

Crisis Communications Guide

This guide is written for state organizations and can be adapted for use by individual libraries.

The best way to respond to a crisis is to avoid it. However, in cases where the crisis is outside of your control, it's important to be prepared in advance. Having a Crisis Communication Plan in place before a crisis will make work easier – especially as crises tend to move fast and often involve multiple people.

Forming a Crisis Response Team and Crisis Communications Plan

- Create a crisis response team comprised of people in your organization's leadership and communications teams.
- Create a general crisis communications plan that will be used as a reference if a crisis arises.
 - List team members' contact information and their crisis communications roles. (Include others and modify roles if needed when a crisis occurs.) Questions to consider include:
 - Who will prepare messages? Who will approve them?
 - Will you identify a specific spokesperson (such as your president) or multiple to deliver messages to target audiences (e.g., association members, library users, the general public, elected officials)?
 - Who else might need to be notified among key stakeholders (e.g., other state library associations, partner organizations, state library, ALA), and how will you reach them?
 - Develop general policies and procedures and share within the organization and with key stakeholders.
 - Provide guidance that your organization will follow to determine if an issue is a legitimate crisis and therefore, whether or not to implement a full crisis plan.
 - Include a definition of what a "crisis" is. The [Institute for Public Relations](#) provides this definition: "a significant threat to operations that can have negative consequences if not handled properly."
 - Who is authorized to take action? Who will handle member and external queries?
 - Establish rough timetables for activation.
 - Identify, review, and organize for easy access any policies that might be most useful with crisis communications (e.g., collection development and reconsideration).
- Prepare general talking points and messaging templates ***before*** a crisis hits. Practice using and circling back to key messages.
- Periodically review your plan to ensure it reflects best practices and up-to-date contact information.

When a Crisis Arises

- Meet with your crisis response team to determine if the issue warrants an immediate response or if additional monitoring is required before potentially responding. Even if you decide to not offer an official, public response, you may still want to inform your members and stakeholders of the situation.
 - ***React in an informed, but timely manner.*** It's important to carefully analyze the situation and gather the facts before deciding on a course of action, but don't wait too long.
- Each crisis response will be contingent on the issues at hand; however, as you develop a response you'll be drawing upon your general crisis communications plan as a reference tool.

- Choose how and when you'll deliver your response to each audience (external, internal, etc.), including which media outlet(s) you'll contact or social media channels you'll use.
- Be sure to clearly outline everyone's roles within the plan. Involve volunteers and/or staff who have expertise in the specific issue area or library type, such as a school librarian during a school-related crisis.
- Craft your organization's official response and talking points for your spokesperson(s).
 - Be mindful of word choice and framing:
 - Aim for a response that is professional, transparent, and action-oriented.
 - Align your messaging with your organization's values and policies; keep it consistent and, to the extent possible, unified with other library organizations in your state.
 - Take control of the library narrative by correcting misinformation in your response without "repeating the lie." Focus on the core values of librarianship, e.g., "libraries serve the *information needs of all members of the community.*"
 - **If you need help developing talking points, reach out to ALA for assistance.**
 - Keep your response succinct and don't be afraid to repeat yourself. You are not simply answering questions but proactively ensuring your library message is clear and consistent.
- Write background information, talking points (if applicable), and clear instructions for your volunteers and/or staff on how to handle or support communications regarding the crisis.
 - Stress that messaging should be unified (whether that means there is only one authorized spokesperson, or that each of your organization's committees or divisions should produce messaging that aligns with your organization's official response).
 - Include a basic procedure for what volunteers and/or staff should do when external questions and comments go beyond the scope of the talking points and instructions provided, such as directing the inquiry to someone on the crisis communications team.
- Provide messaging that includes background information and any requests for action to your members and/or external stakeholders, such as asking that they share your official response via their social media channels.
- Implement your plan: issue your official response and send related background information and communications instructions/requests to your stakeholders. Make sure key leaders are prepared in advance with instructions and talking points.
 - As with deciding to determine if an issue is a crisis or not, implement your plan in an ***informed, but timely manner***: you want to make sure your audiences know you're aware of the crisis, are doing something about it, and are listening to their concerns.

Post-Response

- Continue to monitor general coverage of the crisis, as well as reactions to your response.
- Consult with the crisis communications team to evaluate your response and related actions, and determine if additional action is necessary.
- Share any updates with volunteers and/or staff and/or members and/or external stakeholders. Request further support if needed.