Crisis Communications: Best Practices for Incidents and Events

Presented by the Washington State House of Representatives
Welcome and Introductions

• Jennifer M. Hansen, MPS
  Public Information Officer and Social Media Coordinator
  Washington State House Republican Caucus

• Craig Ginn
  Deputy Director of Security, Emergency Preparedness and Safety
  Washington State House of Representatives
Definitions

**Emergency** – a situation that poses an immediate risk to health, life, property, or environment. Most emergencies require urgent intervention to prevent a worsening of the situation.

**Crisis** – any event that is going (or is expected) to lead to an unstable and dangerous situation affecting an individual, group, community, or whole society.
What is an emergency?

**Emergency** – a situation that poses an immediate risk to health, life, property, or environment. Most emergencies require urgent intervention to prevent a worsening of the situation.

- Workplace hazards
- Natural disasters
- Environmental hazards
What is a crisis?

**Crisis** – any event that is going (or is expected) to lead to an unstable and dangerous situation affecting an individual, group, community, or whole society.

- Organizational/Legislative (controversial bills, floor vote walkouts, personnel)
- Health (COVID)
- Financial (economic recession)
- Technological (phishing, malware)
- Natural (wildfires, earthquake, hurricane, tornado)
Internal and external crisis communications

As a communications professional, there are two types of crisis communications you will be tasked to do:

- **Internal** crisis communications – how will you communicate an internal incident or event as your role as a communications professional.
- **External** crisis communications – communicating a real-time incident or event outside of the scope of your legislative communications duties.

In this presentation, you will learn what the Washington State House of Representatives does for both internal and external incidents and events, plus provide a template for a comprehensive communications plan.
Internal crisis incidents or events

Craig Ginn
Deputy Director of Security, Emergency Preparedness and Safety
Washington State House of Representatives
Internal crisis communications

Describes the communication activities of an organization or agency facing a crisis. They need to communicate about that crisis to their organization, various partners, and the public.

Typically, a crisis:

• Occurs unexpectedly
• May not be in the organization’s control
• Requires an immediate response
• May cause harm to the organization’s reputation, image, or viability

Internal crisis incident
or event examples

The following are examples of the types of incidents or events that would be communicated with staff and stakeholders of the House.

• Event (permitted or unpermitted)
  • Rally or Protest

• Active Threat

• Implied Threat (Bomb or other)

• Fire (evacuation)

• Earthquake (drop, cover, hold, and evacuate)

• Traffic (avoid campus)

• Weather (significant impact to the campus or surrounding areas)
Internal communication principles

1. Focus on the needs of your staff and stakeholders.
2. Make a commitment to effective communications.
3. Make communications an integral part of all Planning and Operations.
4. Be transparent in your communications.
5. Ensure that your information is accurate.
6. Release information in a timely manner.
7. Make yourself, your staff, and others, where appropriate, available and accessible.
Internal methods of communication

The Washington State House of Representatives has several methods of communication available to use during an incident or event. The method or methods used will be based on the incident or event severity and timeliness of the information needed by the recipient.

- Word of Mouth
- Telephone
- Email
- Radio
- Legislative Security Alerts (email distribution list)
- Communication Technology (GovDelivery & Everbridge)
Internal communication planning

Questions to ask yourself:

• Does your Legislature have protocol in place when there’s an internal crisis or emergency?
  • If so, do you know what they are?
  • If not, what can you do to be prepared when an internal crisis or emergency happens?
• What is your role in communicating an internal crisis or emergency?
• How will you communicate an internal crisis or emergency for your office/members/caucus/Legislative branch?
• Do you need/have a communications plan to establish your own protocol to responding to an internal crisis or emergency?
Internal crisis communications examples

Here are examples of internal crises that the Washington State House of Representatives, and the Washington State Capitol campus, have experienced:

- Active Threat (OB2)
- Bomb Threat (HLB and Leg)
- Suspicious Substance (Jefferson)
- Unplanned Protest (during session - January)
- Capitol Lake Flooding
- Inclement Weather
Internal crisis communications examples

Here are the methods of communications used for the Washington State House of Representatives examples:

• Word of mouth: Information may not be from a vetted source and needs to be checked.
• Phone: Information received from a security partner and relayed to leadership.
• Radio: Communication only between campus security partners.
• Email: Between campus security partners with information regarding emergencies or events. Security partners and leadership determine distribution to other groups as needed.
• Email: Legislative Security Alerts: Sent when an emergency or crisis is imminent or has occurred.
• Crisis Communication Technology: Technology used to distribute messaging to a targeted group or the campus.
Internal Crisis Communications Guide

The House Crisis Communications Guide is in draft. It explains:

• Who receives the information
• How will the information will be processed and shared (decision matrix)
• The method of communication that will be used
• Timeliness of the communication
• Pre-scripted messages

*Decisions for messaging will be made by the Crisis Communication Team (security partners and key House leadership members)*
Internal Crisis Communications Plan

Decision Matrix
External crisis incidents or events

Jennifer M. Hansen, MPS
Public Information Officer and Social Media Coordinator
Washington State House Republican Caucus
External crisis incidents or events

For most communications professionals, external crises are what will throw you for a loop. Take COVID-19 as the best recent example.

- Did you have to become a subject-matter expert on something you might have no knowledge about whatsoever?
- Did you know who the lead agency was?
  - In Washington State, our state health department immediately teams up with our Emergency Management Division and created a JIC within the EOC structure to streamline where information would flow.
- Was your role that much different, once the highway of information was established, from your normal day-to-day communications duties?
- Who were the main people/outlets searching for information?
Crisis communications in the Legislature

Here are some questions to ask yourself as the crisis begins:

• What’s my role in communicating information about this crisis?
• Who will be receiving the information I provide?
  • Legislators
  • Fellow colleagues and staff, including legislative assistants
  • Constituents
  • The media
• Who is in-charge/lead agency? Do I have their contact information?
• How will I gather and receive information from whomever is in-charge?
  • Are the internal processes/procedures already in place once information is received?
  • Is there a central place to house information so all necessary people have access?
• Does my team have a communications plan in place for me to follow to ensure I cover everything?
What is legislative crisis communications?

- What the heck is going on? Describing the event, incident, or crisis
- Lead agency updates, websites and phone numbers
- Other involved agencies updates, websites and phone numbers
- Media questions, interview requests and answers
- Constituent questions, concerns, fears, need for information
- Current updates and information (hourly, daily, weekly, monthly)
- Legislative role
- And, and, and...

As a communications professional, you are the funnel of any information swirling around about the crisis. You are also there to provide a listening ear and to calm frustrations while crafting the message.
External crisis communications: Example #1 of “funneling” information

The Washington House Republican caucus created a website specific to COVID-19. This was a non-partisan information hub geared toward housing every known link of information, including links to the governor’s emergency proclamations, surrounding COVID-19.

• All the information was placed into categories so people could find exactly what agency and link they were searching for.

• This made it easier for our members and their legislative assistants to have a one-stop place to direct questions on the response. This site was a companion to our state’s main COVID website.

• This gave our communications team a simple website to link in any member communication (i.e. email update).
External crisis communications: Example #1 of “funneling” information

The website: https://houserepublicans.wa.gov/coronavirus/
External crisis communications: Example #1 of “funneling” information

General information

The federal government’s official Coronavirus (COVID-19) site:

- Coronavirus (COVID-19)
- How to Protect Yourself
- If You Are Sick or Caring for Someone
- Symptoms
- Are You at Higher Risk for Severe Illness?
- Cases & Latest Updates
- Latest news

Washington state’s official COVID-19 site:

- Washington State Coronavirus Response (COVID-19)
  - COVID-19 risk assessment dashboard
  - Government emergency actions
  - You & Your Family
  - Travelers & Commuters
  - Business & Workers
  - Local Health Departments
  - Childcare / K-12 / Higher Education

Portions of: https://houserepublicans.wa.gov/coronavirus/
External crisis communications: Example #2 of “funneling” information

The Washington House Republican caucus created a document (due to election-year restrictions we couldn’t turn it into a website) specific to the massive wildfires we recently experienced. This was another non-partisan information hub geared toward housing every known link of information regarding the state’s response to the wildfires.

• All the information was placed into categories so people could find exactly what agency and link they were searching for.
• This made it easier for our members and their legislative assistants to have a one-stop place to direct questions on the response. We found most questions came from people not knowing what agency was handling what and where to even begin to search for the information they needed.
External crisis communications: Example #2 of “funneling” information

State resources

Washington State Department of Natural Resources (DNR) | Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, E-newsletter
- Information on wildfires
- Report a wildfire: 911 and 1-800-562-6010
- Wildfire Division: (360) 902-1300 | wd@dnr.wa.gov
- DNR year-to-date wildfire statistics
- DNR Regions and Districts | Fire information contacts | Services
- Fire prevention and fuel management mapping system
- Wildfire prevention
- Wildfire preparation | How to prepare for a wildfire | Defensible space – prepare your home
- Burn risk map
- Outdoor burning
- Burn portal
- Investigations
- Fire District Assistance Programs
- Community wildfire protection planning (including counties and completed plans)
- 2019 Fire Season Summary

Washington Military Department
- Emergency Management Division
- Washington wildfire resources
- Alert and notification warnings (by county)

Incident Information System

Northwest Interagency Coordination Center | Twitter, Blog
- Wildfire map
- Information on emergency medical evacuation
- Information on Distributed Real Time Infrared (DRTI) Flights

Washington Smoke Information - Washington Smoke Blog

* I can provide the full document if anyone wants it
External crisis communications plan

One of the key elements to successful crisis communications is having a crisis communications plan in place. Plans:

• Help to establish processes and procedures for communicating in an emergency or crisis.
• Defines roles and responsibilities.
• Map out strategies, goals and game plans.
• Provide vital contact information for the key players.
  • Legislative leadership; senior staff leadership; communications teams, policy staff, legislative assistants.
Elements of an external crisis communications plan

Here are the key elements to include in your crisis communications plan: **Purpose**

Define the purpose of your crisis communications plan. Each Legislature will have different objectives to define. Highlight when the plan should be referenced in the event of an emergency or crisis. Highlight what kind of information and resources will be outlined.
Here are the key elements to include in your crisis communications plan: **Outline and definitions of potential crises**

Create an outline to map out the levels of severity when going through an emergency or crisis. This is also a good section to define roles and responsibilities to your communications team, including names, titles and contact information.
Elements of an external crisis communications plan

Here are the key elements to include in your crisis communications plan: **Outline and definitions of potential crises**

Examples could include:

- **Tier 1: CRISIS MODE!** This level should involve an all-hands-on-deck approach. Describe this situation as immediate to your Legislators, constituents, staff, etc.
- **Tier 2:** Event poses a potential moderate risk or impact on Legislative activities and/or response.
- **Tier 3:** Event is unlikely to pose a long-term risk to Legislative activities and/or response, but the team should still be on the same page for responding.
- **Tier 4:** This is where most “crises” will fall into. The actual event tends to be a slightly larger version of day-to-day Legislative activities that may need a bit of extra effort to be fully messaged.
Here are the key elements to include in your crisis communications plan: **Ready. Set. Action.** These are the potential phases to execute your plan.

**Alert Phase:** Outline the actions necessary to ensure the communications team (or you) are notified of the emergency or crisis.

**Assessment Phase:** What happens next? Explain how the communications team will assess the emergency or crisis, gather any available information, classify the incident through the outlining process, and prepare to take action.

- What happened
- Where and when?
- Who was affected?
- Who is involved?
- When do we know about the incident?
- What is the impact/likely impact?
- Do we understand the entire issue?
Here are the key elements to include in your crisis communications plan: Ready. Set. Action. These are the potential phases to execute your plan.

**Activation Phase:** Turn your plan into action. Explain how the communications team will communicate the information and the message, and to whom the team will communicate this information.

**Administration Phase:** Determine how the communications team will continue to assess, address, and provide information for the incident. Tasks include communication to Legislators, staff and legislative assistants, constituents, social media platforms, the media, and continuing to update your crisis communication plan. This section should address the steps for any crisis, whether long-term or short-term.
Elements of an external communications plan

Here are the key elements that the Washington House Republican Caucus considers for our legislative communications plans. This template would also work for a crisis communications plan if you want to keep things cohesive.

• Title page
• District/legislative/state analysis
• Storyboard themes
• Priorities and key messages
• Communications objectives
• Community relations and outreach
Elements of an external communications plan

Here are the key elements that the Washington House Republican Caucus considers for our legislative communications plans. This template would also work for a crisis communications plan if you want to keep things cohesive.

• Constituent relations
  • Postal mail newsletters
  • Email updates
  • Video updates
  • Town halls / telephone town halls

• Media relations
  • Micro media
  • Press conferences
  • Press releases
  • Columns and op-eds
  • Media tours and editorial boards
  • Radio and TV talk shows
Elements of an external communications plan

Here are the key elements that the Washington House Republican Caucus considers for our legislative communications plans. This template would also work for a crisis communications plan if you want to keep things cohesive.

• Internal and external communications
  • Email updates
  • Social media including Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube
  • Caucus social media

• Progress and Reporting

• Checklists and to-do lists
  • Pre-session
  • Session
  • Post-session
  • Interim
Final thoughts and tips

• Crisis communications in the Legislative environment is not just about communication with the media. It’s also helping and advising lawmakers on speaking, giving presentations, attending meetings, and keeping their constituents informed.

• Always plan ahead. The best way to start a crisis communications plan is to think about what potential crises your Legislature might face.
  • Do you live in an area/state prone to natural disasters?
  • What kind of crises have you already experienced?
  • Use COVID as an example for a health care related crisis.
Final thoughts and tips

• Don’t wait until the emergency or crisis hits to realize you need a crisis communications plan. Put something in place now so you’re ready when the next crisis hits.

• Let the past be your guide. You can build outlines and templates for crisis communications plans based off events your Legislature has already seen and experienced. Ask yourself: What worked? What didn’t? Start your plan for the past.
Thank you!

Jennifer M. Hansen, MPS
Public Information Officer and Social Media Coordinator
Washington State House Republican Caucus
Jennifer.Hansen@leg.wa.gov
(360) 786-7720

Craig Ginn
Deputy Director of Security, Emergency Preparedness and Safety
Washington State House of Representatives
Craig.Ginn@leg.wa.gov
(360) 786-7774