



Policies of the Diocese of Kansas City ~ St. Joseph

Policy # 230.70

Guidelines for Communications Management at a Time of Crisis

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Introduction

A crisis is any potentially life-altering event which causes people to experience unusually strong emotional reactions that push them beyond their normal coping abilities. It may be an accident involving a school child, a protest group arriving at the Chancery, or a public scandal involving a priest, religious or lay church employee.

Crises happen at inopportune times. Resulting news coverage will say a lot about the management and accountability of schools, parishes and diocese. At the same time, how we respond to such a crisis can demonstrate the competence, caring and compassion of our schools, parishes and diocese.

Crises usually cannot be controlled, but a prompt and thoughtful response can keep the problem from getting worse. The purpose of these guidelines are to help diocesan leadership and staff deal with crises with clarity and common sense. They are intended for distribution and use on the diocesan level.

I. Who Should Coordinate the Diocesan Crisis Response

A. The "Crisis Management Team"

1. The Crisis Management Team includes the Bishop, the Executive Board, Communication staff and any other senior diocesan staff persons affected. Although he should always be kept informed, the Bishop is part of the Crisis Management Team only in exceptional circumstances.
2. The diocesan lawyer should be included as part of the team in order to provide input on liability and regulatory issues related to a crisis. This is even more important if civil or criminal charges might be part of the crisis.
3. When appropriate, a representative of the local parish or school where the crisis is occurring might also be included in the team.

B. Activating the Team

1. With the Bishop's consent, the ranking member of the Bishop's Executive Board will convene the team.
2. Usually, the convener should be the media spokesperson.
3. With the assistance of other team members, the media spokesperson should gather pertinent information, and coordinate communication between the diocese and the parish / school where the crisis occurred. In addition, the responsibilities of the media spokesperson include scripting and coordinating the media response.
4. The convener should see to it that someone is in contact with the parish / school to assist on-site staff with information releases both to the press and to the parish / school community. On-site staff should be instructed to give out minimal but factual basic information regarding the crisis and then refer additional inquiries to the media spokesperson. This basic information may be best scripted and approved by the media spokesperson.
5. The convener should also see to the distribution of appropriate information to the Chancery staff and to the ministering community of the diocese.
6. Where a proactive approach is taken to the media, the media spokesperson should oversee the compiling of names and contact information of media and church personnel needing immediate and ultimate notice of information regarding the crisis.

C. Plan for Arrangements and Prepare Information Materials

1. The following is a checklist to guide the team's work at the time of a crisis:
 - a. What area would best serve as a press room in the event a space is required for a press conference?
 - b. How is the best and most efficient way to handle the extra volume of inquiries?
 - c. Who will be responsible for maintaining proper contact with the Bishop during the time of the crisis?
 - d. Who will be responsible for maintaining proper contact with on-site staff during the time of the crisis?
 - e. Who will prepare and continue to update a statement of all relevant information regarding the crisis, including appropriate names, titles, background information of principal players and detailed description of the total diocesan and local response?
 - f. Who will prepare materials for distribution, which may include "d" above as well as the history and ministry of the diocese and the parish / school or other affected entity?
 - g. Should it be necessary, who will make arrangements for security personnel to keep order and control access to the offices?

II. Responding in a Crisis

A. Initial Steps

1. Reaction time is important. Quick response has much to do with getting off to a good start in managing a crisis. The Crisis Team should be convened immediately and should be apprised of all pertinent information.
2. All Crisis Team members should maintain a record of activities which should be kept on file for one year following the crisis. Keep all notes, memos and news releases on file for five years following the crisis.
3. A list should be compiled that identifies the most important individuals / publics who are likely to be affected by the crisis. This list should include both diocesan and Catholic Charities' staff, local parish / school staff (most importantly those who may be answering phone calls relative to the crisis), affected constituencies and other area pastors / pastoral administrators and staffs. A sequence of notification should be developed and followed.
4. If the crisis has occurred in a parish or school, immediately assess the preparedness of local staff to answer inquiries and to instruct them regarding their response. Any local response should include a referral to the Chancery for an official statement.
5. Where appropriate, the Catholic Charities Crisis Intervention Team would be called upon to meet with affected staff and other groups (or follow School Setting manual). Make their availability known to the wider community so that others may know how to contact them.

B. Preparation of Official Statement about the Crisis

1. The official statement should include basic facts and actions taken. Use accurate but non-inflammatory phrases.
2. Should the media call about a crisis before a statement has been prepared, an immediate response might be:

"I want to be sure the facts are, indeed, factual. I will get the information together and call you back. What is your deadline?"

In addition, if it is urgent, say,

"I will do my best to get the facts together and call you with whatever I have before your deadline. No doubt, we will want to make an official statement and that may take a bit more time. I will get back with you."

It is critical to keep this promise.

3. The initial statement should include the following information:

- a) basic facts;
- b) an expression of concern for persons involved; and
- c) action taken.

C. Releasing Information

1. The goal should be an open and transparent release of factual information as available and verifiable.
2. One-on-one interviews with reporters should be the primary means to release information.
3. Only in unusual circumstances should a news conference be used to release information or to make an otherwise important announcement.
4. News conferences are best suited for situations where new information is emerging and where the media require updating. *For news conference guidelines, see Addendum A.*
5. When an open parish / school meeting would be of value, follow the format outlined in Addendum A.

III. After the Crisis

A. Additional Actions

1. Express gratitude and appreciation, even as the crisis winds down and as media move on to other stories. Thank individuals through telephone calls, personal letters and / or by way of public acknowledgment.
2. If media did something that was questionable or harmful (i.e., report crisis inaccurately, attribute quotes to the wrong person, report false information), one course of action may be to ignore the situation. If responding to something in the media, contact the reporter who did the story first, not his or her superior.

B. Evaluation and Improvement

1. After a crisis, the Crisis Management Team (along with the Bishop) and all other relevant parties should debrief on the situation and the actions taken. The evaluation should include a thorough examination of the question, "Now that this crisis is behind us, what did we learn that will help us improve the next time?" The following area should be considered when making this evaluation:
 - a. Media coverage should be reviewed, including what was released and what was actually printed and broadcast. Collect news and broadcast clips for evaluation.
 - b. Review activity records of all team members.
 - c. All memos and communications to employees, administration, priests, local pastors and ministers, affected church members, the community at large, etc., should be retained for study.
 - d. Evaluation of how the Crisis Team functioned during the crisis should be made.
 - e. Given the reaction of people involved, what would the Team do differently?
 - f. Evaluate the initial statement. Determine if the statement was complete and if media ar-

rangements, staffing, telephone response, etc., were adequate.

- g. What follow-up steps are needed? Who is responsible?
- i. What if any support do members of the Crisis Team need?

ADDENDUM A -- The News Conference

1. Include all legitimate news media in the news conference.
2. Host the news meeting in a place already selected in the Crisis Management Plan.
3. Select a time for the news conference that allows media to meet deadlines.
4. If relevant, maps, schematics, photos or other exhibits should be available.
5. When facing the media, keep information "fast, factual, frank, fair and friendly."
6. Appoint a moderator -- other than the spokesperson -- to open, direct and close the conference. Moderator duties include:
 - a. Open the meeting by welcoming guests.
 - b. Explain services available (i.e., that background information and a printed copy of the prepared statement will be available at the conclusion of the meeting).
 - c. Announce the agenda. (i.e., "First, [name/title], spokesperson for the conference, will read a prepared statement [which will be available to you today]. After the statement, he / she will respond to your questions.").
 - d. After the spokesperson delivers the statement, the moderator comes forward to say, "We will be glad to take your questions now. Before your question, identify yourself." (The spokesperson will then field questions, making sure that he or she calls on as many of the reporters as possible).
 - e. After a reasonable time -- approximately 15 minutes -- the moderator says, "Let's make time for a couple more questions." Following two more questions, the moderator will say, "Thank you very much for being here. One final reminder, the background information and prepared statement are available at the door." (Have people at the door to hand out the background information).