

COVID-19
APRIL 2020

Working with the Press During the COVID-19 Pandemic

Key messages:

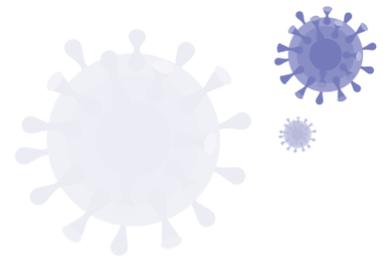
- Accuracy and consistency are of utmost importance for city government communications teams working with journalists covering the COVID-19 pandemic
- Journalists will rely on city governments for scientific information during the pandemic, so it's important to identify reliable sources such as the World Health Organization; locate local experts for possible media interviews; and prepare educational materials for sharing with media outlets when appropriate
- Misinformation distributed through the media must be corrected, but city governments can avoid feeding rumors and controversies by making sure that corrections are made promptly and in proportion to the error

This guide will help you to:

- Prioritize media activities that will be the most effective during the pandemic
- Decide when to host press conferences
- Create written materials for the press

Who will implement communication?

- City communications staff working on COVID-19 response



Introduction

The news media play a very important role in all emergency responses. Whether working with local, national or international news media, your main goals should be clarity, consistency, accuracy and credibility,

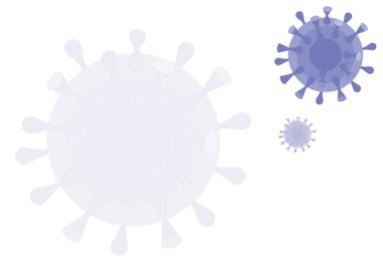
As you partner with the media, keep in mind that news messages need to be delivered in a timely manner and conveyed so that they are easily understood by the diverse segments of your community.

Be aware that as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolds, there may be a gap between what you believe the media should focus on and what they want to know. Your job is to make sure you have clear messages, to say what you know and what you don't know, to be consistent and to correct any ***misinformation***.

Media expectations during a crisis

Journalists will expect spokespersons and leaders to:

- Answer their questions honestly – including telling them what you don't know
- 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, emails and texts
- Provide them with accurate information (indicate if information is preliminary, or that there is still more being learned and the information could change)
- Tell them when you do not have an answer, and whether you are able to supply one at a later date
- Provide a consistent message
- Have at least a basic understanding about how the news business works
- Treat journalists with respect
- Provide equal access to information for all outlets



When and how to hold a press conference

During a crisis, city leaders are advised to hold a daily news conference and, if possible, at the same time every day. During the COVID-19 response, when social distancing is recommended or required, you will likely have to conduct news conferences remotely or with great care placed on social distancing of those attending the news conference.

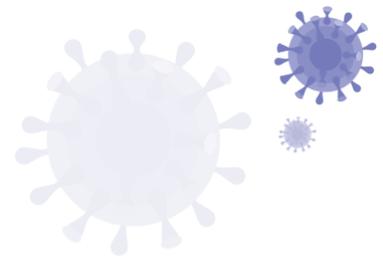
When to hold a news conference

- You have an urgent message or recommendations for the public
- You have promised to update the public on a regular basis
- It is an opportunity to present the city's leadership as coordinating together to address the crisis
- Address ongoing concerns about the crisis even if there is no breaking news
- The public is clamoring for information
- To refute misinformation and rumors and to fill the information void with facts and constructive information
- You've been contacted frequently by reporters about the issue

Consider in advance your *bottomline message*, *who will participate*, *what subjects* will be covered and *who will answer* particular types of questions. For virtual press conferences, prepare in advance by selecting the appropriate technology and platform that can be used by both local government and media outlets. Virtual press conferences can be done with or without video, depending on internet bandwidth and any other concerns.

The news conference begins the minute you enter the room or initiate on-line communication—not when you step up to the microphone. Other tips for success include:

- Plan ahead. Create a “run of show” document that outlines the sequence and timing of events, who will make prepared remarks, and what they will say. For online events, determine how you will take questions from journalists (e.g. via email, or a live chat feature in videoconferencing software)
- If the news conference is in person or on video, be careful about non-verbal, facial expressions and non-verbal communication such as impatience or exasperation with questions.



Managing rumors and misinformation

During a crisis, media typically report 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.

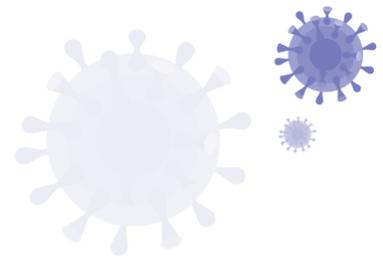
Writing for the media during a crisis

Work with communications staff and emergency response teams to ensure that the messages in all of your media materials are factual and consistent. Use plain language and avoid acronyms and jargon; define scientific terms.

Press releases

The press release provides 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 medical updates). 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 person the media may request more information or interviews through. Related fact sheets or other materials may be sent to the media along with the press release.



Fact sheets and backgrounders

It is helpful to provide the media with additional information they can use when writing or reporting their stories. Supplement your press release with supporting facts and details in separate, written “backgrounders” or fact sheets.

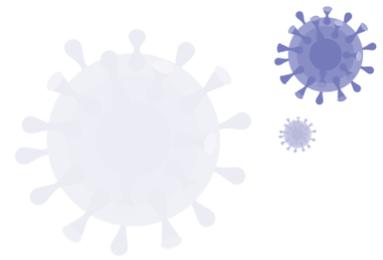
Media advisories

Media advisories inform the media about an upcoming media event. 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 the COVID-19 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, email or text to confirm receipt and provide additional information.

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:

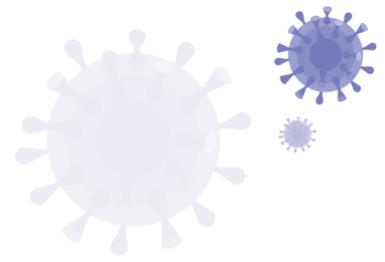
- Use names and terms consistently throughout the emergency
- Avoid acronyms and jargon, such as WHO, MOH, CDC, morbidity, prophylactic, or odds ratio. If some technical terms cannot be avoided, provide clear definitions
- Choose visual materials that you know the media will want, and make sure that the information conveyed by the visuals is explained fully
- Use these visuals to clarify your key messages and supporting information.
- 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.

- Make your point. Have your key message prepared ahead of time. Try to deliver your message within the first 30 seconds of the interview and in fewer than 90 words
- Anticipate questions. Work with your public information officer or your communications coordinator to figure out as many potential questions as possible. Draft the answers and stick with them
- 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?
- Don't fake it. If you don't know the answer, say so. If it's not in your area of expertise, say so.
- Break down multiple-part questions, and answer each part separately
- Don't raise issues you do not want to see in print or on the news
- 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
- Never speak disparagingly of anyone, not even as a joke, and don't assign blame
- Don't respond to hypothetical questions. Reframe the question in a way that addresses the legitimate concerns of the public
- Don't let a reporter put words in your mouth. The reporter may use inflammatory or emotionally laden words in questions. Avoid repeating these
- If a question contains leading or inflammatory language, reframe the question to eliminate this language, and then answer the question
- 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."
- Handle follow up questions promptly



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 14: News Media Communication*