



NEWS MEDIA COMMUNICATION



PREPAREDNESS



RESPONSE

This tool will help you to:

- Establish collaborative relationships with the news media
- Provide the news media and the public with a skilled and well-prepared **spokesperson** who exemplifies the characteristics required of a leader in this role
- Prepare for successful **press (news) conferences** and interviews

Who will implement this tool:

- The mayor
- A member of the **municipal leadership team** or emergency response team
- A designated spokesperson or a member of your **communications support team**
- A **public information officer**

During an influenza pandemic, the news media will be involved in reporting on the situation. This tool explains how to send messages out to the public through the news media and how to correct misinformation that has appeared in the press. The previous two communications tools, 12 and 13, should be read before this tool. This tool is intended for individuals who will work *directly* with journalists, television crews, radio interviewers, and newspaper editors. In this tool you will find information on how to educate the news media, avoid common mistakes, plan a news conference, provide a well-prepared spokesperson to the media and the public, and write press releases and other materials.

News messages need to be delivered in a timely manner and conveyed so that they are easily understood by the diverse segments of your community. (For information about developing effective **key messages** that address the primary concerns of different target populations, see Tool 12, *Fundamentals of Communication During Crises and Emergencies*.)

The news media plays a very important communications role in all emergency responses. It is critical that you establish strong, positive relationships with them before a crisis occurs. Doing so will help guarantee a smooth **response** and build a partnership that will last through the **recovery** stage of a crisis.

“The media will not allow you to spoon-feed them headlines. They will decide what to tell their readers, viewers, or listeners about what is occurring. Don’t treat them like a member of your staff—suggest, do not dictate, and the relationship will move smoothly forward.”

From the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention’s
Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication

BUILDING POSITIVE RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE NEWS MEDIA

Depending on the severity and magnitude of the pandemic, your municipality might get the attention of national and international news media organizations. Whether working with local, national, or international news media, understanding how they work and what they want is the first step toward building a positive relationship. Your mutual goal should be consistent, accurate, and reliable news coverage.

Be aware that as the pandemic unfolds, there may be a gap between what you believe the media should focus on and what they actually want to know. Your job in working with them is to make your points clearly and consistently and to correct any **misinformation**.



Here are some guidelines for working with the news media:

- **Establish collaborative relationships.** As a municipal authority, you probably have already established a relationship with your local media. Building these relationships ahead of time will make it easier for you to get your messages across during a crisis. You should keep an updated list of news media contacts. Include their full name, news organization, phone numbers, fax number, and email address. This will allow you to make a quick phone call to the news editor at your local newspaper or a program director at your local radio station when a situation arises.
- **Understand the media.** The media are going to report what they think is news, not necessarily what you tell them is important. What's more, part of a journalist's job is to seek multiple perspectives, sources, and opinions on a news story. Do not expect journalists to do favors for you, such as reporting exactly what you ask them to, even if you have a friendly relationship. Media representatives will do their jobs, even in a crisis situation.
- **Respect the media.** Treat reporters, editors, and media directors with the same respect that you expect from them. Let media representatives know that you want to help them achieve their goal of informing the public.
- **Know the news media's deadlines and provide information to them on time.** The 4 o'clock news is going to start at 4 o'clock whether you are ready for an interview or not. And the media are going to report something. So it is critical for your spokesperson or a member of your communications support team to be available routinely—possibly around the clock—to respond to reporters' inquiries in time for them to meet their deadlines.

EDUCATING THE MEDIA

Part of your role in working with the media will be to educate them. You can help journalists and reporters by providing them with background information about the pandemic. You can also arrange for journalists to interview health or disaster experts prior to a crisis. These experts can serve as trusted resources for accurate background information. You and these experts can help make sure that the journalists do a good job making the information simple and easy to understand to the public.

MANAGING RUMORS AND MISINFORMATION

During a crisis, media coverage typically covers a mix of accurate and inaccurate information. It is critical that you monitor the news to identify rumors, false information, and misperceptions in order to respond accordingly. You and your team need to pay attention to the news on television, radio, newspapers, and the Internet.

When you find inaccurate information in the news, the level of your government's response should match the seriousness of the rumors. Overblown, exaggerated responses may actually give more credence to rumors. One minor mistake or exaggeration in one newspaper, for example, does not warrant the same response as a 10-minute television news story full of misinformation.

Responses to rumors should be unemotional, clear, and firm, and leave no room for doubt. You can take the steps outlined at left to help you respond.

THE EXPECTATIONS OF THE MEDIA DURING A CRISIS

During a crisis, the media will have their own expectations of government leaders and spokespersons. They will expect spokespersons and leaders to:

- Provide equal access to information for all outlets.
- Answer their questions honestly.
- Ensure the timely release of information.
- Dispel rumors quickly (or they will continue to report them).
- Commit to a schedule for media availability.
- Provide subject matter experts (if you want them to report an *official view*).
- Return their calls.
- Provide them with accurate information (or indicate that the information is preliminary and could change).
- Tell them when you do not have an answer and explain what you are doing to get it.
- Provide a consistent message during the response stages of the crisis.
- Have at least a basic understanding about how the news business works.
- Treat them with respect.

KEEPING REPORTERS ENGAGED AT THE COMMAND CENTER

Early in a crisis, the media will naturally flock to the *communications command post*. This is the physical location that serves as the central point for all crisis-related communications and houses the communications support team. It is where journalists will be directed for answers to their questions.

However, within a short period of time, they will begin to drift and seek alternate perspectives on the crisis. If you want to lengthen the time that reporters are willing to invest in the official story, make it worth their time. You can, for example, plan to have some of your municipal officials take turns briefing them and have subject matter experts provide background information.

You can also make the media as comfortable as possible. Sometimes this is as simple as providing food and access to restrooms. After the initial stages of the crisis, you may hold *news briefings* to update the media only once a day. If you want the media to stay close to the command post, you can consider scheduling regular daily briefings to keep them involved.



RESPONDING TO RUMORS AND MISINFORMATION

- Meet with decisionmakers in the news media to discuss issues and define common strategies.
- Proactively and objectively address the concerns and expectations of outlets whose coverage is overly critical.
- Mention by name specific media outlets that have provided inaccurate or misleading reporting if they continue to report in such a manner.

BASIC ELEMENTS OF CRISIS AND RISK COMMUNICATION FOR SPOKESPERSONS

- Give anticipatory guidance. If you can foresee issues people may have to deal with soon (such as side effects of antibiotics), let them know what to expect.
- Be regretful, not defensive. Say, “We are sorry . . .” or “We feel terrible that . . .” when acknowledging misdeeds or failures for your municipality or a sector.
- Acknowledge people’s fears. Don’t tell people that they shouldn’t be afraid—they have a right to their fears as a facet of their humanity.
- Acknowledge shared misery. Some people, feeling hopeless and defeated, may suffer less from fear than misery and even a sense of doom that might result from a catastrophic event. Help them move toward the future.
- Express wishes. Say, “I wish we knew more” or “I wish our answers were more definitive.”
- Panic is less common than imagined and often doesn’t come from bad news, but from mixed messages. If people are faced with conflicting information or recommendations, they are left with no credible source for help.
- Be willing to address the “what if” questions that everyone is thinking about and to which they want expert answers. If you are not prepared to address concerns or possibilities, you lose credibility and the opportunity to frame the “what if” questions with reason and valid recommendations.
- The media are important during the first hours or days of an emergency. They are the fastest and, in some cases, the only way to reach the public during an emergency.
- Go into every media interview with a specific purpose. Have a key message to deliver and re-deliver. If you don’t have a message, you don’t have a reason to do the interview.

COMMON MISTAKES MADE WITH THE MEDIA EARLY IN A CRISIS

Below are some of the common mistakes leaders make during the early stages of a crisis.

- Playing favorites or holding grudges against a media channel or person with whom you have had good or bad experiences in the past. You should give all media equal access to information during a crisis.
- Attempting to set arbitrary new rules about how media can interact with the official response group. If you have rules, state them in the planning stages before a crisis. Reach out to the media and explain why the rules exist, and remain flexible.
- Attempting to tell a reporter or editor how to do their job. From a leader, even a suggestion can sound like an order, and like most professionals, journalists don’t like being given directions by outsiders. Make it your practice to start any recommendation with an opening statement, such as, “Perhaps it would be helpful to . . .”
- Paying more attention to national or international media than to local media. Even if the crisis is big enough for the national or international media to show up, do not discount your local media.

PROVIDING THE MEDIA AND THE PUBLIC WITH A WELL-PREPARED SPOKESPERSON

A lead spokesperson is an essential member of almost any emergency response team, and should be familiar to and trusted by the general public and the media. The spokesperson’s image or voice alone may represent the first message your municipality sends out during an emergency. A lead spokesperson may be your public information officer, the communications coordinator from your municipal emergency response team, the top authority of one of your municipality’s *sectors* (such as the director of your ministry of health), or a member of your municipal leadership team.

THE MUNICIPAL LEADER AS A SPOKESPERSON

Tool 12, *Fundamentals of Communication*, notes that being a good communicator is one of the basic requirements for being a successful spokesperson. But the requirements do not end there. Being a spokesperson is not as simple as reading a prepared statement. Spokespersons should thoroughly understand the situation and the role they play.

Overwhelming research shows that a credible spokesperson can influence behaviors that can save lives. Spokespersons can reduce anxiety and fear, and help communities to recover quickly from a pandemic. To do this, they must understand that it is not only the words they deliver, but also the way in which the words are expressed.

HOLDING SUCCESSFUL PRESS OR NEWS CONFERENCES

One of the toughest decisions you will have to make during a crisis such as a pandemic will be deciding whether to hold press or news conferences and, if so, when to hold them. As a municipal leader, you can decide, in consultation with your communications coordinator or public information officer, when to call a news conference based on the guidelines below.

WHEN TO HOLD A NEWS CONFERENCE

- It is a fast-breaking crisis, and the public is clamoring to know who is in charge.
- You have an urgent message or recommendation for the public.
- You have promised to update the public on a regular basis.
- You have news.

If you decide that a news conference is warranted, consider in advance *who will participate*, *what subjects* will be covered, and *who will answer* particular types of questions.

Keep in mind that the news conference set-up has an impact on what the media and the public will expect. If you seat your experts at tables, this implies that you have enough information to share that everyone should stop and sit down. If you do not have much information to share and plan to take only a few questions—or no questions at all—do not sit down. Instead, have a single microphone on a stand (not a podium, if possible) where you or the leader of the news conference speaks and refers to other experts only if needed.

The news conference begins the minute you enter the room—not when you step up to the microphone. So any discussion with those around you—official or otherwise—should take place in a separate room. And remember to *always* assume that every microphone is live at all times.

Refer to Handout 1 for a checklist you can use for planning and organizing a news conference.

TIPS FOR SUCCESS AT A NEWS CONFERENCE

Eliminate unnecessary distractions. Avoid being surrounded on stage by members of your staff or other parties who might engage in conversation. Even while reporters watch you in the front of the room, they may be listening to comments that contain confidential or sensitive information offered in the back.

Provide consistent non-verbal communication. A lot of information can be given away by a nod or a puzzled look.

Keep everyone out of the area of the news conference except for the media, your communication staff, and the principal participants in the event.

Hold a news conference only when you have news or important messages for the public. If a news conference is not appropriate, you can provide interviews to individual media outlets instead.

SPEAKING ON RADIO

Some radio stations have news shows or commentaries. A host may talk about current events and interview guests or take telephone calls on the air. These “Talk Radio” shows offer a good opportunity to educate the audience about what to do during crisis situations. They are one of the quickest, easiest, and least expensive ways to get information about an issue out to the community.

Talk radio provides an opportunity for you to speak directly to the public about important public health messages and to share the actions you are taking to protect your municipality in such emergencies as a pandemic.

GUIDELINES FOR AN EFFECTIVE APPEARANCE ON RADIO

Whether you are calling into a program or being interviewed in person, the following guidelines can help you meet your communications goals and be an effective spokesperson on radio.

- In an interview, you will be answering questions or addressing statements made by the show’s host, but remember that your real *target audience* is the show’s listening audience. Try to include a public health expert in the interview with you who can answer questions about the influenza pandemic and public health measures.
- Your experience as a municipal leader has probably taught you how to effectively talk with and listen to your community. But it is a good reminder to think about one member of your audience, sitting at home or driving to work, listening to the show. Use your voice to speak to this person in a way that is persuasive and compelling.
- Know what you are going to say before you begin. Try writing down two or three notes to help collect your thoughts and organize your key messages.
- If you are phoning into the radio station, call early in the program even though you may be put on hold.
- Always assume that listeners don’t know as much about an issue as you do.
- Start with your most important and compelling statement. Once you are on the air, you will only have a short time to make your points.
- Don’t lose your temper. If you get follow-up or combative questions, answer them in a way that takes listeners back to your key messages.
- Always refer listeners to a Website, telephone number, or another official source of information to take action or to learn more.



WRITING FOR THE MEDIA DURING A CRISIS

Communications will proceed more smoothly if much of the information to be conveyed to the media is written and cleared prior to a crisis. For example, *backgrounders*, *fact sheets*, and basic templates for *press releases* (news releases) should be prepared in advance if possible. Work with your staff, your communications coordinator, and your emergency response team to ensure that the messages in all of your media materials are consistent. Use plain language and avoid acronyms and jargon; define scientific terms that cannot be avoided.

PRESS RELEASES

You can think of the press release as a crisis update for the public, providing the who, what, when, where, why, and how on a situation. It should have the new information you wish to convey to the public (such as school closures or the initiation of a new food-for-work program). Press releases should be no more than one or two pages in length and should provide only enough background information to provide context.

A press release should clearly state your most important messages first, followed by supporting information, and should generally include one or more pre-approved quotes from government leaders and/or subject matter experts. It should also have contact information for the individual the media may request more information or interviews through. Related fact sheets or other materials may be sent to appropriate media along with the press release. Handouts 2, 3, and 4 provide a press release template and two examples.

FACT SHEETS AND BACKGROUNDERS

The media like to have background facts or information that they can use when writing or reporting their stories. Information that is event-specific should be included in the press release. Additional details, history, and supporting facts should be provided separately as written “backgrounders” or fact sheets.

MEDIA ADVISORIES

Media advisories are brief documents sent to journalists, news organizations, or other media outlets that are not meant to be published. They inform the media about an event or upcoming news story. Advisories should be as short and to-the-point as possible (approximately half a page to one page), and provide the most relevant details (the who, what, when, where, and why). In the case of an unusual disease outbreak, such as an *influenza pandemic*, advisories should also contain a key message and sometimes a quote stating the municipality’s specific response. Include the contact information of the person who can help reporters with their questions or interview requests. Use a follow-up call to confirm receipt and provide additional information. (Handout 5 provides a media advisory template that you can modify for use in your municipality.)

Guidelines for Disseminating Press Releases and Media Advisories

- Send your media advisory or press release to all relevant media by fax or email (or both, if necessary to ensure delivery).
- Identify, in advance, the people to whom you want to send your advisories and press releases. Address faxes and emails to these individuals directly, and ask to speak to them when you follow up.

- The lead municipal authority, your public information officer, or your designated communications coordinator should follow up with a phone call or email to confirm receipt and to see if they have any questions. Keep your conversation brief and courteous at all times.
- Be prepared to resend your advisory or press release to those who say they have not received it.
- Make sure that your staff and official spokesperson have copies of any materials you send at the same time the media does.

LETTERS TO THE EDITOR AND OP-EDS

Newspapers may print letters to the editor and opinions on their editorial pages. These are submitted by readers, not written by the newspaper staff, and are also called *op-eds*. Typically, during a crisis response, you will not have time to write a letter to the editor or an op-ed but, after the crisis is over, you may wish to consider this way of getting your message out.

A letter to the editor or an op-ed can put the influenza pandemic event in perspective and offer suggestions for *preparedness* and response to future emergencies. This can also prove to be a powerful instrument for getting life back to normal and encouraging people to resume normal activities while acknowledging the losses of human lives and the impact on your economy. You may wish to continue writing letters that will build resilience in the community and help prepare for future emergencies.

To get your op-ed or letter to the editor published, begin by calling the publication (newspaper or magazine) to find out the name of the relevant contact person and the publication’s preferred means (fax or email) for receiving submissions to the opinion page. When you submit an op-ed, include a brief cover letter explaining who you are (e.g., describe your background or qualifications) and why your opinions are important.

Handout 6 provides a sample pitch letter for an op-ed, and Handout 7 provides a sample op-ed related to pandemic influenza that can be adapted to your municipality’s needs and submitted to your local newspaper.

SPECIFIC CHALLENGES AND GUIDANCE FOR SPOKESPERSONS

As the face of the municipality’s response to a crisis, the lead spokesperson will need to be prepared to communicate to a variety of audiences in a range of situations. Some specific advice follows to help you prepare.

REACHING YOUR AUDIENCE

In the midst of a crisis, remember that you are communicating to people who are hurt, confused, anxious, and possibly angry. Do not let the media distract you or lead you to respond inappropriately. Remember that the emotions and behaviors of your principal audience are your concern.

- Before participating in an interview or speaking before a microphone, remind yourself of your principal audience and their concerns by forming a mental picture of the audience you are trying to reach.
- To help stay focused, picture your grandmother, son, sister, or other family member. Humanize your audience because they are watching every move you make in front of the camera.

TIPS FOR WRITING AND PLACING LETTERS TO THE EDITOR OR OP-EDS

- Make an outline. It will help you to stay focused and remind you to cover key points.
- Stick with one subject per submission.
- Express an opinion and state it clearly in the beginning.
- Don’t assume that your readers are aware of the issue or your viewpoint. Give them enough background information to help them follow your logic.
- Support your position with statistics or study results, but don’t bury readers with numbers.
- Use appropriate anecdotes (you can reference a recent news event or story).
- Limit your letter to the editor to no more than 250 words (or as the newspaper requires). Make your words count. Remember that editors will edit long letters.
- Keep your op-ed to no more than 800 words.
- Include a “by-line” at the end of your op-ed consisting of your full name, city, and your title or position.

- Remember you are not answering the media's questions, you are answering the questions of the people in your community who want to know what they can do to protect themselves. They want to know who the individuals and organizations are that they can turn for help.

COMMUNICATING SCIENTIFIC AND TECHNICAL INFORMATION

To communicate effectively to the general public, your communications support team will need to create messages that are free of scientific jargon and technical language. When you are communicating key messages via an interview or news conference, keep in mind the following:

- Use names and terms consistently throughout the emergency.
- Avoid acronyms and jargon, such as *CDC*, *WHO*, *morbidity*, *prophylactic*, or *odds ratio*. If some technical terms cannot be avoided, provide clear definitions.
- Choose visual materials that you know the media will want, and make sure that the information conveyed by the visuals is explained fully.
- Use these visuals to clarify your key messages and supporting information.
- When deciding whether the information you want to share is relevant, weigh not only how much information you should share but also whether it will hurt you by causing undue fear or confusion.
- Use familiar frames of reference to explain measures of how much, how big, or how small, and try to create mental pictures of such measures. For example, if authorities recommend social distancing, show how far away people should stand from one another.

WORKING WITH REPORTERS

Below are the most common obstacles faced by spokespersons when interviewing with reporters. Preparing ahead of time for how you will address these obstacles will help you have a successful interview in which you will be able to focus on seizing the opportunity to get across your key messages.

1. Don't let a reporter put words in your mouth. The reporter may use inflammatory or emotionally laden words. Avoid repeating these.
2. If a question contains leading or inflammatory language, reframe the question to eliminate this language, and then answer the question.
3. Don't assume that the reporter is correct if they claim that someone has made an allegation. Don't react to new information a reporter gives you. Instead, say "I have not heard that" or "I would have to verify that before I could respond."
4. If a reporter leaves a microphone in front of you after you've answered the question, stop. Do not answer the question again or add to your answer. Instead, say "Do you have another question?" Say it matter-of-factly, without sarcasm or expressing annoyance.
5. Anticipate questions. Work with your public information officer or your communications coordinator to figure out as many potential questions as possible and draft the answers.

6. Nuances count. A word change here or there may make the difference in how well your answer is received. What is the point you want to make? What rings true and doesn't sound evasive?
7. Make your point. Have your key message prepared ahead of time. Try to speak your message within the first 30 seconds of the interview and in fewer than 90 words.
8. Don't fake it. If you don't know the answer, say so. If it's not in your area of expertise, say so. Commit to finding the answer.
9. Never speak disparagingly of anyone, not even as a joke, and don't assign blame.
10. Don't respond to hypothetical questions. Reframe the question in a way that addresses the legitimate concerns of the public.
11. Don't ask reporters to let you review their finished articles or interviews before publication. Offer to clarify information for them as they prepare their piece.
12. Break down multiple-part questions, and answer each part separately.
13. Don't raise issues you do not want to see in print or on the news.
14. Don't say "no comment" in response to a reporter's question. Instead, state why you can't answer that question. Say that the matter is under investigation or, simply, that you are not the appropriate person to answer that question.

EXPRESSING EMPATHY, SYMPATHY, AND GIVING DIRECTIONS FOR ACTION

As a spokesperson, it will be important to remember that the general public is looking for an expression of empathy (understanding) and sympathy (caring) from those in power, and they will see you as their representative. If you let your words convey a sincere understanding of what the people in your municipality are feeling, you will make a giant leap toward gaining their trust.

Examples of what to say:

- "I understand that this situation may be frightening . . ."
- "I know you are looking for answers to important questions . . ."
- "We want answers too, and we're taking steps to get them, including . . ."
- "This is a confusing time for us. It's such a horrible tragedy we face today."

Do not simply memorize words of empathy. Aim to be a compassionate leader, and show how the members of your municipality can respond not as victims, but as helpers. Express your concern, and then give directions for action. Those two steps, in that order, will help you and your community early in the disaster. A leader who is sharing the risk, as part of the affected community, can call on their community to shoulder the burden and help others.

RESPONDING TO GRIEF

In a catastrophic event, many people might be ill, dying, or in need of treatment, and it may be your job to talk with them about what is happening. Leaders communicating directly with members of a community who are experiencing the extreme pain and grief that comes from losing loved ones must be especially aware of how grief is experienced.

Remember to say what actions have been taken in response to the crisis and to focus on positive steps that can be taken.



Grief is a universal emotion, but no two people experience it in the same way. Keep in mind these basic concepts in highly emotional emergency situations:

Empathize with the Individuals Impacted by the Disease and their Families

- Privacy is important; assure those involved that the information they share will be kept private.
- Try not to answer questions outside of your area of expertise; ask the individual involved to let you refer them to an expert.
- If you attempt to make physical contact with a grieving person and they tense or flinch at your touch, don't take it personally.
- Family members may voice their feelings quite strongly. Short statements of condolence, such as, "I'm so sorry," "This is a sad time," or "You're in my prayers" are enough of a response on your part.

Listen Carefully

- Place the speaker's needs above your own.
- Always be honest in your responses.
- Try not to interrupt the speaker to give him or her advice.
- Accept moments of silence.

Focus on Better Communication

- As often as possible, use the person's name in the conversation.
- Ask a clarifying question (e.g., "Can you help me understand?")
- Allow the conversation to evolve—resist the temptation to push it where you hope it will go.
- Be sensitive to the person's nationality, ethnicity, religion, age, values, and feelings.

Finally, use *death* or *dying*, not softer euphemisms. Many people feel patronized by words like expired or expressions such as *received his heavenly reward*. Use the same words as the grieving person might use, and you will be able to convey respect for cultural and religious differences.

CONCLUSION

Your work with the media during a crisis situation will involve building strong, positive relationships; having clear and concise printed materials; and having a skilled and well-prepared spokesperson. All of these should represent your municipality's emergency *communications goals*.

NEWS CONFERENCE CHECKLIST

A news conference can be a good way to provide media with information. Take into consideration the following items when planning and holding a news conference.

PLAN DATE, TIME, AND LOCATION

- Have you given the media as much advance notice as possible?
- Is your event in a location that is easily accessible to the media?

INVITE KEY MEDIA TO ATTEND BY SENDING OUT A MEDIA ADVISORY

- Does your media advisory provide the date, time, and location of the news conference; the subject to be discussed; the names of the people who will be speaking or otherwise participating; the names of contact people from whom the media can obtain advance (and follow-up) information; and a list of languages in which materials will be provided?
- Have you placed follow-up calls before the conference to remind reporters about the event?

PREPARE THE ROOM

- Does the room in which your news conference will take place include a stage area, chairs, a podium, and microphones? Have you checked to ensure that all equipment is working properly?
- Have you rented a mult box (or press box) from an audio/visual company for broadcast reporters to plug into? (A mult box connects to a powered speaker or mixer to allow many separate recordings of one audio signal.) Keep in mind that mult boxes may not be needed in areas with more advanced technology.
- Is your sector's or department's name (and logo) clearly visible on the front of your podium, or behind the speaker?
- Do you have a backup plan for possible glitches?

PROVIDE MEDIA MATERIALS

- Have you prepared media kits that include news releases, speaker names and bios, fact sheets, or other materials that might help reporters be better prepared to write their stories?

BE PREPARED

- Have the main spokespersons rehearsed the key messages developed for the event, and are they ready to answer questions?
- Do your spokespersons know what the most important information is and how to stay focused, even if asked questions that concern other issues?
- Have you developed answers to potentially controversial questions that may be asked?
- Have you discussed in advance which key points will be made by each spokesperson?
- Have you designated a moderator to keep the conference on schedule, establish ground rules, and field reporters' questions?
- Have you set a clear end time for the news conference?
- Have you made a Spanish spokesperson (or other appropriate language spokesperson) available at the news conference? Have you made a reference to this fact in your media materials?

BE THOROUGH

- Have you made sure that all questions are answered during the news conference? If a spokesperson does not know the answer to a question, make sure a member of the team finds the answer after the news conference and makes it available to the reporter as soon as possible. If possible, allow spokespersons to be available to answer questions one-on-one with reporters following the conference.
- Have you designated someone to ask, during the news conference, the questions that reporters may neglect to ask themselves?

MONITOR ATTENDANCE AND FOLLOW UP

- Have you asked reporters to sign in? This will provide a list, for future reference, of those who attended (which can be used to build your media contact list for future press releases and media advisories) and those who did not (which is useful for following up with media representatives who were unable to attend the news conference).
- Have you offered key media personnel who were not able to attend the press conference a phone interview with one of the spokespersons, or have you sent them a media kit?

PRESS RELEASE TEMPLATE

Use your agency's letterhead, or include your logo at the top.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Date (also include the time if more than one release is issued in one day)

Contact Information

Contact person
Telephone number
Fax number
Email address
Website address

HEADLINE

City, State, Date—Opening paragraph: should be short and contain the most crucial information—the who, what, when, where, why, and how—such as government actions, decisions, and recommendations.

Second and subsequent paragraphs: should provide any necessary details and only enough background information to provide context (other background information should be included in separate backgrounders or fact sheets). Include quotes from government officials, experts, and other relevant actors.

If the press release extends beyond one page, be sure that all of the most important information appears on the first page. Signify that the press release continues on the next page by including the following at the bottom of the first page, centered:

– more –

Continue on the second page (if any) with a brief version of the headline and page number, as follows:

Shortened headline – Page 2

At the end of the release, summarize the most crucial information one last time, and provide a source for more information that is accessible by the public, such as a Website address or telephone number (e.g., a hotline).

The last paragraph should provide a brief description of the agency or organization issuing the press release, including (if relevant) its location and Website address.

Always include three pound symbols (or hash marks) centered at the bottom of the last page to signify the end of the press release.

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**SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE A—TWO RIVERS HEALTH DEPARTMENT
 (“SCHOOLS REMAIN OPEN”)**

Following is a press release template that the Two Rivers Public Health Department in Nebraska provides to the public school sector for use in the event of an influenza pandemic during which the schools will still remain open.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: (DATE) **Contact:** (Public Information Officer name and number)

**TWO RIVERS PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT—
SCHOOLS ARE OPEN BUT PARENTS SHOULD PREPARE**

Two Rivers, NE, Date—Schools will remain open despite the pandemic influenza outbreak in the county, but parents are asked to prepare for possible closures if the virus continues to spread.

School officials, Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services, Nebraska Department of Education, and the Two Rivers Public Health Department are working together to monitor the situation, and parents will be updated with any important information.

“At this time, we believe that students can safely attend classes and schools will remain open. Our thoughts are with all of our families and children who are affected,” said Terry Krohn, director, Two Rivers Public Health Department.

If the pandemic influenza continues to spread and more students become ill, health officials say they may need to order schools closed for a period of time. They urged parents to begin planning now for childcare in their homes. Health officials say that parents can help protect their children and prevent the spread of pandemic influenza as they would colds and other influenza by taking the following precautions:

- Teach your children to wash hands frequently with soap and water for 20 seconds. Be sure to set a good example by doing this yourself.
- Teach your children to cover coughs and sneezes with tissues or by coughing into the inside of the elbow. Be sure to set a good example by doing this yourself.
- Teach your children to stay at least three feet from people who are sick. People who are sick should stay home from work or school and avoid other people until they are better.

Health officials point out that recommendations may change during the course of an influenza pandemic. For school updates, parents can call the school district’s hotline at (INSERT NUMBER) or Two Rivers Public Health Department at 1-308-995-4778 or toll free at 1-888-669-7154. For more information on pandemic influenza, visit the Two Rivers Public Health Department’s Website at www.tworiverspublichealth.com or the Federal Government Website at www.pandemicflu.gov.

The mission of the Two Rivers Public Health Department is to assess and monitor the health status of the district and to facilitate the linking of resources to ensure that health promotion and prevention services are meeting the needs of the public in Buffalo, Dawson, Franklin, Gosper, Harlan, Kearney, and Phelps Counties.

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SAMPLE PRESS RELEASE B—TWO RIVERS HEALTH DEPARTMENT ("SCHOOLS WILL CLOSE")

Following is a press release that the Two Rivers Public Health Department in Nebraska provides to the public school sector for use in the event of an influenza pandemic that requires schools to close. (A similar press release would be issued when schools reopened.)

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE: (DATE) **Contact:** (Public Information Officer name and number)

SCHOOLS HAVE BEEN ORDERED CLOSED BY LOCAL SCHOOL OFFICIALS AND TWO RIVERS PUBLIC HEALTH DEPARTMENT

Two Rivers, NE, *Date*—Schools have been ordered closed by local school officials, the Department of Education, Nebraska Health and Human Services, and the Two Rivers Public Health Department as a result of the pandemic influenza outbreak in the county.

Schools may be closed for a period of time—days or even weeks. Because the virus is easily spread from person to person, colleges, daycare centers, and preschools have also been ordered to close. Because it is unsafe for large groups of people to gather, health officials warn people to stay away from shopping malls, community centers, and other places where germs can be spread.

"We know this is an anxious time for our community, and our hearts go out to those who are ill. We are working closely with the schools to deal with the situation and will keep parents updated with any important information," said Terry Krohn, director, Two Rivers Public Health Department.

According to Two Rivers Public Health Department, the purpose of closing schools is to limit contact among children to decrease their risk of getting sick and to limit the spread of infection.

Because so many people are sick with influenza, health officials acknowledge that it may be hard to get a doctor's appointment, go to a clinic, or even be seen in a hospital emergency room.

They provided some tips for residents to care for the sick at home:

- Have them drink a lot of liquid (juice, water).
- Keep the sick person as comfortable as possible. Rest is important.
- For adults with fever, sore throat, and muscle aches, use ibuprofen (Motrin) or acetaminophen (Tylenol). Do not use aspirin in children or teenagers; it can cause Reye's syndrome, a life-threatening illness.
- Keep tissues and a trash bag within reach of the sick person.
- Be sure everyone in your home washes their hands frequently.
- Keep the people who are sick with influenza away from the people who are not sick.

More information on pandemic influenza is available on the Two Rivers Public Health Department's Website at tworiverspublichealth.com or by calling the Two Rivers Public Health Department at 1-308-995-4778 or toll free at 1-888-669-7154.

The mission of the Two Rivers Public Health Department is to assess and monitor the health status of the district and to facilitate the linking of resources to ensure that health promotion and prevention services are meeting the needs of the public in Buffalo, Dawson, Franklin, Gosper, Harlan, Kearney, and Phelps Counties.

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MEDIA ADVISORY TEMPLATE

A media advisory is intended to drive media to attend an event—such as a vaccination clinic or a news conference. Because it is like an invitation, it answers only the most important questions the media will want to know: **who, what, when, where, and why.**

Send the advisory to your local media **before** the event and again **the day of** the event. Call reporters and news desks the **morning of** the event as a reminder and to confirm their attendance.

If press representatives have confirmed their attendance, set up a media hospitality area where reporters can sign in and gather media materials, such as a fact sheet or biographical information about the guest speaker(s). Make sure you know when and where your spokespersons will be available.

Below is a media advisory template that the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) recommend for use during National Influenza Vaccination Week.

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

CONTACT: Tom Jones
Agency or Organization
 Phone: (916) 555-5555
 Fax: (916) 555-5500

[NAME OF YOUR DEPARTMENT] Holds [EVENT] as Part of National Influenza Vaccination Week

[City, State]—[Name of Your Department] is hosting a [event], which is expected to involve more than [minimum number of expected participants] from [name(s) of area(s)].

WHO: [List any speakers, experts, and other attendees of note who may be of interest to the press. Include titles whenever possible.]

WHAT: [Provide additional details about the event (e.g., What activities are scheduled).]

WHERE: [Address of the event location]

WHEN: [Date and time of the event]

WHY: National Influenza Vaccination Week provides an important opportunity for our community to tell people how important it is to get an annual influenza vaccine. Getting vaccinated is the single best way for people to protect not only themselves influenza, but their loved ones as well.

CONTACT: [Name, phone number(s), fax, and email address of contact]

For more information about influenza and the influenza vaccine, visit www.cdc.gov/flu and [Insert department/organization Website, if applicable].

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SAMPLE PITCH LETTER FOR AN OP-ED

Date

Mr. Peter White
 Editorial Page Editor

Title of Publication

Dear Mr. White,

Attached for your consideration is an article written by Dr. John Smith, Chief of the Avian Influenza Unit of the Ministry of Health [**the author of the article should be a respected national or local figure, ideally someone with expertise in public health**], intended to create awareness about avian and pandemic influenza among opinion leaders and decisionmakers in our country and to encourage all readers to reconsider our pandemic preparedness efforts.

As you surely already know, Dr. Smith is a reputable epidemiologist with considerable experience in successfully dealing with several public health crises in the region [**include a very brief bio of the author and why he/she is qualified to speak on this issue**]. In other words, he is a scientist with great authority to speak on this subject.

The threat of an influenza pandemic still lingers upon us. According to World Health Organization statistics, more than 256 of the 417 confirmed human cases of avian influenza (H5N1) have resulted in death [**use updated information**]. If the virus mutates to one that easily transmits from human to human, a pandemic could erupt. Communities need to be prepared to respond to a pandemic, and leaders need to make sure that preparedness efforts are sufficient to mitigate the effects of such a crisis.

We are pairing the attached article “How prepared are we to deal with a crisis?” with a question-and-answer sheet on avian and pandemic influenza in an attempt to shed more light on this issue.

We would greatly appreciate your help in disseminating information about this important matter by authorizing the publication of this article.

Sincerely,

Your Name

Your Title

SAMPLE OP-ED ABOUT PANDEMIC INFLUENZA

HOW PREPARED ARE WE TO DEAL WITH A CRISIS?

Fourteen human cases of avian influenza have been recorded worldwide in the first weeks of 2009 (seven in China, five in Egypt, and two in Vietnam). Almost half (six) of these cases were fatal. Investigation into the source of infection reveals that the infected persons came in contact with sick or dead poultry.

Closer to our part of the world, in Canada, an avian influenza outbreak emerged in early 2009 among turkeys at a farm in British Columbia. More than 60,000 animals were destroyed. There are no indications that the virus has expanded beyond this farm, located near Vancouver. No cases of infected persons have been reported. Tests conducted indicate that the strain of the virus detected in the turkeys is of relatively low severity.

An avian influenza virus of high severity (highly pathogenic), like H5N1, can infect humans and result in death, as it has done to 256 people in various countries over the past six years, according to data from the World Health Organization.

So far, no country in the Americas has experienced an outbreak of highly pathogenic avian influenza, but in recent years other subtypes of the avian influenza virus (H5N2, H7N3) have caused outbreaks in Chile, the US, and Mexico—in addition to Canada—which were successfully controlled and eradicated. Public health agencies have not yet reported any signs of the disease among humans in this hemisphere. Nonetheless, the region is considered to be at increasing risk because of the speed at which the virus can spread.

If a strain like that which took hold in 1918, known as the Spanish flu (which killed some 50 million people worldwide), were to emerge in the next few years or months, it is very likely that there would not be an effective vaccine for the first wave of the pandemic, that antiviral drugs would not be widely available, and that hospitals would be too full to treat the majority of cases. Are we prepared to deal with such a scenario?

Because of the known characteristics of the disease, its likely forms of propagation, and the lack of an effective vaccine or other medical solution, we must combine medical efforts with volunteers and large-scale social protection measures led by national, regional, and municipal authorities. If a pandemic occurs, the influenza would most likely be spread by one person coughing or sneezing on another, by direct or indirect physical contact (for example, via an object touched by the infected person), or by breathing air contaminated with the virus. In this case, it will be necessary to enforce social distancing measures, such as closing schools and churches, canceling public meetings, and having employees stay home from work. Informing the public and proper communication on the part of authorities will be essential to managing the crisis.

Today we must ask ourselves the following questions: Do we have sufficient medical services to treat thousands of sick people in the event of an outbreak? Have we prepared a joint plan of action for diverse institutions, both public and private, for maintaining public order, guaranteeing access to food, containing the spread of the virus, mitigating the disease among those affected, and managing a number of deaths? Are we prepared to ensure the continuation of basic services at the national, municipal, and provincial levels when we know that many workers will not be able to work for a certain period of time and that the reduced workforce will affect the normal functioning of society as a whole? How will we manage the scarcity of basic products? Have we prepared every citizen to take measures to avoid getting sick?

International agencies and various professionals and government authorities in our country have made enormous efforts to prepare and to ensure that we will be able to respond to an emergency caused by an outbreak of a disease like avian influenza.

But we must ask ourselves if these efforts are sufficient. An avian influenza pandemic in our country could spark immeasurable economic and social consequences. The entire country could be paralyzed for some time. If we are not prepared for the crisis, excessive mortality could result.

Both citizens and politicians must make a commitment now, before a crisis hits.

[Be sure to include the author's "by-line" (who wrote the letter) at the end of the article. An example could be:]

John Smith
Chief of the Avian Influenza Unit
Epidemiology Division, Ministry of Health

SOURCES

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