

CASA Program

I. Policy

This crisis communication plan provides policies and procedures for the coordination of communications within CASA of Cook County, and between CASA of Cook County, the media, the public, and IL and National CASA in the event of an emergency, crisis or other unusual event effecting CASA of Cook County. This plan not only addresses media relations and communications issues, but also includes procedures for the rapid identification of potentially harmful situations and the methods for responding to these situations quickly and effectively. It is the goal of this crisis communications plan to establish guidelines for dealing with a variety of situations, and to ensure that CASA of Cook County's board of directors, staff members and volunteers are familiar with those procedures and their roles in the event of a crisis. The plan is designed to be used in conjunction with the normal decision-making hierarchy of CASA of Cook County and does not supplant that decision-making process.

II. Objectives of the Plan

- To fully assess the situation and determine whether a communications response is warranted.
- To implement immediate action to:
 - Identify constituencies that should be informed about the situation.
 - Communicate facts about the crisis.
 - Maintain necessary confidentiality.
 - Minimize rumors.
 - Restore order and/or confidence.

III. Procedures

Incident Evaluation: A crisis or disaster may be defined as an event that causes death or serious injury. An emergency or unusual event is an occurrence that may result in unfavorable publicity to the organization. Any such event that occurs in relationship to CASA of Cook County will be promptly reported to the Executive Director and / or Board President. These individuals will then gather accurate information from appropriate sources.

After fact gathering, the Executive Director, Board President and members of the Marketing Committee should determine whether an immediate response within 24 hours is necessary and, if so, should consult:

- Board of Directors' Executive Committee
- Board of Directors
- State CASA Director
- National CASA

Via land line and/or cellular telecommunications. The Executive Director has a listing of stakeholder's phone numbers if the crisis should occur outside of work hours.

Response to Crisis Situation

There is always a strong likelihood that a member of CASA of Cook County may hear about an event first through a media call. It is CASA of Cook County's policy that upon the occurrence of a crisis or other unusual event effecting CASA of Cook County, only the (1) Executive Director, (2) Board President or (3) specifically designated Board Member, is authorized to provide information to the media concerning the stand or involvement of CASA of Cook County. If a staff member, board of director or volunteer, receives such a call, they should follow the general guidelines:

- Never answer with: No Comment. Suggested answers:
 - (a) We have not received any information about the event, but will investigate immediately. When we can obtain information we will get back to you (get contact information). Action – Notify Executive Director or Board President.
 - (b) We are aware of the event, but are still developing information to clearly understand the issue. I will have our Executive Director or Board President contact you. (be sure to get contact information and then pass on that information to the designated individual)
 - (c) Finally, you do not have to answer media questions. You can always use the safe response: I will be sure that someone gets back to you to answer your questions.
- When the media calls be sure to obtain the following information and then inform the Executive Director and/or Board President.
 - Name of reporter
 - Name of Publication or media outlet

Telephone number
List of specific questions
Deadline

- Assuring the proper balance means we must remember the media's needs but we must also weigh them against our own. Newspapers have unalterable deadlines and television news crews must meet scheduled broadcasts. As a result we will schedule news conferences or issue statements at a time which will permit reporters to meet their deadlines if possible. We must be aware, however, that reporters will use these deadlines to pressure us into releasing information that may be premature. Be assured that you are not required to answer a reporter's questions if there is any doubt as to the accuracy of your information.
- DO NOT SPECULATE. Never fall into the trap of speculation of an event, even if the reporter presents the question in an off-handed remark. There is no such thing as "off the record." Never tell the media anything you do not want published.

Staff Notification: 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. The Executive Director or Director of Child Advocacy will begin the phone tree by calling the first staff member listed on the CASA Staff Directory (internal document that every staff person and board member should have an updated copy of at their homes). 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 Executive Director or Director of Child Advocacy to ensure that calls are complete.

Board Notification: As soon as practical in a crisis, the board president 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.

In the event of a crisis, emergency or unusual event, CASA of Cook County will determine key constituencies that should be informed of the crisis. Effective communications will help quell rumors, maintain morale, and ensure continued orderly operations. Among the groups that should be considered for communication in a crisis situation are:

- Law enforcement agencies
- Board Members
- Volunteers
- General public
- Mass media
- IL CASA
- National CASA

- CASA of Cook County will communicate the facts of the situation and the intended response.
 - Information to board members, staff members, volunteers and National and IL CASA should be provided via telephone voice mail, electronic mail, and/or mass meetings.
 - Mass media: The Executive Director, Executive Committee and the Marketing Committee may prepare news releases for distribution. All media inquiries should be directed to the Executive Director or Board President.
 - Government Agencies: If government entities (legislators, Governor's offices) need to be informed, this should be handled only by the Executive Director.

IV. Aftermath Component

Following any crisis, appropriate action must take place to ensure that CASA of Cook County, and others as necessary, receives needed information and assistance to help bring closure to the crisis as well as relief from the effects of the event. Attention also should be placed on identifying and implementing measures to improve the action plan used during the crisis.

Immediately following a crisis, it is imperative that CASA of Cook County be sensitive to the needs of staff members and volunteers who may have been personally affected by the disaster. There may be a need to assist individuals with obtaining information and/or a referral to available resources. An example might be to refer a volunteer to a grief counselor.

The Board of Director's Executive Committee shall meet within 10 days following a crisis and review all actions taken as a result of the crisis to determine effectiveness and efficiency of operations and make any needed changes to the Crisis Management Plan.

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 Executive Director and Board President immediately.
- Crisis Communications Team – Key staff and, if needed, the chairs of the Board and the Marketing Committee, 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 chair of Marketing Committee).
- Determine the crisis communication spokesperson who will answer all media and other inquiries (most likely the Executive Director and/or Board President).
- Assess the situation to determine the facts
- Determine appropriate response/action
- Create plan of action for internal and external communications.
- Develop factual, detailed messages that reflect the status of the crisis, CASA of Cook County's response, and, if possible, proactive steps to resolve the situation.
- Prepare talking points and provide a script for the administrative assistant/staff 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 Marketing Committee 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

Media Relations Reminders
(Specifically for designated individuals within the organization)

Always return media calls. The more cooperative you appear, the better.

Communicate with the media -- talk to them as well as listen to them. During crisis time, you may learn a great deal from the media that can be useful to you in further dealing with the crisis.

Remember and enforce your confidentiality requirements!

Avoid antagonizing the media. A short tone at a press conference, during a phone call, or elsewhere can affect your future relationship with an individual or other media who may hear the conversation.

Consider establishing a dedicated call-in phone line that will offer information to media or others. Information on news conferences and newly acquired information can be placed on a tape that can be updated. This is particularly useful when regular phone lines are tied up with calls.

Consider how information you release to media may affect other agencies, businesses or individuals. If you say things that may result in media calling other agencies, call those agencies first to warn them of impending calls.

When talking to the media, be sure to give credit to other agencies, groups or individuals working on the crisis, including your own staff.