Introduction

Responding to public health crises: The what, when and why

What is a public health crisis?

A public health crisis is an event or situation that has the potential to put many people's health at risk, physically or emotionally.

When and why do they happen?

Often, a crisis stems from factors outside of your association's control. Sometimes though, you may have a scenario involving an internal misstep.

Examples of public health crises:

- **Outbreaks:** Flu, measles, exposure to tick-borne diseases, food recalls
- **Misinformation:** Trends on traditional and social media, third parties actively sharing anti-public health rhetoric
- **Emergency alerts and advisories:** Boil water notice after a water main break, severe weather alerts (e.g., heat waves, poor air quality from fires, contaminated water from flooding)
- **Social:** Loneliness epidemic, opioid crisis, other systemic challenges
- **Infrastructure:** Closing down of school health systems or federally qualified community centers, overwhelmed services, internal data breach
- **Media-related:** Quotes taken out of context from an interview, or an interview that's gone sideways
- **Miscommunication between partners** that may exacerbate a situation



Public health crises are inevitable, and managing one is not a matter of ***if***, but ***when***. While you can't predict the details of a crisis, having a communication plan ready beforehand protects your team's capacity, helps you respond with confidence and builds community trust.

The first step in becoming prepared is identifying a core group of response leaders in advance of a crisis. This ensures that when a situation arises, you can quickly and clearly get accurate information out ahead of conjecture and avoid situations that would increase confusion and decrease credibility.

Next, ask yourself, "Do I need to respond to everything?" The short answer is, "No." The longer answer is more complicated, of course, and depends on the scale and severity of active and potential factors. Every crisis is different, and the worksheet on Threat Assessment can help you determine whether to respond.

The response, however, should center these six crisis communication principles, from CDC's Crisis & Emergency Risk Communication guidance. Build a crisis communication plan that allows you to responsibly act on these:

1. Be first
2. Be right
3. Express empathy
4. Promote action
5. Show respect
6. Demonstrate transparency

How to use this guide

This guide was created for the APHA-Affiliated 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, so that you can succeed in the above.

This guide is broken into the following sections:

1. Crisis Response Checklist
2. Preparation: Before a Crisis
3. Action: During a Crisis
4. Evaluation: After a Crisis
5. Additional Resources

Crisis Response Checklist

Before: Prepare your team

Teaming

- ☐ Build your team*
- ☐ Decide if you'll need contractors or external team members
- ☐ Decide on backup team members
- ☐ Articulate expected roles and responsibilities

Assembly

- ☐ Designate who will initiate the crisis communication meeting
- ☐ Assemble your team
  - ☐ Decide how the team will communicate together before, at the start of and during an event
  - ☐ Decide where and how the team will meet (online, in-person, etc.)
  - ☐ Choose a backup meeting location or time
  - ☐ Create an organizational chart showing processes and who will contact whom
  - ☐ Gather and confirm contact information for all team members
  - ☐ Ensure everyone has a dated digital and physical copy of the most current organizational chart and communication plan

During: Taking thoughtful and timely action

Assessing

- ☐ Pull the response team together to decide on action
- ☐ Verify the origin of crisis information
- ☐ Assess the level of threat
- ☐ Collectively agree on next steps, including whether to respond to the crisis or continue observing as the situation unfolds

If responding, develop communication assets

- ☐ Define your communication objective for the crisis, what you want to achieve by responding
- ☐ Develop a call to action that answers your communication objective and guides the audience on what they need to do

**Depending on capacity and size of your team, one person may play multiple roles.*

- ☐ Identify your priority audience
- ☐ Identify your secondary audience, if needed
- ☐ Strive to answer key questions to define your messaging objectives
- ☐ Develop messaging that speaks to your audience's specific needs and concerns
- ☐ Audit current communications for reuse of any relevant material
- ☐ Identify any needed changes to current material so it can be used as supporting information in the crisis

Engaging partners

- ☐ Identify and confirm trusted messengers
- ☐ Update organization stakeholders
- ☐ Practice how the messengers will engage the media

After: Evaluate and update the plan

Assessing

- ☐ Bring the team together to review the crisis communication plan and response
- ☐ Discuss key metrics for communication goals, such as message effectiveness, behavior change, identification and counter of misinformation, public trust and credibility through an evaluation exercise
- ☐ Make updates to the plan as needed

Preparation: Before a crisis

"Failing to plan is planning to fail."
– (not Ben Franklin!)

Developing a plan and process

The goal in any crisis scenario is to be responsive, not reactive, by developing a plan and process. This includes building your communication team; creating and maintaining a contact sheet; knowing how to assemble; and designing parameters for initiating a response.

1. Build your crisis communication response team



Assemble a team that is responsible for and accountable to the outcomes of the crisis. Your crisis communication team acts as trusted points of coordination both internally and externally. Not everyone will be communicating with the public, but everyone will be coordinating with the agreed-upon outcomes in mind. Depending on how you typically operate, your response team may comprise association staff and board members, as well as members of partner organizations, members with relevant expertise and community leaders. Some people may play multiple roles.

Also, not everyone on your crisis communication response team may get "called up" for a crisis response. Each event will dictate which members of your team will need to be part of a response.

Keep the size of your response team manageable. General roles[1] are typically divided between:

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

1 Based on CDC CERC Crisis Communication Plans pages 21 and 22.

Consider having trusted subject matter experts on your team who can provide informed third-party expertise, especially on regionally relevant topics. Additionally, if capacity is severely limited, consider committing a trusted communications or public relations contractor who can supplement your crisis communication team as needed. If you don't have those relationships, now is a good time to start developing them.

Third parties, like those above, should be carefully weighed:

- **Potential benefits:** A recognized expert in a relevant field can provide credibility. Sometimes, someone who is not the "official organization" can be a more appropriate messenger for your audience.
- **Potential risks:** Contractors may end up unavailable, have a conflict of interest, or not adhere to protocol.

2. Create and maintain team contacts, roles and responsibilities

All crisis communication team members should have a clear understanding of their expected role (or roles) and responsibilities, the response protocol and team members' contact information. This information should be reviewed, revised and updated regularly.

Note: Make sure to coordinate with partner organizations so they include your response team's contact information in their own communication plans and you have their current contact information as well.

Make communication pathways as accessible as possible:

- Create or update the organizational chart so everyone involved can quickly find key resources. Include it in your crisis communication plan.
- Include telephone numbers and after-hours contact information in the notification list.

3. Know how to assemble

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

- Who will initiate?
- How will team members be notified? This could be by making a phone tree or choosing a specific app for communicating (e.g., WhatsApp, Signal, Slack, Messenger).
- Where will you engage? This could be an in-person meeting, or one held virtually (e.g., via phone, Skype or Zoom).
- Who are the members of the back-up team, and how will they be brought into the team?

4. Design parameters to initiate a response

Identify possible scenarios your organization might face. For example, an organization could be spreading misinformation around vaccine safety.



Next, determine what criteria would require a response. Ask yourself:

- Does the situation directly affect or harm our association, or anyone?
- What do we gain by responding?
- 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 misinformation spreading something that we are well-positioned to clarify?

More guidance in the Threat Assessment section.

Now that you have prepared for a potential crisis response, you're responsible for maintaining these documents. For instance, if you identify a new potential scenario, add that to the plan, along with the criteria for initiating a response to it.

Worksheets

- Identifying your team
- Assembling your team