



Colorado  
**NONPROFIT**  
Association

Serving nonprofits. Strengthening communities.

# **Crisis Communication Plan**

## Nonprofit Toolkit

## ***Purpose of a Crisis Communication Plan***

To effectively manage communications through a formal, clearly defined channel in order to mitigate crisis, or serious negative repercussions for the Association or the sector, and maintain a reputation of leadership and transparency on vital issues and breaking news.

In speaking with the media and public, the Colorado Nonprofit Association will provide factual information and messages most beneficial to the organization and sector it represents. We will help the media by providing information that enables them to do their jobs and positions the Association as a reliable resource and nonprofit leader.

In all communications, the Association will create a positive opportunity for the public positioning of the sector as a whole. Messages should be responsive and solution/action oriented, reinforcing the Association's position of leadership.

The following is intended to serve as a crisis communications guide for the Colorado Nonprofit Association. Its purpose is to help manage *communications* around a crisis, but does not suffice for an overall crisis management plan that would also include other organizational considerations. The objectives of this crisis communications plan are as follows:

- Prepare the Association staff to effectively and nimbly manage crisis communications;
- Help staff respond in a unified, professional manner that reinforces sector leadership and creates loyalty;
- Strategically enhance the organization's brand/role, and the public understanding of the value provided by the nonprofit community;
- Manage the distribution of critical, often sensitive, information to the media, members, and public;
- Inform members of the Association's position to help shape a consistent sector-wide response.

## ***Using the Crisis Communications Plan***

Items on pages 1-4 are intended for use by staff, board and committees that play a role in communications, particularly in a crisis. Information should be explained at staff orientation and periodically reviewed by staff and the Marketing and Communications Committee (MACC). Gray boxes indicate the people who will need the information in that section.

The Detailed Crisis Communications Plan and the appendices should be used by the director of communications and the president & CEO to prepare for, oversee and evaluate the handling of communications around a crisis situation both internally and externally as appropriate. The steps outlined in Appendix I should be firmly in place before a crisis situation occurs and shall be reviewed and revised by staff, as necessary, but at least quarterly.

### **This plan includes:**

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### **Attention Nonprofits:**

The Colorado Nonprofit Association Crisis Communication Plan is intended to be used as a *template* for nonprofits to adapt and implement. To use this tool, you will need to adjust this to fit your organization's resources, structures and messages. For instance, this template refers to the Marketing and Communications Committee (see page 10 for tips on creating such a committee) and director of communications (replace that title with the person at your agency who handles media efforts), and the Decision Tree will need to be reworked for your organization's messages and goals, etc.

## ***Crisis Communications Policy***

1. All crises should be reported to a supervisor and the president & CEO immediately.
2. Only the chief spokesperson and back-up spokespeople are authorized to release information to the media and to the public. All other staff, board and committee members should be professional and helpful to the media by connecting them with the spokespeople, but will neither speak to the media, nor provide any information.
3. There should be one designated crisis management lead person, directing and coordinating all aspects of the organization's response including managing the messages and the media.. There should also be one designated spokesperson who actually interacts with the media and other inquirers. In some cases, particularly in the event of a "small crisis," the two may be the same person. In others, the jobs may be divided to facilitate efficient handling of the situation. Most likely, but not necessarily, the two roles will be filled by the director of communications and the president & CEO, respectively.
4. All comments should be guided by professionalism and transparency, and serve to mitigate the crisis while reinforcing the leadership role of the Colorado Nonprofit Association.
5. "No comment" is never an acceptable response. If an answer is unknown or cannot be immediately answered, make note of the question, tell the inquirer you will get back with him/her, and do so. If the question cannot be answered due to a policy (such as sharing personnel information, etc.) let the inquirer know that.
6. Personnel matters are to remain confidential.
7. When possible, responses should be proactive, responsive, and action-oriented.
8. The Association recognizes the importance of media relation to public trust. In times of crisis, maintaining effective media relationships will be particularly critical in bolstering public confidence in the sector as a whole.

All staff, board and Marketing and Communications Committee members should review this as part of orientation clearly helping each individual understand his/her role in crisis communications.

## ***Crisis Communications Checklist Overview***

This is a brief overview of crisis management steps.

- Safety** – Ensure safety of all staff and site. Call 911 if needed.
- Notification** – Notify the president & CEO immediately.
- Crisis Communications Team** – Key staff and, if needed, the chairs of the Board and the Marketing and Communications Committee (MACC), will convene to strategically review the situation and manage the communications surrounding the issue. **Note:** In some cases, a larger *Crisis Management Team* may be needed when action surrounding the crisis involves more than just handling communications. In those cases, the Crisis Communication Team would be a part of the larger team, though the guidelines in this manual only outline the steps to take in the *communication* needs surrounding a crisis.
- Before Going Public**
  - Determine crisis communications lead person who is responsible for ensuring all tasks are completed (most likely the director of communications).
  - Determine the crisis communication spokesperson who will answer all media and other inquiries (most likely the president & CEO).
  - Assess the situation to determine the facts (see Detailed Crisis Communication Plan on page 6)
  - Determine appropriate response/action (see Appendix 3: Decision Tree).
  - Create plan of action for internal and external communications.
  - Develop factual, detailed messages that reflect the status of the crisis, the Association's response, and, if possible, proactive steps to resolve the situation.
  - Prepare talking points and provide a script for the receptionist receiving incoming calls.
  - Determine if a press release, web and/or voicemail updates are necessary.
  - Assess what resources are necessary to manage the crisis (i.e. cell-phone availability, press conference needs, on-location resources – signs, lectern, visuals, etc).
  - Appoint staff to:
    - Serve as the official spokesperson and manage media;
    - Keep the chairs of the Board and the MACC informed;
    - Contact partners, allies, members, etc. and assist with sector-wide talking points, if appropriate; and
    - Record crisis details, actions taken, external responses, resolution.
- Going Public**
  - Begin placing telephone calls to critical internal audiences, including staff, board and/or legislators, etc.
  - Begin media and other external audience outreach, use press release if appropriate.
  - Update web site and organization phone mail, if needed.
  - Evaluate message effectiveness as the situation progresses.
  - Implement methods for updating key audiences with ongoing information.
  - Distribute post-crisis communications.
- Evaluate crisis communications efforts** (see Appendix 4: Post Crisis Review).

The Crisis Communications Team should be familiar with and have a copy of this overview. The director of communications will help them maneuver through it using the Detailed Crisis Communications Plan on page 6.

## ***Emergency Phone Tree: Internal Use Only***

All staff who may need to contact others in an emergency should have this information accessible at home and in the office.

Person responsible for updating: \_\_\_\_\_  
Date updated (at least quarterly): \_\_\_\_\_

If the crisis occurs when staff are not in the office and disseminating the information is either critically time-sensitive or jeopardizes the safety of the office, a phone tree will be used to communicate the information to staff. Remember, it is better to have staff learn of a crisis from organizational leadership, than from the media.

Your job of calling is not done until you reach the next person on the list and have assurances that he or she will continue the tree. The last person on the tree is responsible for calling the organization's communications director to ensure that calls are complete.

**Staff List** (Indicate with an asterisk the preferred phone number to be used first.)

| Name | Work Phone/extension | Home Phone | Cell Phone |
|------|----------------------|------------|------------|
|      |                      |            |            |
|      |                      |            |            |
|      |                      |            |            |

### **Board**

As soon as practical in a crisis, the board chair or designee will alert the Executive Committee, who will alert the remaining board members via phone. After initial phone alert, updates will be sent via email when possible. If nothing else, after the crisis an email will be sent providing a summary of the situation and resolution details.

The board phone tree is the responsibility of the board, not the staff. Staff attention shall remain focused on the crisis situation at-hand.

### **Marketing and Communications Committee Designee**

The MACC Chair or designee will determine the need to alert other members of the committee and seek counsel, if necessary, to support Association staff in managing the crisis communications.

## ***Detailed Crisis Communications Plan***

The Detailed Crisis Management Plan and appendices are intended for use by the director of communications and the president & CEO.

Following are steps to help manage communications in an event of a crisis. Be sure to record all actions taken and related coverage gained, in order to evaluate efficacy and measure intended plan objectives. Modify the plan after evaluation, if needed.

1. **Internal Pre-preparation** – see Appendix I: Preparing for a Crisis.
2. **Safety** – Ensure safety of all staff and physical location. Call 911 if necessary.
3. **Notification** – The president & CEO shall be notified immediately of a crisis situation.
4. **Crisis Communications Team** – The CEO will notify appropriate staff and, if appropriate, the chairs of the Board and the Marketing and Communications Committee (MACC). Receptionist will also be advised regarding the process to follow. Information shall not be released until the Crisis Communications Team convenes, reviews the situation, and develops a strategy.
5. **Situational Assessment** – The Crisis Communications Team will assess the situation, determine facts, and begin delegation. Questions to help devise appropriate crisis communications response, include, but are not limited to:
  - a. Who is the crisis communications lead person responsible for ensuring all steps are taken? (Most likely the director of communications.)
  - b. What is the situation? What will happen next?
  - c. Who on staff needs to be involved?
  - d. What immediate steps need to be taken?
  - e. What is known and who already knows it?
  - f. Is there potential public interest? Does the issue have traction (will it become anything more than a blip on the evening news)?
  - g. Who will be affected?
  - h. What are people feeling – what emotions need to be considered?
  - i. What information is needed and who beyond organizational staff need to get it? When will it be available?
  - j. What should the organization do about it? Proactive vs. reactive? Contact or refer to another organization? (See Appendix 3: Decision Tree)
  - k. What CAN and CAN'T be said? What are the organization's privacy policies?
  - l. Is legal or PR counsel needed? If PR counsel is needed, will the MACC suffice or is a firm necessary?
  - m. Who will communicate response as spokesperson? (Most likely the president & CEO.)
  - n. How will response be communicated? (Could include: newsletter article – low urgency – also good as a follow up to any major situation; one-on-one meetings – higher urgency, specific audience targeted such as legislators; media release – higher urgency, broad public appeal; media conference – high urgency and big issue; etc.)
  - o. Should a resource list be compiled of additional nonprofit spokespeople?
  - p. What media will be contacted? What legislators? What donors? Others to consider include: Members, NCNA members, etc.
  - q. Who will begin the staff and board phone trees? (See Emergency Phone Tree)
6. **Developing Key Messages** – The Crisis Communications Team will develop factual, responsive messages to be used by the Association and its representatives. It will also provide a script for the receptionist and voicemail system. All media and public inquiries should be referred to the spokesperson for comment. (See Appendix 2: Positions and Sample Releases for Common Media Q&A to see if the necessary message has already been created.)
  - a. These messages should be prepared for media inquires, member updates, and proactive phone calls to critical audiences.
  - b. Messages should reflect the organization's overall messages, leadership role, and resource status. They should attempt to reinforce the positive and be action/solution oriented if possible.
  - c. Consider what media know about the situation and what their potential interest is.

- d. Recognize that unfavorable, inaccurate information, if not corrected, could have future negative consequences requiring additional responses.
  - e. Consider questions that will be asked in order to prepare answers for them – including the questions you hope will not be asked.
  - f. Develop a written statement for the receptionist and the representative greeting members of the media and the general public. Decide if it is appropriate to change the Association's or particular staff members' voicemail messages.
  - g. Consider need for additional materials such as a fact sheet, backgrounder, web site resources, FAQs, etc.
  - h. If appropriate, consult with other organizations involved to ensure consistent messages and conformity of responses.
7. **Staff Notification** – As soon as practical, the president & CEO or designee will communicate information regarding the crisis to agency employees. If the crisis occurs at a time when staff are not in the office and disseminating the information is either critically time-sensitive or regards the safety of the office building, a phone tree should be used to communicate the information to staff. Affected staff's needs and input on the situation should be taken in to consideration. If necessary, make resources such as and employee assistance program (EAP) available to staff.

Staff should be reminded that all inquiries (media, members, etc.) should be referred to the designated spokesperson and that they should refrain from commenting.

8. **Board and MACC Notification** – The Board Chair or designee will alert the Executive Committee, who will in turn alert the remaining members of the board. The MACC Chair will alert the MACC. Regular updates will be sent as able to ensure consistency of information and promptness of message delivery.

Board and MACC should be reminded that all inquiries (media, members, etc.) should be referred to the designated spokesperson and that they should refrain from commenting.

9. **Media Releases** – If determined necessary, the Association will distribute a release to media (See Appendix 3: Decision Tree).
- a. The release should be posted on the Association web site and distributed to members.
  - b. The prepared written statement should guide all interviews.
  - c. Media access to organizational facilities should be supervised. Know ahead of time who the journalist is and what he or she is planning on covering. Be sure the area into which the media are invited does not have sensitive information such as reports, personnel information or other papers visually available.
10. **Partner and Key Group Notification** – Notify organizations, partners, members, funders, etc. (Some of these parties may need to be contacted prior to contacting the media.) Use the opportunity to assist with sector-wide messages and leverage the organization's role as a resource.
11. **Record Keeping** – Document critical conversations, decisions, details and media questions regarding the crisis situation in order to effectively evaluate crisis communications management.
12. **Media/Message Evaluation** – Evaluate appropriateness and traction of messages throughout the situation. Revise as appropriate, but don't stray from original theme.
13. **Communications Updates** – Ensure key audiences are kept up to date. Methods may include:
- a. Sending communications to members via the listserv or broadcast email.
  - b. Promptly returning phone calls.
  - c. Posting a statement on the web site and updating it regularly.
  - d. Updating the organization's voicemail.

- e. Post-crisis wrap up communication and calls.
  - f. Printing an article in the newsletter (if the crisis is not time sensitive or as follow-up to the situation, particularly to demonstrate the Association's actions and as a future guide for use by members).
14. **Loose Ends** – Ensure all loose ends are secured, i.e. follow up calls, email updates, etc.
  15. **Evaluate the Management of the Crisis** – See Appendix 4: Post Crisis Action Steps.
  16. **Post Crisis Clean-up** – File notes, clips, lessons learned – then take a deep breath and celebrate a job well-done.

## Appendix 1: Preparing for a Crisis Before it Happens

Appendices are for use by the communications director and reference of the president & CEO.

Person responsible for overseeing: \_\_\_\_\_

Date last completed: \_\_\_\_\_

1. **Phone/E-mail List** – Disseminate an emergency list with phone numbers, cell phones, and e-mail addresses for staff and board. To be completed by \_\_\_\_\_ and updated quarterly or more frequently as needed by staff turnover and contact changes.
2. Perform annual communication audit and Strength Weakness Opportunity and Threat (SWOT) analysis.
3. **Media Training** – Identify and train organization spokespeople.
  - President & CEO (main spokesperson)
  - Board chair (back-up spokesperson)
  - VP of external affairs (back-up spokesperson)
  - Director of communications (back-up spokesperson)
  - Subject experts: \_\_\_\_\_
4. **Media Tips** – Make sure spokespeople are familiar with media tip sheet found in the Association's overall communications plan and in the Colorado Nonprofit Association Working with the Media Nonprofit Toolkit available at [www.ColoradoNonprofits.org](http://www.ColoradoNonprofits.org) under Resources.
5. **Crisis Management Checklist\*** – Update the Crisis Communication Checklist for staff to have with them at work and at home, including crisis procedures, policies regarding media inquiries, communication priorities and best means to reach the crisis manager. Ensure that all staff are familiar with the document.
6. **Key Audience and Media List** – Keep contact information for key audiences updated in iMIS so that they can be easily contacted in a crisis.
  - Media (director of communication)
  - Membership (membership associate)
  - Public Officials (public policy manager)
  - Other: \_\_\_\_\_
7. **Key Messages\*** – Spokespeople should be familiar with organization's key messages. At the time of crisis, relevant messages will be created by the Crisis Communications Team.
8. **Pre-approved Statements\*** – Responses for common media inquiries should be created and approved by the board as necessary.
9. **Emergency Personnel\*** – Maintain contact information for police, fire, hospitals, the health department, utilities and paramedics. Make sure staff know how to access the information.
10. **Off Site Alternatives** – Determine a location to convene and/or from which to stage communications if the crisis situation prevents staff from getting to or using the office.
11. **Equipment** – Identify resources necessary prior to a crisis including extra cell phones, computers, etc. Determine how that equipment would be gathered and who would be responsible for operation.
12. **Drill Session** – At least quarterly, review and practice crisis communications plan.

\* **Items should be reviewed and updated as needed, but at least on an annual basis.**

## ***Appendix 2: Positions and Sample Releases for Common Media Q&A***

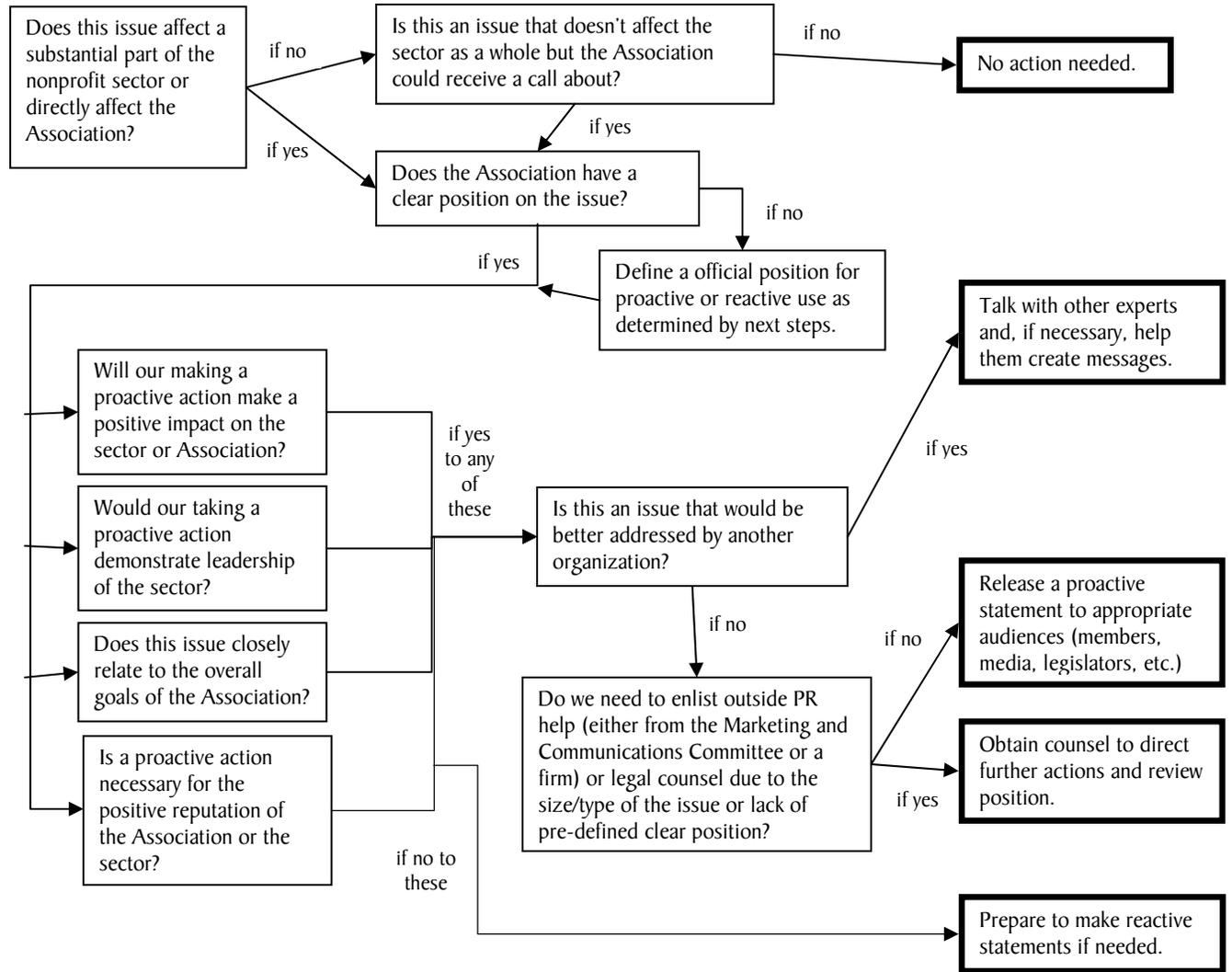
There are some crises and media inquiries that could never be foreseen, however there are also those that organizations have received before and know they will receive again, or that they could guess might eventually arise (even if they hope they will not). Such situations might include acceptance of a gift from a controversial donor, staff or board malfeasance, or issues specific to the organization's mission or population served. In cases like these, crisis management and communications are expedited and potentially less stressful (not to mention possibly better handled) if the organization already has a clear position, agreed on by staff and board regarding the issue.

The following steps outline a process for identifying and preparing for potentially foreseeable crisis.

1. Convene a task force (possibly including PR professionals, staff, board members, communications committee members,\* etc.) to brainstorm all possible crisis issues for which the organization may need to respond.
2. Pare down the list of potential issues by identifying those most likely to occur or for which the organization most needs to be prepared.
3. Determine which, if any, the organization would want a prepared full media release to address versus those for which having a clearly defined position ready to repeat to inquiries would be sufficient.
4. Draft media releases and/or official responses the organization's spokespeople could use to answer inquiries on those issues. Creating or obtaining pre-approved quotes from key spokespeople on certain topics may also be a good idea. Be sure to review and possibly update the releases on at least an annual basis and to alert those quoted when and if the quotes are used so that they are not caught off guard if contacted for follow-up.
5. Depending on the issues at hand and the culture of your organization's board, some or all of the issues and positions developed should be presented to your board to be discussed, possibly amended and approved in order to ensure that they truly represent the organization's point of view, not just that of the person or group drafting the response.
6. **Keep the approved statements and releases confidential.** Only the organization's spokesperson/spokespeople should have access to the releases or statements unless they are needed for release.

**\* *Forming a Communications Committee*** – A communications committee can help prepare and review the basic communications materials an organization uses. They can help identify areas where the organization could better capitalize on marketing or communications opportunities. In some cases, they may even serve as a speakers bureau on behalf of the organization. The committee may operate on an *ad hoc* basis or meet regularly year-round. When gathering such a committee, consider who from staff and/or the board should be involved (if no one on the board has expertise in communications, you may want to consider adding someone who does), communications experts from organizations with which you partner, or from PR firms that support your organization. Building a committee is also a strategic way to reach out to people and organizations with which you have not had a previous relationship. Consider the local volunteer center, if available, as a source for potential recruits.

### Appendix 3: Decision Tree – Potential Actions and Guiding Considerations



## ***Appendix 4: Post Crisis Review***

1. **Secure Loose Ends** – Appropriate communications should be made outlining the resolution of the crisis to appropriate audiences. If changed, voice mail and web site should be updated. All media contacts should be double checked for completed interaction, then new names added to the organization’s media list.
2. **Recognition of Heroes** – The Crisis Communications Team will work with staff and the Marketing and Communications Committee to determine the best and most appropriate means for recognizing the “heroes” involved in the crisis situation.
3. **Crisis Communications Review** – Re-convene Crisis Communications Team to evaluate response, actions, what didn’t work, what needs to be improved/ revised for the future, etc.
4. **Media Coverage Assessment** – Review coverage. Check for message consistency and saliency. Are there issues that might need further clarification.
5. **File and Update** – File notes, clips, talking points, communication, etc. into a folder. Revise the crisis communications plan if necessary.