Crisis Communications

The Jewish Federations® of North America

SCN
In view of the accelerating pace of crises – both man-made and natural in origin – in our time, Federations have an urgent need to be at the ready with a response. Although it’s impossible to prepare every Federation for every type of crisis, advance preparation can ensure a Federation’s quick and efficient response.

This resource document offers guidance to assist Federations in preparing for a crisis through the lens of communications. It outlines the steps of creating a communications plan and provides media training tips, sample social media posts, and a sample statement.

Note: JFNA is preparing a comprehensive guide for Federations related to emergency response.
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JFNA’s Secure Community Network

In 2004 The Jewish Federations of North America established the Secure Community Network (SCN) in cooperation with the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations. The first national organization exclusively dedicated to homeland security initiatives on behalf of the American Jewish community, SCN helps Jewish Federations, their partners, and their communities through information sharing, security awareness, training, and security consultation.

We encourage you to contact the SCN Duty Desk to ask questions and/or receive support regarding any aspect of security.
Defining a Crisis

A crisis may arise in a multitude of ways. It can present itself in the form of a man-made action, such as a terrorist attack by a group or by an individual acting alone, a domestic dispute that manifests in the workplace, a criminal act perpetrated by a disgruntled employee, or an act of vandalism.

A crisis can also be the result of a disaster, like a chemical spill, fire, or structural collapse, or it may develop from an act of nature, such as a flood, tornado, or snowstorm. A crisis can even be reputational, originating from a financial issue or legal dispute and resulting in negative media coverage.

Whatever the genesis of the crisis, well-timed communications will be critical, and community leaders must be prepared. An immediate, reasoned, and effective response will demonstrate the Federation’s commitment and expertise, as well as its dedication to the community at large. It will help to reduce tension and apprehension, both during and in the aftermath of the incident, and it may contribute to a stronger and expedited recovery.

You have the best chance of being prepared in an emergency if you are prepared in advance.
Planning Ahead with Staff and Community

**Define staff responsibilities.** Establish an internal crisis response team that includes management, security, marketing and public relations, legal, and/or IT.

**Make friends before you need them.** Establish relationships with local law enforcement and other emergency personnel (more details in the next section).

**Know your first responders.** Identify the Jewish community security director or regional security advisor in your area. Develop relationships with your local police department and emergency management agencies (more details in the next section), as well as with the SCN.

**Reach key stakeholders.** Develop a plan to keep community members informed in a clear and timely manner. This should include tailored messaging for a variety of different stakeholder groups, such as communal professionals, board members, and individuals such as parents, students, volunteers, and donors.

**Identify trauma professionals.** Establish access to your agency resources, rabbis, and other community resources that have experience helping people cope with trauma. This should include gaining familiarity with the broader network of resources, locally and nationally, that may be of assistance.

**Practice dry runs.** If you and your leadership team have not participated in a tabletop exercise or other preparedness scenario training, please contact the SCN Duty Desk.
Creating a Security Lay Committee

Dependent on the existing structure of the Federation Board and the desired mission, a security lay committee can drive the development and implementation process for a security plan, as well assume responsibility for setting the strategic agenda, initiative goals and objectives, budget, and other components and functions on behalf of the Federation.

This committee can also ensure the evaluation of safety and security strategies, both those implemented and those considered: Have the policies, procedures, tactics, and techniques had the desired impact? Were injuries or accidents reduced? Did insurance premiums go up or down at renewal? Is the plan having the desired impact, or does the community need to make revisions? It can help ensure that the issue of risk management receives ongoing attention.

COMMITTEE COMPOSITION

The most consistent composition of a security committee includes representatives of the Federation Board, lay leaders with backgrounds, experience, or interest in security, real estate or facility managers, security directors, facilities managers, and other stakeholders. It is particularly important that the organizational interests of stakeholders are minimized so as to ensure an approach that places the needs and objectives of the community, Federation, and committee first.

Committees are usually co-chaired by two lay leaders who are familiar with and supportive of the Federation, its policies, procedures, budgeting, and governance structure, and the broader Federation system. Members of local law enforcement may be asked to sit as ex officio members of the committee, or as observers, but should not have any voting rights or powers.
Setting up Communication Tools

Set up access to your communications tools. Make sure it’s easy to make changes to your website and update your social media feeds. Your email lists should be clean and updated. Ensure that you have remote access or mobile ability to generate and send communications. It is critical that this access is available to more than one person and that more than one person is trained on how to update multiple channels. Even in smaller organizations, cross-training is critical to ensuring that you can maintain the ability to communicate quickly.

Additionally, you will need to:

**Designate a spokesperson.** This individual should be trained in effective media communications and how to stay on message, and he or she should be familiar with the essential content.

**Develop internal verification systems.** Develop processes for verifying, clearing, and approving information in the event of an emergency. Implement a chain-of-command structure to ensure alignment. Ensure you have the cell numbers of key Federation staff and volunteer leaders programmed into your phone.

**SCN ALERT SYSTEM**

We encourage you to use SCN’s Alert System. It’s a state-of-the-art emergency communications platform that allows Federations and other organizations to provide vital, timely information to staff, community members, and partners. Contact the SCN Duty Desk at 212.284.6940 or email DutyDesk@SecureCommunityNetwork.org to learn more.
Establishing Relationships with Law Enforcement and First Responder Networks

**Partner with law enforcement.** A close partnership with law enforcement cannot be overemphasized. Although it is the duty of law enforcement to protect the community, their ability to provide sensitive information—particularly during an ongoing crisis or investigation—can be extended through existing relationships with community-based resources like Federations and through the creation of a high level of trust.

In each incident, the decision makers will need to consider the following intrinsic variables:

- The type and breadth of the threat
- The likelihood that the incident or threat will affect the community or a specific entity
- Whether law enforcement/intelligence information is involved
- The degree to which there is a *need* to know vs. an *interest* in knowing among different stakeholders (e.g., executives, employees, parents, students, the general population)

The Federation’s SCN is available to help build relationships with local law enforcement. We recommend taking the following steps with their assistance:

- Contact your local police department and request a meeting with the chief to discuss the community, any concerns you have, and issues you have had to address in the past.
- Invite the department to your facility for coffee or a Shabbat dinner. Getting to know the police officers who routinely patrol the community streets where your facility is located can prove invaluable during a crisis.
- Ask the department to undertake a walk-through of your community’s facilities.

**Establish a first responder network.** There are approximately 18,000 US police agencies, including local, state, and federal law enforcement entities, as well as sheriff’s departments, college campus security departments, and others. These entities range in size from one to more than 30,000 officers.

Each of these departments is subject to different state, county, and city laws and codes. At the same time, they each have different policies, practices, and officer training programs. It is important to note that although there are recognized best practices for law enforcement organizations, there are no standards for the structure, size, or governance of police departments.
As a community, we should never presume that law enforcement has an understanding or knowledge of our traditions, history, or practices. Even when a law enforcement agency possesses employees who are members of the community, this does not guarantee an organizational or institutional understanding of our community or its institutions and facilities. As such, it is important for the community to proactively keep law enforcement informed about details, such as knowing when and where our services are held.

It cannot be stressed enough that best practice with regard to strong relationships and open lines of communication means maintaining regular contact and outreach.

Note: With emergency response and/or law enforcement agencies, it is crucial to tell it all, tell it fast, and tell the truth.

Practice dry runs. Tabletop exercises, facilitated by experts, can prepare Federations to respond effectively to an emergency. Exercises allow members to work together to manage the response to a hypothetical incident and improve their own performance by better understanding their responsibilities and roles in the broader response.

Dry runs are also an important way to:

- Evaluate the preparedness program
- Identify planning and procedural deficiencies
- Test or validate recently changed procedures or plans
- Obtain participant feedback and recommendations for improvement
- Measure improvement against performance objectives
- Improve coordination between internal and external teams
- Validate training and education
- Strengthen awareness and understanding of actual and potential hazards
- Assess the capabilities of existing resources and identify needed resources
The Keys to Crisis Communication

It is critical to communicate quickly, truthfully, and comprehensively to the right people at the right time. However, determining how, when, and how much information is released to the community and to the media requires an extensive appreciation of the audience and a thorough understanding of the situation. We recommend that you adhere to the following key concepts:

• Be seen: People need to see their leaders.
• Be clear: Use simple terms and short sentences.
• Be confident: Your confidence will instill confidence in others.
• Be transparent: People need to know what is being done. Tell them. Report precisely what you know, nothing more, nothing less.
• Be consistent: Always come back to the message, and always convey the message in a way that enables people to act on it.
• Be direct: People need direction. Tell them what you want them to do.
• Be brief: The longer you talk, the more likely it is that you will say something you regret.
• Be honest: Sometimes the truth is unpleasant, but it is impossible to retract dishonesty.
• Be prepared for feedback: Make sure there is a clear way for people to communicate, engage, and give feedback.

CONSIDER APPOINTING A FACT-FINDING COMMITTEE

Appointing a fact-finding committee can be a valuable step if you need more time to understand all the facts surrounding a situation, if you are unsure of the full ripple effect, and/or it’s not clear how you will prevent the crisis from occurring again in the future. By engaging a committee composed of respected leadership, professionals, and others, you can buy the time you need to sort out the details and plan a solution or a longer-term response. Consider including widely respected leaders from the general community who are outside your usual leadership orbit, or possibly even outside the Jewish community (e.g., leaders of major institutions such as universities, hospitals, foundations, or corporations), and who can help establish credibility for the process.

If you decide to appoint a committee, be sure to set an end date for the committee’s work. You can make clear that the committee has been directed to report to the Federation Board, Executive Committee, or officers, which in no way requires you to make all of their findings public. Once the committee’s findings are reviewed, decisions that protect the people involved can be made regarding what information becomes public.

You should also require complete confidentiality among committee members. Leaked information could unintentially make the situation worse. For that reason, the individuals on the committee should be chosen wisely.
The Keys to Crisis Communication continued

Also, be prepared to withstand pressure from people in your committee who are demanding answers. They may become frustrated and take those feelings out on you.
Developing Your Message(s)

When developing your message, you must convey your organization’s dedication to and credibility in the community, your confidence in the team that’s addressing the crisis, your empathy about the loss, and hope for bouncing back.

If you cannot give people the information they need when they need it, others will provide an answer for them. This information, whether factual or not, will have an impact on the audience and subsequently on the official response.

Partner with local government officials. In major crisis situations, you may also need to give your audience information about the resources available at city, state, and county levels.

Let the police be the first communicators. They will have more information about the crisis and will not release information that would compromise an investigation.

Rumors or false accusations should be addressed directly.

Avoid public power struggles at all costs. It is disconcerting for people to think that those responsible for helping them are not getting along. When roles and responsibilities overlap, make sure officials can settle concerns without releasing confused responses to the public. Stay within the scope of your role’s responsibilities and refrain from declaring, “I'm in charge,” without being certain that you are.

Even if the police provide the first communication, you may need to convey one or a combination of the following, as appropriate:

- Your organization has prepared and implemented your emergency plans, which were formulated in consultation with emergency responders.
- You have a mechanism for assessing and responding to threats, and you made the decision, in consultation with law enforcement, to close the institution.
- Express sadness when appropriate.
- Note your thoughts and prayers for those injured when appropriate.
- Thank the police, other emergency responders, and your staff.
- Discuss heroic behavior on the part of a child, staff member, or police.

Take care not to comment on violence or terrorism in society at large or draw conclusions beyond the evidence at hand.
Internal Communication Tips

Imagine your marketing and communications world as a bullseye, and divide your community into at least three groups. Have an intentional discussion with your leadership team about who should be included in each group.

**Group 1: Insiders.** This is the core, the people who will help address and coordinate the response to the crisis. It includes the executive committee, top influencers, and staff members, and it may also include influential rabbis, a day school director, parents, and the executive director of a recipient agency or local Jewish group.

**Group 2: Donors and influencers.** This group includes the rest of the Jewish community, which can include donors to other local Jewish groups.

**Group 3: Everyone else.**

You should also consider:

**Group 4: The naysayers.** This group includes highly critical people in your community, those who always seem to be unsatisfied or to know better. Think about including them in Group 1 or 2 in order to get ahead of what could become a problem later.

Public anxiety can be high in a crisis, and frequent, reliable communication can offer relief. That being said, inaccurate information will undermine your credibility. Be sure to double-check everything.
External Communication Tips

Know your communication tools: Facebook, Twitter, YouTube, Vimeo, the organization's website, and email.

You will need to move quickly in a crisis, and having password information at your fingertips is critical. Lists and crisis documents should be housed on a web-based server and reviewed and updated periodically.

The tool you use and the time at which you use it will depend on the group with which you are communicating. For Groups 1 and 2, email will likely suffice, whereas Group 3 will need only social media or less frequent email messages.

**Group 1: Insiders.** Insiders must have frequent, regular reports. For the first week or two, this can be done once or twice a day, by phone or in person. Reports could be from local law enforcement, medical personnel, an executive director, a designated spokesperson, or any combination of these sources. Insiders are likely to need talking points in order to convey accurate messages to their own subgroups.

**Group 2: Donors and influencers.** Donors and influencers also need frequent communication, but not at the same level of detail and intensity as Group 1.

**Group 3: Everyone else.** Periodic communication on social media is sufficient for this group.

**Note:** Be sure to monitor all media to ensure the delivery of timely reports to these previously agreed-upon groups.
Managing the Media

In a crisis situation, the media will want to investigate and report the developing news as soon as possible. Often, the circumstances surrounding a crisis create difficulties and sensitivities, and those who are involved will probably not willingly share the information.

The competitive nature of this dynamic makes dealing with the media quite challenging. Therefore, it is critical to maintain well-established media protocols and deploy a crisis management media relations team for emergency or crisis situations. Your credibility is your greatest asset and should be preserved at all costs.

Any information released to the public should be developed and approved by the executive team, the designated crisis executive team leader, or the designated media liaison, and only at a time and in a manner designated by the crisis management team.

Your lay leaders are community ambassadors – not media spokespeople. Unless someone has specific media expertise, their role is defined in the internal communication section.

**Note:** Your interests during a crisis are different from the media’s. They want to gather as much information as possible, and some media outlets stress sensational elements. Your goal is to accurately and appropriately inform your staff and the community about the situation before they hear about it on the news.
How to Talk to the Media

Never make factual errors. Do not hesitate to say, “I don’t know,” or “I will have to check and get back to you.” Find the answer and call back immediately.

Do not speculate or answer hypothetical questions.

Always return phone calls quickly.

Do not assume that the reporter is your friend or your enemy. You and the reporter have different jobs; understand the differences.

Know and respect deadlines. Use them to set your own deadlines and understand: the best time to pitch a story, the best time to schedule a news conference, and the latest you can call to get your quotes into a story.

Make sure you and the reporter you are talking to have the same understanding of specific terms, such as “off the record” and “not for attribution,” before you use them. These phrases vary regionally and personally. You must clarify your meaning every time with every reporter.

On the record: The reporter can use anything you say and attribute the quotes to you. You are always on the record unless you clearly specify otherwise.

Off the record: The reporter cannot use the information you are giving him in the story. Note, however, that he or she may use the information to find another source who will go on the record. Further note: some reporters may violate this trust if the quotes are irresistible. BE CAREFUL.

Background or not for attribution: The reporter can use the information you supply for a story, but must conceal you as the source (e.g., a campaign aide, a staff member). Clarify when you are using the word “background” in another context, as in, “Here’s the background on the situation.” Avoid any misunderstandings by using “not for attribution” instead. How you are described needs to be negotiated as well. For instance, if the reporter attributes something to a female campaign aide, and there’s only one female campaign aide, the aide is easily identified in some circles.

Deep background: The reporter can use the information in a story but must go further to conceal you as the source (e.g., a Jewish professional, someone familiar with internal discussions). Alternatively, this can mean that the reporter can’t attribute information to you in any way.
How to Talk to the Media continued

Be careful of joking with a reporter. A joke in print is not always as funny as it was in the context of the conversation. If the quote is good, the reporter will use it.

Do not accept the premise of a reporter’s question unless that premise fits into your message. Also, do not be afraid to question the premise of a reporter’s question. Explain why you believe the premise is incorrect.

Do not feel obligated to fill silences in a conversation with reporters. Be concise and to the point.

Know that reporters may not have a full understanding of the Jewish community and offer to explain terms or practices as a part of the conversation.

Reporters are human beings. If they sound short, harried, or even occasionally rude, it’s probably not personal.

Refrain from generalizing or using absolutes. Never use “never”; always avoid “always.”

TIPS FOR TELEVISION

Dress conservatively but not lifelessly. Opt for monochromatic color schemes; avoid wild patterns and thin stripes. Wear something that will accommodate a clip-on microphone. Do not overaccessorize.

During the interview, try to project hope and confidence. If you tend to speak quickly or even at a normal rate, slow down and lower your register; a lower tone connotes deliberation and authority. Remember that a microphone may always be on.

Check out the interview room beforehand, if possible. Check your chair, and avoid soft, deep chairs. You want the hardest seat you can find, with a straight back and arms, positioned as close to the interviewer as possible. Sit on the edge of your seat so that you appear to be anticipating questions and ready to answer confidently.

Be conscious of your hands. If you gesture, keep hand movements in a frame between your shoulders, below your face, and no farther out than a 90-degree bend of your elbow. Do not point.

Use simple words and phrases that give reporters and the audience a clear indication of the news in your message. Practice sentences or thoughts that begin with verbal cues such as “the real story is,” “the key issue here is,” or “there are three things people need to know about this issue.”
How to Talk to the Media continued

Be brief.

Do not allow yourself to be drawn into a repetitive line of questioning. Sometimes reporters (in print and broadcast) will confront you with the same question phrased another way. Do not be embarrassed to give the same answer. Stick to your initial response.
Samples From Past Facebook Posts

Jewish Federations of North America
July 14, 2016

The terror and death seem to be everywhere and almost overwhelming. Once again, our hearts break, this time in France. May we all come together to pray for the dead and injured and for their families. May full justice be sought for those who would do them harm.

#PrayforNice

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Jewish Federations of North America
February 15, 2018

Following the horrific tragedy at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School, our thoughts and prayers are with the victims and their families.

#ParklandShooting

Jewish Federation of Broward County
February 14, 2018

We are deeply saddened and disturbed by today's shooting at Marjorie Stoneman Douglas Senior High School in Parkland. Our thoughts and prayers are with all the victims and their families.

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Jewish Federations of North America
November 8, 2018

We don't condone violence in any form. Our hearts are with the victims of this terrible tragedy. May their memory be a blessing.

Jewish Federation of Greater Los Angeles
November 8, 2018

Our hearts and prayers are with the victims, friends, families and first responders affected by the horrific tragedy in Thousand Oaks last night. May their memories be a blessing.
Sample Statement From The Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh

October 27, 2018

JEWISH FEDERATION STATEMENT ON THE TRAGEDY AT TREE OF LIFE*OR L’SIMCHA

The Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh joins the entire Pittsburgh community in mourning the people in our city killed and injured in the senseless violence today at Tree of Life*Or L’Simcha Congregation.

Jeff Finkelstein, CEO of The Jewish Federation, made these comments:

“Today our city, which has ordinarily been among the most safe and secure in the nation, was rocked by horrible tragedy. My heart is broken, and I offer my condolences to the friends and family of those killed. I hope and pray for healing for everyone affected and for all of us who are sickened by these recent events. We are truly all family in the Pittsburgh Jewish community, so these deaths have affected me and all of us as would a death in the family.

“Thank you to our brave first responders, some of who were reported wounded. We have had an excellent relationship with the City of Pittsburgh and the Pittsburgh Police, and their response in this emergency was exemplary.

“Many synagogues share the sacred space where this tragedy occurred, including the combined Tree of Life*Or L’Simcha Congregation, a Conservative congregation, New Light Congregation, and Dor Hadash, a Reconstructionist congregation. An attack of any kind— and especially an attack on a place of worship—is despicable. Violence has no place in our society or in our community.

“The Jewish Federation of Greater Pittsburgh will work in the coming days and weeks, alongside our many community partners, Jewish agencies, and synagogues, to bring the Jewish community and all of Pittsburgh together to mourn, to help those affected, and to heal. We are stronger than the tragedies that befall us because we are strong together.”

For the bereaved families, we offer the traditional Jewish condolences, “May the families of the fallen be comforted among the mourners of Zion and Jerusalem.” We also offer a Refuah Shlema, a traditional Jewish prayer for healing for those injured and for all sickened by this tragedy.

We will continue to update the community as new information emerges. Please visit jewishpgh.org or www.facebook.com/jfedpgh for developments and information.
Collateral Created for Your Use

View the full suite of materials on FedCentral
Sources Used

https://www.ready.gov/business/testing/exercises

http://www.cdc.gov/communication/emergency/erc_overview.htm


https://www.ready.gov/business/implementation/crisis