Risk and Crisis Communication Principles

Key messages:

- One of the most important and effective interventions in a public health response to any event is proactive communication to the public—what is known, what is unknown, what is being done and how to get more information—with the objectives of saving lives and minimizing adverse consequences.

- A risk communication plan will facilitate effective two-way communication between health authorities and at-risk populations in response to COVID-19. Having a thoughtful risk communication plan in place will help your city respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in a focused and strategic manner.

- Clear communication objectives form the foundation of an effective communication response during a pandemic.

This guide will help you to:

- Understand the principles of risk and crisis communication during a public health emergency
- Appreciate that *what* and *how* you communicate will make a difference
- Create a risk communication plan of action

Who will implement a risk communication plan?

This process will be led by a designated communication coordinator who sits on the emergency response team and reports directly to the mayor or city leadership team. This could be the current public information officer. He or she ensures that all messages to the public are consistent and delivered effectively and provides leadership to your communication support team. The communication coordinator will also coordinate and engage with risk communication/community engagement counterparts in partner agencies, departments and organizations.

"One of the major lessons learned during public health events of the 21st century—including outbreaks of the severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS), the Middle East respiratory syndrome (MERS), influenza A(H1N1) and Ebolavirus disease—is that [risk communication and community engagement] is integral to the success of responses to health emergencies."
(World Health Organization, January 2020)

Why integrate risk communication as part of a public health emergency response?

Communicating during crises and emergencies is different from communicating during normal conditions. One of the most important and effective interventions in a public health response to any event is to proactively communicate—what is known, what is unknown, what is being done and how to get more information—with the objectives of saving lives and minimizing adverse consequences. Be first, be right, be credible.

Effective and proactive risk communication can:

- Prevent the public from becoming confused by an excessive amount of information, and minimize and manage misinformation that may undermine the public health response

- Build trust in the response and increase the probability that health advice will be followed

- Inform the public and help them understand the health risks that they and their loved ones face

- Adapt and deliver complex scientific information, so that the perception of risk among affected populations is brought more in line with that of experts and authorities

- Involve communities in nonpharmaceutical interventions (such as social distancing, school and business closures, stay-at-home orders), thereby increasing their effectiveness

## Key considerations when developing a COVID-19 risk communication plan

Your risk communication plan will be a living document, to be updated and adapted depending on the evolution of the COVID-19 outbreak (epidemiology) and people's reactions to the response. The resulting plan will facilitate effective two-way communication between health authorities and at-risk populations in response to COVID-19.

A few key considerations in developing your plan:

- Coordinate and plan together with your partners, existing community networks and government counterparts. Remember that communities should play a major role as implementers and leaders in promoting individual and collective behavior change

- Conduct early and ongoing assessments to identify essential information about at-risk populations and other stakeholders (their perception, knowledge, preferred and accessible communication channels, existing barriers, etc.) to develop your plan. Do not assume or take for granted local understandings and perceptions

- Recognize the importance of regular and proactive communication with the public and at-risk populations to reduce stigma, build trust, and increase social support and access to basic needs for affected people and their families. Stigma can undermine social cohesion and prompt social isolation of groups, which might contribute to a situation where the virus is more, not less, likely to spread. Provide identified communities/groups with accurate information tailored to their circumstances. People have the right to be informed about and understand their health risks

- Ensure that all people at risk of acquiring COVID-19 are identified, reached and involved

How to develop a COVID-19 risk communication plan

Having a thoughtful risk communication plan in place will help your city respond to the COVID-19 pandemic in a focused and strategic manner. A series of steps will help you jumpstart collaboration with government agencies and other stakeholders and gather the information needed for an effective response.
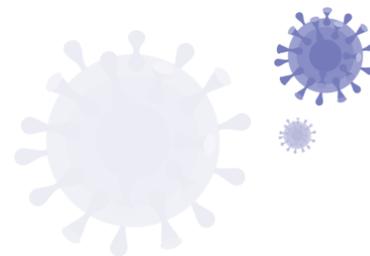
Step 1: Assess and collect

- Collect existing information and conduct rapid qualitative and/or quantitative assessments to learn critical information about your communities (knowledge, attitudes and perceptions about COVID-19, most at-risk populations, communication patterns and channels, language, religion, influencers, health services and situation). Analyze and assess the situation with your team
- See World Health Organization, March 2020 for an example rapid assessment tool

Step 2: Coordinate

- Designate a communication coordinator. He or she ensures that all messages to the public are consistent and delivered effectively, and provides leadership to your communication support team
- Regularly evaluate and inform national-level risk communication message and coordinate with the national level to harmonize any discrepancies
- Use existing coordination mechanisms or create new ones to engage with risk communication/community engagement counterparts in partner agencies, departments and organizations. Develop and maintain an up-to-date contact list of all partners and their focal points. Keep in regular contact to avoid duplication and identify potential gaps or discrepancies

Step 3: Define and prioritize objectives

- Clear communication objectives form the foundation of an effective communication response during a pandemic. Objectives should be simple, straightforward and realistic
- Review objectives regularly, asking if the communication products and activities you are developing are serving current priorities and reorienting as needed

  Examples of objectives:
  - To ensure that people have the lifesaving information they need to protect themselves and others, and to reduce the epidemic's impact on health, social life and the economy

- o To ensure effective feedback mechanisms are in place and used to facilitate reciprocal communication between health/response authorities and communities, the public and stakeholders
- o To ensure that health care workers know how to: engage with patients and caregivers; detect possible cases and report them to relevant health authorities; communicate with patients about COVID-19; and protect their own health
- o To position city health officials as the main trusted source of information about COVID-19
- o To ensure consistency in information and language from all partners and avoid misinformation
- o To inform the general public how the public health response is being conducted and assure the public that health authorities are being proactive in monitoring, detecting, and preventing the spread of COVID-19
- o To increase engagement with communities on their uptake of public health measures

Step 4: Identify key audiences and messages

- Identify target audiences and key influencers. The characteristics of each target audience should help shape the information you are trying to deliver.

Examples of key audiences:
- o People at increased risk of acquiring COVID-19 and/or suffering severe consequences, for example: the elderly, people with underlying health conditions, health care workers, travelers, etc
- o Health care providers (e.g. physicians' organizations, hospitals, community health centers)
- o Stakeholders and partners: policymakers who provide funding or create legislation related to public health, other relevant government sectors such as education and transportation, NGO partners who may have strong relationships with at-risk groups, community leaders and organizations

- Others: news media, influential bloggers or other social media leaders, local leaders, women and youth groups, religious and elders' groups, schoolteachers and parents, local and international NGOs, health experts and practitioners

- Develop clear and concise key messages. These are points that you want your audience to remember after your communication is complete. Targeted messages are aimed at a specific audience

Tips for developing your messaging:
- Disseminate recommendations from the World Health Organization and your country's health authorities; reinforce public health guidance for each group
- Be transparent: Share information about decision-making in your messages to the public so that the reasoning behind difficult decisions is clear
- Share stories, photos and videos that illustrate key messages
- Make sure messages are consistent across sectors and levels
- Anticipate essential questions and concerns that are likely to arise:

Examples of key questions:

Public	News Media	Other Stakeholders (Businesses, NGOs, Religious Organizations)
• Am I safe? Is my family safe? • What have you found that may affect me? • What can I do to protect myself and my family? • Who/what caused this? • Can you fix it?	• What happened? • Who is in charge? • How are people in need being helped? • What can we expect? • What should we do?	• How will my group be affected? • What resources will we have to mobilize to ensure the safety of our members? • What is our role in the overall response and how will it affect our group?

Table 1: Examples of key questions

Step 5: Develop the risk communication strategy

- Identify spokespersons based on the trust they have with the population, the type of message that needs to be conveyed (e.g., about political commitment, technical expertise, health protection) and/or the severity of the situation. The spokesperson will give a human face to your response and does not need to be someone familiar

with public health. They need to be able to relay public health data effectively, but the most important factor is for them to be clear and credible

- Determine information dissemination channels, where your audiences seek public health information. Use whatever vehicle allows you to get vital information to the public quickly, accurately and effectively. Provide regular, transparent communication through these channels

  Examples of channels:
  - Broadcast media (television and radio)
  - Newspapers and digital news sources
  - Social media (WhatsApp, Facebook, Twitter, etc.)
  - Text messages for mobile phones
  - Billboards
  - Community health boards
  - Traditional channels such as community meetings, loudspeakers, existing neighborhood or village structures

- Develop your communication materials and tactics. Match these with the appropriate channel and message. Develop a consistent schedule for engagement to ensure a steady drumbeat of communication. Whenever possible, use materials that have been pre-tested with the target audience

  Examples of materials:
  - Press releases
  - Media advisories
  - Fact sheets
  - Visual materials (such as maps, charts, timelines, diagrams, drawings, and photographs)
  - Educational materials for stakeholders which include a call to action such as an instruction to follow, a behavior to adopt or shareable information

  Examples of tactics:
  - Public announcements and briefings
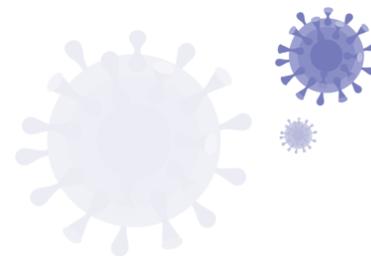
- o Daily press conferences
- o Journalist interviews and roundtables
- o Prepared talking points for officials for all public speaking engagements

Step 6: Implement

- Implement the risk communication plan with relevant partners to engage with identified audiences and community
- Identify human, material and financial resource needs. Define staff and partners who will do the work and budget according to the resources. Ensure strong and regular supervision and coordination mechanisms
- Update skills training among risk communication responders as new methodologies and campaigns are rolled out. Train city leaders and spokespeople on risk communication guidance as needed
- Set up and implement a rumor tracking system to closely watch misinformation and report to relevant technical partners/sectors. Make sure to respond to rumors and misinformation with evidence-based guidance so that all rumors can be effectively refuted

Step 7: Monitor

- Develop a monitoring plan to evaluate how well the objectives of the risk communication plan are being fulfilled
- If minimal or no positive changes are achieved, find where the problems are: check if the activities are fit for the purpose, check the content of the materials, the methodologies, the quality of work conducted by the teams. Adapt the communication strategy as needed

SOURCE(S)

This document is adapted for use by the Partnership for Healthy Cities program from USAID & PAHO, *Leadership During a Pandemic: What Your Municipality Can Do, Tool 12: Fundamentals of Communication During Crises and Emergencies, Tool 13: Communications Plan Implementation for a Severe Pandemic.*
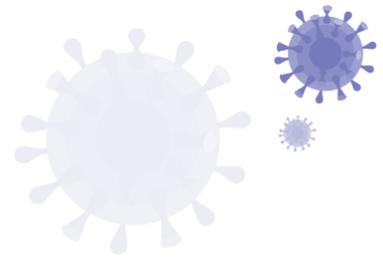
Additional sources:

World Health Organization, January 2020

World Health Organization, March 2020