



The UNIVERSITIES *at Shady Grove*

Policy Number: 1.015
Name: Crisis Communication Plan
Approved: April 1, 2009

A crisis communication plan can provide an outline for coordination of communication within the university, between the university and outside entities, between the university and the public, and lastly between the university and the media in the event of a critical incident. Crises can happen anywhere, at any time, and often occur when they are least expected and with little notice. When a crisis does occur, events usually unfold rapidly, leaving little time for advanced planning. That is why advance preparation is essential. The goal of this plan is to establish guidelines for dealing with a variety of situations, and to ensure campus officials and communicators are familiar with those procedures. This plan can be activated by the Executive Director, the Director of Administration and Finance, or the Director of Marketing.

A. Preparing for a Crisis

It is important to set up the framework of the crisis communication plan in advance. It is always best to anticipate a crisis in advance (weather system, protest, etc.); however, the University must be prepared for unanticipated events.

- The Incident Response Team (IRT) as outlined in the Notification Policy (1.009) will meet in the event of a crisis under the direction of the Executive Director. This team should meet annually to ensure all members are aware of their responsibilities.
- Emergency contact information of key officials as outlined in the Notification Policy should be stored both on the University website and within the Emergency Operations Manual.
- Possible locations for the command center where the IRT meets should be listed. In addition, staging areas for the media and press conference locations should be listed as well.
- The university will have a standby statement that can be drawn up and approved in advance. Details of the crisis can then be inserted saving time during an actual crisis.
- The university shall communicate this plan in advance before a crisis strikes. If the media and the university's stakeholders know it exists, and how/where to access it, they will know what to expect from the university when a crisis occurs.

B. Incident Response Team (IRT)

During a crisis the IRT will be called together by the Executive Director or his/her designee. Some or all of the following tasks should be given consideration:

- **Take immediate action**

If the safety of the USG community is at risk, immediate action should be taken. This action should be the first decision by the IRT. The activation of appropriate campus safety plans should also help ensure the safety of the USG community.

- **Identify Stakeholders**

The key stakeholders in the crisis should be identified and notified. It is imperative that administrators, faculty, students, and parents be given details about the crisis and what actions the university is implementing in response to said crisis. Effective communication can help quell rumors and ensure the university can effectively operate.

- **Identify a Spokesperson**

A spokesperson should be identified to handle all official communication coming from the university. This role will normally be the responsibility of the Director of Administration and Finance. The Executive Director should avoid placing him/herself in this role except for the most serious of crises.

- **Gather the facts**

A summary of the situation should be drafted by the IRT. This summary should contain all known facts about the crisis and actions taken by university personnel or IRT. A timeline format should be used. The fact sheet is for internal use and should only be shared publicly after consultation with General Counsel.

- **Develop a Emergency Operations Center**

The magnitude of the crisis will determine the need to establish a Emergency Operations Center or EOC for the duration of the incident. The command center must be large enough to support the activities of the IRT and handle communication needs such as land line phones, fax machines, email, and web updates. The primary EOC will be in room 3156 or building III. The secondary or back-up EOC will be in room 104 of building I.

- **Meet with University, county, state officials, if necessary**

If the crisis is beyond the capability of USG resources the appropriate university campus, Montgomery County agency, or state agency should be called upon. The appropriate agency will vary depending on the nature of the crisis.

C. Communication

Effective and efficient communication during a crisis is the key element to the successful handling of a critical incident. This encompasses both internal and external communication of facts and directions. During a crisis people demand information and direction, it is imperative the university be prepared to provide this information.

- **Identify key audiences**

Determine which of the university's stakeholders need to be informed of the situation and in what order:

1. students, faculty, and staff;
2. home campuses;
3. the system and board of regents; (301-445-1901/Chancellor) and (301-445-2701/Board of Regents). In the event of an off-hours emergency Ms. Janice Doyle should be contacted, her information is in the Notifications Policy 1.009).
4. the media; and
5. the general public.

- **Provide guidance to the public**

If the crisis involves a health risk, university officials should research the risk and offer guidance to the public about symptoms, treatments, and about contacting physicians. If the crisis involves a possible evacuation, the university should inform the public about areas to be evacuated and activate the Fire and Evacuation Policy 1.011. The university should also direct the public where to go for more information-radio, web site, TV, etc.

- **Designate a crisis hotline number**

If the crisis is anticipated to last for a significant period of time, the university should designate a phone number as an information hotline.

- **Communicate the message and the facts**

The facts of the crisis, an official statement and the key message should be communicated to the university's stakeholders. For internal audiences use email, voicemail, text alert, and the home web page. For external audiences, use the media by holding press briefings or issuing official statements. The first press briefing should come out within four hours of the event or crisis.

- **Media**

The media provides a way for the university to get its message to the public. The media will also shape public opinion about how the university is responding to the crisis. Therefore, it is important to cooperate with the media, to be sensitive to media deadlines and to provide all reporters with the same information-no exclusive stories. The designated spokesperson should keep a list of all the reporters to whom he/she talks. This will enable the university to look for news clippings to later evaluate how the crisis was handled.

- **Dispel the rumors**

During times of crisis, rumors can run rampant. If false rumors become prevalent, the spokesperson will need to dispel them publicly. The spokesperson should never release the names of anyone who is injured or killed until their next of kin has been notified.

D. Evaluate

Unfortunately experience is usually the best teacher. After the crisis is over, it is beneficial to evaluate how the university handled it. Knowing what was done well and what could have been done better will only help refine the crisis communication plan and make it more effective in the future.

- **View/read media coverage**

The best way to evaluate the university's dealings with the media is to watch and read the media coverage of the crisis. Seeing how each of the university's actions was covered by the press can help form future media strategies.

- **Debrief**

The Incident Response Team should convene after the crisis ends to evaluate every action and the IRT itself. It is important to learn from successes and mistakes.

- **Test the plan**

To ensure that the plan works and is kept up-to-date, it should be tested and evaluated annually.