abated, come together as a team to reflect on the following questions. Ensure the time after the end of the crisis and the evaluation exercise is a reasonable timeframe, like within a week.
2. A communications director or communications manager can lead this step. If your team lacks dedicated communications staff, a subject matter expert can step into the lead position. Designating a specific team member to oversee the evaluation helps establish clear accountability.
3. Make adjustments to the plan and worksheets as needed.
4. Share findings and adjustments with staff, board members and relevant partners and stakeholders.

There may be an opportunity to conduct an evaluation exercise during the crisis if you find your messaging objectives are not being met. This introspective exercise can help realign efforts before it's too late.

Message effectiveness

What was the reach?

How did people react to your messaging? Was it in the way you intended?

ected?

mselves from the risk?

information

manage it? Were you able to stop its spread?

approaches increase or decrease public trust in your



nt — need to be

resources to more
?

?

forward?



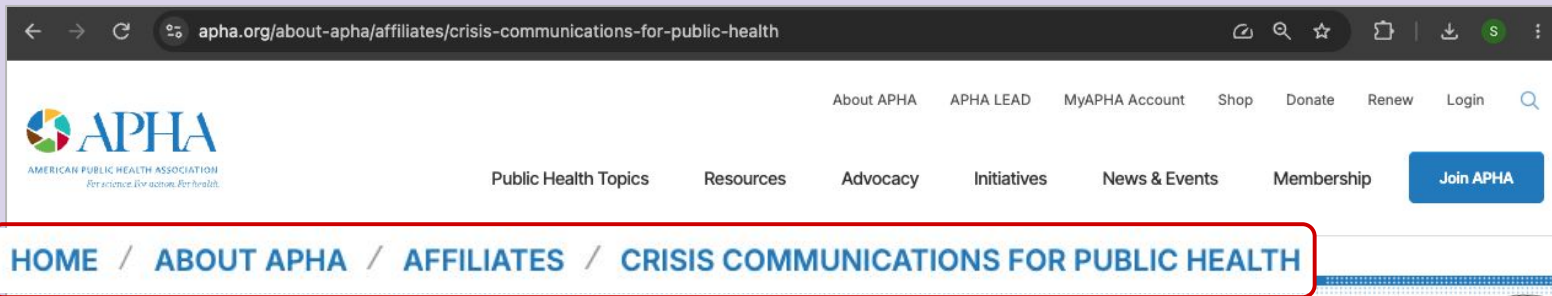
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Crisis Communications for Public Health

Guide: Crisis Communications for Public Health

Step-by-Step Guidance for Planning & Response

This guide was created for the APHA Affiliates (State and regional public health associations) in response to the current (2026) public health landscape. However, the guide may be applicable to other public health nonprofit or governmental agencies. It is not meant to be exhaustive or prescriptive. You know your organization, partners, and the community you collectively serve best. Use this information to help develop a plan and approach that's right for your association's unique needs.

[View the Guide](#)

PDF download



Guide Sections



Before: Prepare Your Team

The goal in any crisis scenario is to be responsive, not reactive. By developing a plan ar



During: Taking Thoughtful and Timely Action

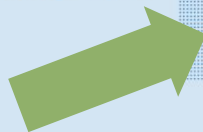
Your team has determined to



After: Evaluate and Update the Plan

Once the crisis is over, you're done,

Guide Worksheets



Identify Your Team



Assemble Your Team



Threat Assessment



Key Questions to Develop Objectives



Additional Resources



[de Beaumont Foundation: Communicating About Public Health Toolkit](#)

[de Beaumont blog: Be First, Be Right, and Be Credible: Translating Lessons from Crisis Communications](#)

[The CDC Crisis and Emergency Response Communication \(CERC\) Manual](#)

[Public Health Accreditation Board: Risk Communication Template](#)

[The Public Health Communications Collaborative: Creating a Plan—Crisis Communication for Public Health](#)

[Spitfire Strategies' Guide to Crisis Prep & Management](#)

[National Council of Nonprofits Communications Guide](#)



Q+A



APHA Affiliate Affairs

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Thank you.

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About Boundless

Boundless Workshop is a woman-led, minority owned business.

Our mission is to co-create a future that is not only robust but equitable. Specifically, our focus is on developing strategies and systems that directly contribute to making a future that is:

- **Healthier:** Implementing practices and solutions that enhance well-being, safety, and resilience for people, communities, and internal teams.
- **Safer:** Building sound governance, risk management, and operational frameworks to protect assets, data, and personnel.
- **More Sustainable:** Designing long-term strategies that minimize environmental impact, eliminate human harm, optimize resource use, and ensure enduring value creation.

Through this deep partnership, we turn complex challenges into pathways for meaningful, lasting transformation.