



Get Ready, **VOTE**

Crisis Communications Planning for Election Offices

By definition, a crisis is something no one can ever prepare for fully. Once a crisis breaks, it can be daunting. Unexpectedly, things go wrong and the information is viral in a matter of seconds.

Whether big or small, all Election Offices should have a solid crisis management plan in place to ensure the best possible outcome from unpredictable situations. This vital resource is intended to provide a roadmap for crisis communications and assist you in handling an evolving crisis. When things get tough, remember you are not alone.



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Escalation Framework

Establishing a general chain of command will ensure that the lines of communication are tightly controlled during unpredictable circumstances. An established chain of command reinforces who is responsible for what, who reports to whom, and who has specific decision-making power, in order to move as quickly as possible.

Identify the key players to notify once a crisis breaks. The list should include each person’s name, department, role and responsibilities, reporting structure and contact information. If there is an internal chat system or group email for the whole team, include that as well. **Be aware that written communications can be shared or leaked outside of your office, so phone calls are best for sensitive information.** The following is an example of a chain of command:

Team and Role	Contact Information	Responsibilities
Lead Election Official	Name, email and phone number	Designates internal approvals and stakeholder outreach Appears in an official communications capacity for press conferences and other media placements when escalation is needed, usually when crisis has reached national level of exposure.
Public Information Officer (PIO) Can be internal PIO or a press firm on retainer	Name, email and phone number	Serves as primary spokesperson and drafts press announcements with approval from leadership
Additional Communications Support Can be PIO, communications person from another department or a skilled intern	Name, email and phone number	Serves as secondary spokesperson and can draft press statements with approval from primary spokesperson/leadership
Social Media Point Person If it is chief EO, consider someone from another department or a skilled intern	Name, email and phone number	Manages social media content with approval from the PIO and leadership as necessary
Graphic Design Point Person Consider someone from another department or a skilled intern	Name, email and phone number	Creates graphics and visual presentations with approval from PIO

Greater Response Team

Additionally, list out the individuals and core departments that will comprise the **Greater Response Team**. Also, note that other individuals and departments not listed may be involved as needed. These other departments may include the following:

- Executive Leadership
- Legal Department
- Equity and Inclusion Office
- Constituent/Neighborhood Services
- Budget & Finance Office
- Disability Office
- Human Resources
- Security

Crisis Management Process

Phase 1: Alert

Outline the immediate rapid response actions necessary to ensure that the Crisis Communications Team and members of the Greater Response Team are notified as soon as possible. This alert system can be as simple as an internal chat system or email group. The alert can also be issued by a conference call to get everyone up to speed.

Do not speak with the media before notifying your Crisis Communications Team. Keep staff members not directly involved in communication response apprised of the situation as necessary.

Phase 2: Assess

Outline how the team will assess the crisis, understand the chain of command, compile any available information, and prepare to take subsequent action. This phase should go into effect immediately after the Crisis Communications Team and the Greater Response Team are made aware of the crisis. The assessment should be made quickly during a prompt but intensive brainstorming session.

Phase 3: Activate

Explain how the Crisis Communications Team will communicate with the appropriate team members to outline their tasks and coordinate with external stakeholders for specific messaging.

Phase 4: Implement

Determine how the Crisis Communications Team will continue to assess, address and resolve the incident in the days, weeks and months following the crisis. Schedule regular team check-ins at least once a day to ensure implementation is happening in a timely, cohesive manner at all levels, especially at the onset of a crisis.

Phase 5: Debrief

Once the urgency of the crisis has dissipated, establish protocol to regroup as a team. Consider how execution can be improved and the plan can be updated.

Best Practices

The overall goal of crisis communications planning is to establish your office as the trusted source of information on election processes and results. **Before a crisis**, prepare for possible incidents and establish internal and external communication paths in advance. **During a crisis**, be sure to communicate clearly, accurately and confidently to maintain public trust and share the facts. **After a crisis** passes, learn from the experience and improve response plans where necessary.

Before a Crisis

Establish Efficient Internal Communication Paths

Establish communications response team roles, responsibilities and internal communication paths in advance. Clearly defined roles and predetermined communication methods (i.e. an internal chat system or group email) will allow the Crisis Communications Team to communicate quickly and efficiently in a crisis.

Know Your Stakeholders

Before the outbreak of a crisis, identify the external stakeholders that matter to your office and what issues they are most invested in. Share information and simple, streamlined messaging with key community groups to coordinate responses and make sure there are open lines of communication during a crisis.

Be Proactive in Your Communication

Plan regularly scheduled briefings and updates for the media and external groups, and educate the public, media and stakeholders on the election process. Transparent communication builds public trust in your office and the process and helps limit the spread of misinformation.

Prepare for Common or Likely Issues

Design press releases and statements in advance for as many anticipated incidents and scenarios as possible. Regularly review potential scenarios, modify holding statements and draft new ones as needed.

An example of a holding statement before any factual information is available might be:

"We have implemented our crisis response plan, which places the highest priority on the health and safety of the voters and election staff. We will be sharing additional information when it is available and posting it on our website."

Crisis Communications Team Trainings

Periodically train staff members to handle potential crisis situations, and make sure they understand the plan from start to finish. Coaching staff through theoretical crisis scenarios as well as mock interviews with the press will help ensure staff remains prepared for any actual crisis.

Consult With Peers

Election officials in your vicinity and across the state can be great sources of information regarding potential crisis situations. Peers can offer great advice on what has or hasn't worked in similar scenarios, which can inform your own operation.

During a Crisis

Provide simple, clear and accurate information.

Use plain language and engaging visuals.

Do not repeat the false information.

Avoid amplifying misinformation when sharing your counter message.

Be transparent about what happened.

Who was impacted? What actions are you taking to address the issue?

When will the issue be resolved?

Respond quickly, but accurately.

Share as much information as you can without speculating on unknowns.

Engage on all platforms.

Adapt your crisis communications messaging to different media platforms, including social media and traditional media. For example, due to character limits on Twitter, you may need to link to your longer crisis response on an outside page, likely your website. Facebook posts can be longer or include a screenshot of the crisis response statement.

After a Crisis

Post-Crisis Debrief

When all is said and done, it's important to conduct a formal analysis of successes, missteps and ways to improve crisis preparedness in the future. Hold a post-crisis brainstorming session with the Crisis Communications Team and the Greater Response Team and document what everyone learned from managing the crisis.

Scenario Planning

The good thing is that many potential crises can be anticipated. While your situation may have certain complicating factors, we've compiled a few scenarios to help jumpstart your planning:

Comparatively slow results reporting

Your state election official will likely give you insight into how quickly you are reporting in comparison to other jurisdictions. If there is an outstanding issue causing you to report more slowly than normal, or if your normal processing time is dramatically slower than other jurisdictions, here are some messaging points to consider:

- Reassure voters that counting every vote is important, and that being thorough and accurate is more important than being fast
- Be as transparent as possible about how many ballots are remaining and what your processes are
- Avoid giving estimates. Missed estimates can create further distrust

COVID-19 outbreak or scare

- Communicate clearly about the extent of the outbreak and any potential impacts on voters or election operations
- Do not disclose names of affected individuals, as it can compromise the confidentiality of medical care they may receive
- Clearly outline the health and safety precautions you are continuing to take, framing these measures as a way to keep the entire community safe

Security breaches of polling locations or ballot counting operations

- Reinforce the physical security measures that are in place and identify gaps quickly if they exist
- Explain clearly how the specific breach occurred, and actions your office is taking to address the issue
- Follow up with measures to mitigate or avoid recurrence of this issue in the future

Voter intimidation or violence at polling places (perceived or actual)

Know what it is: Voter intimidation is any activity that threatens, harasses or frightens voters, and has the consequence of interfering with a person's right to vote. This activity can occur outside or inside the polling place. While voter intimidation can happen anywhere, it has a long history of occurring in communities of color to discourage them from exercising their constitutional right to vote.

If intimidation has occurred:

- Explain that voter intimidation is suspected, giving details and actions your office is taking to address the issue
- Be sensitive and calm when speaking with the press about incidents of voter intimidation, to avoid causing panic among voters
- Inform voters and the press how to report incidents to the Secretary of State's Office, the Local Election Office and the District Attorney's Office. They should also Call 911 immediately if a voter's safety is threatened.
- Discuss the safety measures and protocols in place to prevent voter intimidation and reinforce the message that voter intimidation is a federal crime and individuals who participate will be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law

If intimidation has not technically occurred but is perceived:

- Communicate that no one should ever feel threatened when exercising their right to vote
- Do not disregard the concern, even though intimidation has not technically occurred
- Exercise a zero-tolerance policy. Signal that every single report of voter intimidation is taken seriously
- Communicate that poll workers and Election Protection officials are receiving frequent, timely updates about potential occurrences during early voting periods and on election day
- Be direct with the press and, if asked, provide accurate information about ongoing situations, while reinforcing safety measures and protocol in place to encourage voter participation

Poll worker misconduct or disruptive behavior

- Indicate that the incident is being taken seriously and outline the steps taken to correct it
- Make sure to communicate that poll workers receive updated poll worker training standards and information on hand
- Communicate that security personnel are present at polling locations and on high alert for potential disruptive activity

Poll worker attrition

- Inform the press that it was anticipated that there would be a shortage of poll workers this year due to COVID-19
- Tell the press about steps being taken to line up back-up poll workers in the event that one or several call off or do not show up on election day

Lines

- Emphasize efforts to mitigate long lines and point to reasons for lines, likely stemming from COVID-19 precautions that may slow down the voting process.
- Inform voters through proactive press outreach that they should be prepared for longer than usual lines as voters observe six-foot social distancing guidelines
- Communicate that signage with clear social distancing guidelines and COVID-19 safety precautions are posted
- Encourage voters to participate in early voting to help reduce lines on election day as much as possible
- Make sure voters know where PPE and hand sanitizer are available on site

Equipment failure

- Clearly communicate the plan for continuity of operations, such as using emergency paper ballots or a backup generator if there's a power outage
- Inform the press that routine equipment checks will be conducted throughout the day to ensure things are running smoothly
- Be on the lookout for rumors of malfunctioning equipment on social media. This is often used as an intimidation tactic to discourage people from voting on election day

Mis- and dis-information campaigns

- Share the facts as early as possible, and avoid repeating the false information in your responses
- Prepare responses and action plans for mis/disinformation likely to circulate, including false claims about polling place locations and hours, fraud, ID requirements and claims of voter intimidation or violence at the polls.
- Learn from past mis/disinformation situations to improve responses and preparation in future election cycles

For additional resources for responding to mis- and dis-information, see Defending Digital Democracy's [Election Influence Operations Playbook](#), Ideas42's [Guide to Responding to Misinformation](#) and the Center for Tech and Civic Life's [Checklist for Combating Influence Operations](#).