

Communicating in an Emergency or Issue Crisis

A Manual for Twin Cities Campus Communicators

Prepared by University Relations • July 2014

Table of Contents

Purpose	1
Communications Objectives in a Crisis	2
The one-hour objective	
Types of Crises	2
Public safety emergency	
Issue crisis	
Potential issue crisis	
Crisis Communications Procedures	3
Assess the crisis	
Assemble a crisis communication team	
Develop an action plan for communicating in a crisis	
Follow-up	6
Communications	
Emergency Plans	7
Emergency plans coordinated by the Department of Emergency Management	

Purpose

This manual outlines policies and procedures for coordinating communication within the University and between the University, the media, and the public in the event of a public safety emergency or issue crisis.

Public safety emergencies include fires, bomb threats, natural disasters, major crimes, and accidents. Issues that could become crises include police investigations, protests, riots, or other situations that demand a public response. The procedures and policies outlined in this manual are not intended to change the way public safety emergencies are initially reported. All such emergencies on campus should be reported immediately by calling 911.

This manual addresses media relations and communication issues in an emergency or issue crisis, and includes procedures to rapidly identify potentially harmful situations and a process for handling communications in these situations quickly and effectively. Campus officials and communicators should be familiar with these procedures and their individual roles in case of a crisis.

According to University policies, the Office of University Relations is primarily responsible for coordinating, managing and leading all communications efforts during emergency and crisis situations. In the event of a crisis, the University will always try to notify those most affected and the immediate University community (administration, students, faculty, staff, and parents) before communicating more broadly to the public.

The procedures outlined in this manual are to be used in conjunction with the normal decision-making hierarchy of the University and do not replace that decision-making process. Specifically, this manual will be used in conjunction with:

- Emergency Operations Plan and Emergency Procedures Manual—produced, updated, and distributed by the Department of Emergency Management
- University Administrative Policy on Campus and Building Closing—produced and updated by the Office of the Executive Vice President and Provost
- The BSL3 Communications plan—produced and updated by the AHC Office of Emergency Response

Communications Objectives

- Factually assess the situation and determine whether a communications response is warranted.
- Assemble a Crisis Communication Team that will develop and assist with implementing recommendations on appropriate responses.
- Implement immediate actions to:
 - identify constituencies to be informed about the situation
 - communicate facts about the crisis
 - minimize and correct rumors
 - restore order and/or confidence

The one-hour objective

In addition to the objectives above, our goal is to ensure that the University of Minnesota gives a credible public response within one hour after becoming aware of any incident involving health, safety, or the environment, or any media inquiry or potential issue crisis that may lead to a story that damages the University's reputation.

Types of Crises

A crisis is an incident or situation that could affect or has affected the health, safety, or welfare of students, faculty, staff, or campus visitors; the environment; or the reputation of the University.

The procedures in this manual will be used for all types of crises.

Public safety emergency

A public safety emergency is any situation that significantly threatens the health or safety of individuals; the safety of animals, research, or projects at the University; University mission-critical facilities; the University environment; or the University in general. 911 dispatchers should always be the first point of contact in these situations. Dispatchers will automatically contact Public Safety. The Department of Emergency Management will contact the News Service, the “officer of the day” (policy decision-maker in an emergency response), and other University officials involved in emergency situations.

Issue crisis

An issue crisis is any situation that significantly and negatively affects the stature or public perception of the University of Minnesota. An issue crisis may be triggered, for example, by an investigative news story or a public allegation of misconduct or mismanagement. An issue crisis, by definition, is a situation that escalates rapidly with little or no preparation time and, by its damaging nature, requires a prompt response from the University and often involves multiple internal and external constituencies.

Potential issue crisis

A potential issue crisis is defined as above except that the situation is still developing; it has not yet come to a conclusion or reached a crisis level. Not addressing potential issues in a timely manner often results in the most damaging type of crisis.

Very few issue crises are total surprises. Usually, key leaders have information suggesting the possibility or probability of a crisis; it is at this stage that developing a communication plan is most critical. This manual provides people the tools to begin planning before a crisis has occurred, thereby better serving the University. Ultimately, it is critical for communicators to contact the News Service/University Relations when an issue crisis is possible so potential plans can be discussed.

Knowing about a potential issue crisis allows the University to:

- respond to and manage a situation before it becomes public
- prepare a thoughtful and timely response
- ensure that key internal and other stakeholders are aware of the situation and provided with the facts

Following this plan when a potential issue is developing allows the University to take control of the situation by announcing the bad news itself and, to the extent possible, to frame the issue and develop a solution before the media or a third party can do so for us.

Communications Procedures

Assess the crisis

If an emergency that requires response from emergency personnel (e.g., police, fire, EMS) occurs, immediately call 911. Dispatch will notify Public Safety personnel. The Department of Emergency Management will notify the News Service and senior leadership. Also call the director of public relations (612-625-8510) or, if he or she can't immediately be reached, the News Service main line (612-624-5551) to determine next steps. This should be part of any college or unit-specific emergency communications plan.

University Relations will determine whether to form a Crisis Communication Team and will inform the president and Board of Regents Office, if necessary.

Assemble a crisis communication team

The crisis communication team will include at minimum:

- Chief communications officer/deputy chief of staff, or designee
- University general counsel, or designee
- Dean, director, VP in area affected, or designee
- Communications staff from the appropriate college or unit
- Director of public relations
- UR senior public relations consultant tasked with safety and News Service staff as needed

If the crisis is a public safety emergency, the team will include:

- Chief of police
- Director of Emergency Management
- Director of AHC Office of Emergency Response (for all health emergencies on campus and all incidents — of any nature — in the AHC)

Depending on the incident, other personnel will be consulted with and/or added to the Crisis Communication Team to help formulate a response. Those added may include:

- President
- Senior vice president for academic affairs and provost
- Vice president for health sciences
- Chief of staff for the University president
- Vice president and CFO
- Vice president for human resources
- Vice president for research
- Vice president for University Services
- Associate vice provost for student affairs and dean of students
- Executive director of Board of Regents
- Special assistant to the president for government relations
- Other senior University personnel as needed

The individuals listed above need to designate a backup contact if they are unreachable. All backups are responsible for the information outlined in this manual. The unit or college(s) involved in the crisis may also task their communications director and/or other senior administrative staff to be part of the Crisis Communication Team.

Refer to online *Confidential Administrative Telephone Directory* (<https://www.ur.umn.edu/confdir>) for Crisis Communication Team access numbers.

The Crisis Communication Team will assess the nature and scope of the situation, consult with others as necessary, and develop a plan of action.

Develop an action plan for communicating in an emergency or issue crisis

Designate a spokesperson(s)

In most cases, the spokesperson will be the highest-ranking person possessing the most direct knowledge of the crisis (for example, the chief of police in the event of a campus crime). The director of public relations or a designee may also be a spokesperson.

The spokesperson is responsible for conveying the administration's response to the crisis, demonstrating that the University has control of the situation, calming public concern, correcting misinformation when possible, and setting an example for the entire campus.

The Crisis Communication Team will also identify any other individuals who may serve as spokespersons, or who could comment to the news media, and will assign a News Service staff person to brief them on the facts of the situation and on tips for speaking effectively to the media. Draft talking points and/or a fact sheet

Determine whether the Department of Emergency Management is establishing an Emergency Operations Center (EOC) (for Public Safety and University officials) and whether the crisis merits establishing a media-briefing center (for larger media briefings or press conferences), per the Emergency Operations Plan. If an EOC is established, all communications must be coordinated through the EOC public information officer (e.g., director of public relations or designee) and the vice president for University Services, who is the primary officer of the day for any EOC Activation.

A talking points/fact sheet should contain a summary of the situation, including all known details appropriate to the circumstances. This information will be made available to and approved by the Crisis Communication Team. This fact sheet should be analyzed with respect to the public's right to know and concerns for privacy and security in consultation with the general counsel.

Identify audiences

Members of the Crisis Communication Team will be responsible for communicating the facts of the situation and the University's intended response to internal and external constituencies. While the spokesperson (as defined earlier) will be primarily responsible for conveying the administration's response to the crisis and communicating with the media, the Crisis Communication Team must determine whom else to contact and how to do so. Effective communications with key constituents will help quell rumors, maintain morale, and ensure continued orderly operations of the University. Among the groups to be considered:

Internal

- President
- Senior leadership team
- Board of Regents
- Campus administrators, faculty, staff
- Deans, directors, department heads, chancellors, vice provosts and other U leaders (AEL list)
- Students
- University of Minnesota Foundation Board of Directors and donors
- University of Minnesota Alumni Association Board of Directors and members
- Gopher Athletics

External

- Local law enforcement
- Parents of students
- Local community
- Media
- Government agencies and elected officials (via Government Relations when appropriate for state legislators/governor)
- Accreditation or other oversight or grantmaking organizations (NCAA, federal agencies)

Determine the most effective means of communication

After the Crisis Communication Team determines whom to contact, it must decide how to do so. The following issues and mechanisms should be considered, generally in the following order of priority.

Key Phone Contacts

These locations, which receive high volumes of incoming telephone calls to the University, should be notified regarding the key facts of the crisis (fact sheet) and where to refer calls pertaining to the crisis.

- News Service, business hours: 612-624-5551; after hours: 612-293-0831
- Board of Regents, 612-625-6300
- President's office, 612-626-1616
- Campus switchboard (on campus), 0
- Campus switchboard (off campus), 612-625-5000
- Campus Police, 612-624-COPS (2677)
- Human Resources, 612-625-2000
- University Relations, 612-624-6868
- Student Development, 612-624-3533

HelpDesk/HelpLine

In an emergency, calls coming into 612-625-5000 will be triaged and managed by OIT's Help Desk. University Relations will work closely with the HelpDesk/HelpLine to provide support with messaging.

Social media

Work with University Relations and the Crisis Communication Team to determine if there is a need to communicate through the U's social media channels and/or to monitor social media use related to the crisis. It may be important to monitor student, staff, faculty, and public posts about the crisis to see if critical information is being shared, for accuracy, to correct misinformation, and to minimize speculation and panic. Coordinate all social media monitoring and outreach with the University Relations social media manager.

Websites and email

The Twin Cities home page and other campus web pages can be used to communicate with internal and external constituents and provide updates as necessary. University Relations staff will follow the protocols for posting emergency information on the home page and taking over the home page if necessary. Emergency mass email can be sent systemwide by University Relations staff. (Note: The Safety and Security website can also be used for emergency communications if needed over an extended period of time. An example of this was during the H1N1 pandemic.)

Media logistics and access

Work with the News Service to determine whether to proactively alert the media or be ready with a response plan. The News Service, in cooperation with the Crisis Communication Team, will determine logistics of all media contact, including when, where and how the media will be contacted, which media will be contacted, who will coordinate the news conference (if one is necessary), who will appear, etc. When the emergency operations procedures are in effect, the incident commander will determine media access to an incident site.

The Crisis Communication Team will work with the News Service to determine if updates are needed, how frequently they will occur, and who will speak.

TXT-U

TXT-U is the University's emergency text messaging system. TXT-U should be used as soon as possible after a serious threat or crisis has been identified. (Other features through our TXT-U vendor, such as email and social media, may be available.) The University of Minnesota Police Department, the Department of Emergency Management, University Services, or University Relations determines when to use TXT-U.

Follow-up

Following any emergency or crisis, appropriate action must be taken to ensure that members of the University community, and others as necessary, receive needed information and assistance to help bring closure to the crisis, as well as relief from the effects of the event.

Communications

Addressing needs of those affected

Immediately following a crisis, it is imperative that the University be sensitive to the needs of faculty, staff, students, and parents who may have been personally affected by the crisis. There may be a need to assist a victim, or victims, with obtaining information and/or a referral to available resources. The Crisis Communication Team will be responsible for notifying appropriate employees and students. Also, representatives from affected units should follow up with their respective constituents to ensure their needs are being addressed and offer further assistance.

Addressing continued concerns

In many instances, there may be a need to continue providing information after the crisis has passed. Take full advantage of email, websites, etc., and report facts as appropriate to address continued concerns.

Thanking outside partners

Depending upon the nature of the crisis, services and assistance may have been rendered by agencies, companies, or individuals from outside the University. University Relations will work closely with emergency response departments to compile needed follow-up information and draft “thank you” letters to partnering agencies.

Debriefing after the crisis

The Crisis Communication Team shall meet within 10 days following a crisis and review all actions taken as a result of the crisis to determine effectiveness and efficiency of operations and make any needed changes to the Communicating in an Emergency or Issue Crisis Manual.

Emergency Plans

The Department of Emergency Management coordinates the development of emergency plans on campus. There are three levels of emergency plans at the University of Minnesota. These plans are in place to ensure appropriate handling and response to emergencies arising at the University. Contact the Department of Emergency Management at 612-625-8047 or dem@umn.edu if you have questions about these plans.

Building Emergency Plans

Each building on campus should have a Building Emergency Plan. The plan outlines evacuation procedures and other emergency instructions. In order to complete the plan, each building should identify one representative from each department located in the building to participate in a working group that will complete the plan template.

Operational Continuity Plans

Operational Continuity Plans outline the steps critical operating units must take to keep their departments running in the event of an emergency. Departments that are deemed "critical operating units" must complete an Operational Continuity Plan, per the University's Operational Continuity Planning Policy.

Emergency Operations Plan

The University has an emergency operations plan (EOP) that is reviewed and approved every four years by the Minnesota Department of Homeland Security and Emergency Management. There is a separate plan for each campus. Due to the sensitive nature of the information contained in the plan, it is a secure document and only given to certain departments that are involved in emergency operations.

The purpose of the EOP is to set guidance, tasks, and responsibilities for strategic response and recovery to natural and human-caused disasters. Matters such as large-scale evacuations, dangerous storms, hazardous materials incidents, and response and recovery are covered in the plans. There are individual plans for facilities such as TCF Bank Stadium, Northrop, Williams Arena, Mariucci Arena, and Ted Mann Concert Hall. Eventually, all buildings will have individual plans.