

Overview: Anticipate the crisis. Work in advance to minimize damage. The slower the response, the more damage occurs. PC(USA) Communications frequently assists with crisis communications issues for presbyteries – and for camps and conferences. We are here to offer communications advice – please use us!

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Advance planning:

- Set up a phone tree – consider using a combination of staff and volunteers.
- Determine a point-of-contact specifically for parents.
- Communicate in advance your plans and protocols with parents for handling a case should one arise. Remind parents of the steps you're taking and how you've prepared.
- Compile a list of parent emails and phone numbers – same for staff.
- Have protocols in place before the campers arrived. Example: Where or how you will temporarily isolate the person who exhibits symptoms of COVID-19?
- Consider a daily email to parents to keep them informed.
- Familiarize yourselves with HIPAA guidelines.
- Discuss beforehand your commitment to transparency (except for HIPAA matters)
- Consider establishing a dedicated “hotline” just for parents with questions.

Advance planning/Media

- Go ahead and draft an email for parents saying you had a camper who exhibited symptoms of the virus. (you can fill in the blanks later). It's always easier to edit a document than start from scratch.
- As one of you mentioned on the call, reach out to your local health department for help with the appropriate language when talking about the virus or symptoms of the virus.
- Determine a single public/media spokesperson and ensure all staff know who it is and what procedures to follow if a reporter calls.
- Determine where you might hold a news conference. Tip: do not choose a location that has your name or logo in the backdrop.



- Develop a background fact sheet about your camp that you can provide to media – name of camp, address, ownership years of operation etc. This helps ensure accuracy in reporting and will result in fewer follow up phone calls from reporters.
- Assign someone to monitor social media and traditional media coverage. This is a good way to identify potential rumors that you can respond to with facts – this can be adapted into your messaging to bring clarity.
- If you need help, call us for assistance with media – especially national media.

Scenario: A camper or staff member exhibits signs of COVID-19

Action steps:

- Follow your pre-planned protocols – isolation, medical assistance, etc.
- Contact parent of camper or staffer's emergency contact. Determine who has come in contact with the sick camper/staffer. Notify those families as well.
- Using your phone tree, call all camper parents (and your camp leadership) simultaneously. You won't be able to reach everyone by phone, so have an email prepared to be sent ASAP. Remind parents of the steps you've taken - and how you're prepared. **Challenge:** If all campers have phones with them, parents could find out from their kids. If that happens, you lose control of your message. You must be prepared to move quickly.
- If you have a camp the subsequent week, be transparent with those families and tell them how you handled the incident the week prior. (This was also mentioned by one of you on the call)

General Media Guidelines

- Adopt a reactive stance to media. Call Kathy Francis or Kathy Melvin for advice on handling media.
- We can help you determine whether a news conference is necessary, or whether you can respond to media outlets one at a time.
- Prior to your interview or news conference, decide on the message you wish to convey. Then develop three supporting points to your message.
- As the issue evolves, adapt your messaging

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- Be transparent, but don't say more than you need to.
- Be consistent with your message. Express empathy. Be truthful. Don't split hairs with the truth.
- Don't say more than you know – no speculation.
- Use clear, simple language, no acronyms.
- Don't expect a reporter to show you a story before publication. It conflicts with journalistic ethics and professionalism.
- If you are concerned that the journalist hasn't understood your point, repeat it.
- The microphone is always on – Enough said.
- The reporter is not your friend – but be friendly – Avoid a combative relationship with the media.
- It's okay if you do not know the answer to a reporter's question. Unless you are positive that the information is correct, do not offer it. Tell the reporter you will check on the information and get back to them.
- Don't provide "off the record" comments. Always assume the reporter is working on a story and that everything you say is on the record. If you don't want a statement quoted, don't make it.
- Avoid using "no comment." If you think it would not be an appropriate time to answer a reporter's questions, explain why you are not able to give an answer and ask if there is any other way in which you could be helpful. "No comment" often comes across as an admission of guilt in the public arena.
- Don't get defensive. See the difficult question as an opportunity to help the reporter better understand the issue.
- Don't understand the question? – If so, ask the reporter to repeat or clarify the question.

Follow up:

- Consider a follow up communication (email) for when crisis concludes. This closes the loop and let's parents know how the camper (or staffer) is doing – again, without violating HIPAA.

