

The Redwoods Group Insurance Program for YMCAs

RISK MANAGEMENT ALERT

TOPIC: Crisis Communication at Camp

Crisis Management – Communications Planning

So what exactly does a camp director do in the winter? For those of us who lead and work at camps, we know the answer. The job of a camp director is filled with long “to do” list all year long. For some the winter months provide time to get caught up on the items that just did not get completed earlier. It is also a great time to reflect and review on the success and failures of the previous year, learn about new programs, and plan for what changes and improvements you will implement during the coming year.

One area that is often neglected is crisis response preparations. While every camp would prefer to prevent any crisis from happening, the reality is that even with all of our best efforts accidents and incidents occur, and we need to be prepared to deal with crisis. Creating a crisis communication plan today and practicing it with your staff routinely will better prepare your team to deal with the challenges and adrenalin-filled period that arises from crisis.

What is a crisis — and why communicate?

Crises usually announce themselves by a rapid flow of events that instantly attract the interest of the media. They create surprise and uncertainty and call for important decision-making in compressed time, thereby creating anxiety. In a time of crisis, it may be tempting to draw the wagons in a circle and to go silent...to refuse to communicate, to respond to reporters with “no comment.” We’re tempted to clam up or delay responding to media calls because we’re uncertain how to solve the crisis, we believe saying nothing may protect our image, or we fear accountability or speaking prematurely and without all the facts.

Please call us at 800-463-8546 to discuss this or any other risk management safety tip, or visit our web site at www.redwoodsgroup.com to learn more about YMCA risk management issues.

What is often misunderstood is that you’re sending a message regardless of whether you say something substantial or not. The press and the community still look to you as the leader in this situation. So what message do you wish to send?

To have “no comment” is to risk the perception of guilt or incompetence. Instead of telling them *your* story, you will force reporters on deadline to go to others for information. They will report *their* views, allowing outsiders to characterize the incident for you.

Communicating *something* in a crisis situation is vital, but how to do it? Start with *empathy*. What would you want to hear and know if you were:

- A family member of the victim?
- A member of your staff?
- A member of the media?
- A family member of your campers who are in your care, but unaffected physically by the crisis?

Oftentimes, “I’m sorry this occurred” is the first thing folks want to hear, followed quickly by the details, and what’s being done to begin healing right away.

Overall, planning, preparation, selecting and training spokespersons, establishing communications procedures, role-playing, and practice, practice, practice. These are your only ways to prepare to lead, and to lead with character, in a crisis...because small or large, a crisis can come at any moment. Attached please find a template that will assist you in creating a crisis plan.