OUTBREAK Communications Guide
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INTRODUCTION

It’s hard to imagine a state or local health department that hasn’t had to respond to a disease outbreak. They happen all too often. And when they do, public health communicators need to be prepared.

The National Public Health Information Coalition developed this Outbreak Communications Guide as part of its cooperative agreement with CDC’s National Center for Immunization and Respiratory Diseases.

This guide may not cover every aspect of an outbreak; however, it is a good place to start. The steps outlined below will help guide your actions before, during and after an outbreak.

BEFORE AN OUTBREAK OCCURS

1. **Create or update your outbreak or emergency response communications plans.** A good plan will be flexible enough to address any outbreak you may face. The World Health Organization published a Media Field Guide in 2005, which contains a wealth of resources for responding to emergencies. Although it is several years old, it still contains helpful guidance. According to the Guide, communications plans should accomplish the following (we have slightly modified this list based on new available strategies):
   - describe and designate staff roles and responsibilities for different emergency scenarios;
   - designate who is accountable for leading the response;
   - designate who is responsible for implementing various actions;
   - designate who needs to be consulted during the process;
   - designate who needs to be informed about what is taking place;
   - designate who will be the lead spokesperson and backup for different scenarios;
   - include procedures for public information verification, clearance and approval;
   - include procedures for coordinating with important stakeholders and partners (for example, with other health agencies, law enforcement, emergency management staff and elected officials);
   - include procedures to secure the required human, financial, logistical and physical support and resources (such as people, space, equipment and food) for media communication operations during a short, medium and prolonged public health event (24 hours a day 7 days a week if needed);
   - include agreements on releasing information and on ownership (who releases what, when and how);
   - include policies and procedures regarding employee contacts from the media;
   - outline well-thought-out contingency plans for various scenarios;
   - include regularly checked and updated media contact lists (including after-hours news desks);
   - include regularly checked and updated partner contact lists (day and night);
   - outline exercises and drills for testing the media communication plan as part of larger preparedness and response training;
   - identify subject-matter experts (for example, university professors) willing to collaborate during an emergency, and develop and test contact lists (day and night); know their perspectives in advance;
   - identify target audiences;
   - identify preferred communication channels (for example, telephone hotlines, radio announcements, news conferences, website updates, social media and faxes) to communicate with the public, key stakeholders and partners;
   - contain holding statements (messages prepared in advance), core messages and message templates;
   - contain fact sheets, question-and-answer sheets, talking points and other supplementary materials for potential scenarios;
   - contain a signed endorsement of the media communication plan from the agency’s director;
   - contain procedures for posting/updating information on a website;
   - contain task checklists for the first 2, 4, 8, 12, 16, 24 and 48 hours; and
   - contain procedures for evaluating, revising and updating the media communication plan on a regular basis;
   - identify method of monitoring and who will monitor media and social media reports, postings, etc.

DEVELOP A PROCESS FOR UPDATING NEWS MEDIA.

Media will be frequently contacting you for updates. This can be extremely time-consuming. Consider having regularly scheduled media briefings, or inform the media that new information will be posted on your website on a particular day and time every week.

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- identify target audiences;
- identify preferred communication channels (for example, telephone hotlines, radio announcements, news conferences, website updates, social media and faxes) to communicate with the public, key stakeholders and partners;
2. **Draft the informational materials needed for your plan.** After you have developed a plan following the above guidance, begin working with the subject matter experts in your agency to update or develop the following types of materials for each outbreak you are likely to face (these may need to be modified during an actual outbreak, depending on the circumstances):
   - Key messages
   - Fact sheets
   - News releases
   - Social media messages
   - Website content

3. **Test materials intended for the general public.** Test your draft materials, if possible, to make sure they can be easily understood by the intended audiences. Having several audience members review and provide feedback on the materials may help prevent communication challenges down the road.

4. **Provide media and risk communication training.** Provide appropriate training to subject matter experts who may be called upon to speak to the media or public during an outbreak.

   **TIP:** See online Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication; CDC
   http://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/

5. **Establish relationships with key partners and stakeholders.** You will need to work with a wide range of partners and stakeholders during an outbreak—but that is not the time to become acquainted with them. Establish relationships before a crisis arises. Partners and stakeholders may include local health departments, related government agencies, elected officials, health care providers, ethnic community leaders, board of health members and your own agency employees.

6. **Identify strategies for communicating with special populations and non-English speaking people.** Communicating with special populations (e.g., ethnic communities, people with disabilities, seniors) and non-English speaking people should be an essential component of your communications plan. Check with representatives of those populations to determine which strategies will be most helpful. In addition, your plan should include an efficient process for translating materials into other languages.

7. **Develop an expedited process for obtaining PSAs or paid advertising in mainstream and ethnic media.** When an outbreak occurs, you may not have the time required to issue a comprehensive RFP for creative services or advertising. Work with your agency leadership to determine if a firm providing those services can be on retainer to be available on short notice when you need them. You may also want to see if you can work with print or broadcast associations representing both mainstream and ethnic media. These associations may be able to provide “sole-source” services that can be quickly arranged without needing to issue an RFP.

8. **Prepare a “go-kit.”** Your go-kit should include equipment, software, materials and files that you would need in the event you are asked to work from a remote location during an outbreak. For extra security, make sure you can access important files from the cloud or some other readily available source.

   **TIP:** See What Every Crisis Communication PIO Needs in a Go Kit; Lighthouse Readiness Group
   http://lighthousereadiness.com/lrg/what-every-crisis-communication-pio-needs-go-kit/

9. **Outline methods for evaluating your communication effectiveness.** You will want to be able to measure the effectiveness of your outbreak communication activities. This is no simple task. Here are some resources that may be helpful:
   - Crisis Communication Planning Workbook, The Center for Biopreparedness Education
     http://www.readbag.com/preped-resources-crisiscommunication-workbook
   - Risk and Crisis Communication: Best Practices for Government Agencies and Non-Profit Organizations; Booz, Allen, Hamilton
     http://www.boozallen.com/insights/2010/06/riskandcrisis

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**Use social media channels to supplement your traditional media channels.** These channels are most effective when used to engage people, rather than just distribute static information. Ask them to respond to a question or to share what you have posted with their followers. Be clear about how often you will be responding to comments so that expectations don’t exceed your capacity.
DURING AN OUTBREAK

1. **Identify specific objectives to achieve during the outbreak.** Even though you may have already prepared a general outbreak communications plan, every outbreak will require new objectives, depending on the circumstances. Be as clear as possible about what outcomes you wish to achieve and how you will know if you have achieved them.

2. **Implement your communications plan.** Implement the processes, strategies and tactics outlined in your communications plan. Modify the plan, as needed, to fit the particular circumstances of your outbreak.

3. **Consult with CDC communications staff.** Depending on the scope and severity of the outbreak, you may want to connect with communications staff at CDC to evaluate the situation, determine the appropriate response, ensure consistency of information, and discuss how to continue working together during the outbreak. CDC's Office of Public Affairs is very interested in working together with health departments dealing with outbreaks.

4. **Determine if a multi-agency command team and/or JIC is needed.** Work with your agency leadership and other partners to determine if a multi-agency command team and possibly a joint information center (JIC) should be established to manage the outbreak.

5. **Remember to follow the principles of risk communication.** "Be first, be right, be credible." Express empathy. Tell people what you know, what you don't know, what you are doing to find out more about the situation, and when they can expect additional information.

6. **Make sure all key partners are regularly updated on the outbreak.** Partners include local health departments, related government agencies, elected officials, health care providers, ethnic community leaders, board of health members and your own agency employees.

7. **Monitor the communications environment.** Monitor traditional and social media channels, web traffic and calls to hotlines, and adjust your communications based upon what you are observing. Determine ahead of time how/if you will respond to misinformation.

8. **Explore ways to keep the story relevant throughout the life of the outbreak.** As the response continues, think of feature stories or new angles if you want to continue raising awareness about the outbreak.

9. **Consult with your subject matter experts** about when to consider the outbreak over and how to announce it is over.

AFTER AN OUTBREAK

1. **Conduct an after-action review with all key partners and stakeholders.** Document what worked well, what did not work so well and what could be done to improve the next response.

2. **Review media coverage of the outbreak.** Determine the extent to which your key messages were accurately conveyed.

3. **Review your media relations and public information strategies.** Were they efficient and effective? Did they accomplish your objectives? What would work better next time?

4. **Update your outbreak communications plans.** Update your plans to reflect what you learned during the outbreak and what you can do better next time.

5. **Assess how you can prevent a similar outbreak from occurring in the future.** You will have learned many lessons while responding to an outbreak. Some of those lessons may point to strategies you can implement to reduce the chances of a similar outbreak. For example, if you were dealing with a vaccine-preventable outbreak, explore what kinds of initiatives you can launch to increase immunization rates.

OUTBREAK RESOURCES

You can view sample materials relating to outbreaks in our Incident Communications resource library. [https://www.nphic.org/nphicisearch](https://www.nphic.org/nphicisearch)


Consider posting an FAQ on your website that can be modified periodically to address the kinds of questions or issues the public are raising. This FAQ can also serve as a key-message document for spokespeople.