

## The Redwoods Group Insurance Program for Camps

# Form: Crisis Communication Plan Outline

### Why a Crisis Communications Plan?

In today's society, for any camp and conference center serving thousands of people, preparation for emergencies and for emergency communications is essential. As we guard the lives and well being of our campers and guests, we also protect the reputation of our camps. In the first minutes and hours of a crisis, that reputation — and the conduct of a camp's staff and managers — will go through a swift re-assessment in the eyes of campers, participants, other staff, volunteers and the general public. And *perception* of an organization's response to a crisis, as it plays out in the media, may in the long run create a greater impression on local government and the public than does the actual response itself.

### Goals of communications in crisis situations

The goals of good communication with the media and other audiences are to:

- Show compassion and understanding
- Accurately reflect your camp's actions
- Position camp as good citizen and responsive and credible source of information
- Report and interpret the crisis; put damaging information or charges in perspective
- Maintain contact with priority audiences
- Achieve quick resolution
- Gain knowledge for future prevention strategies

### Prepare *before* the crisis

To weather the confusion and anxiety of a crisis and emerge with the best possible outcome, **ACT NOW**, *before* the crisis.

### ACTION STEPS IN ADVANCE OF CRISIS

- Form a crisis communications team for buy-in and as a resource for information and

ideas — members from all areas of the camp and board

- Designate and train a primary spokesperson and contingent backups — all other staff must know to refer all queries to this spokesperson
    - Spokesperson(s) should be:
      - Empathetic
      - Authoritative and articulate
      - Believable
      - Knowledgeable
      - Available
- Note: Ranking spokespersons (CEO, CVO) may be inappropriate for certain crises; you may wish to distance them and/or bring more particular knowledge to bear
- Assign logistical responsibilities – for example:
    - Where is the “press room” for on-site press? Is it set-up for Internet access, electrical, chairs, etc.?
    - Who rounds up the press and leads them to the “press room” as they arrive?
    - What other sites can press utilize to get their video/sound/photography?
    - Where is the “command center”?
    - Who are your point people at various sites at your camp? Do you have communication logistics (ex: walkie talkies) in place between sites and command center?
    - Who is coordinating with any first-responders or government representatives? Who is their spokesperson? Are you all on the same page with what you know and what you don't?
    - When's the next update likely to occur?
    - Who's gathering and distributing press kits?
    - Who will speak at press updates?

- Will you have eyewitnesses available for interviews? Who coordinates?
- Will additional staff or leadership be available for interviews? Who coordinates?
- Who's responsible for providing initial statement and instructions to reception/front desk staff?
- Assemble a Press Kit, including:
  - Your camp's safety protocols for the area where crisis occurred (ie, aquatics, climbing, property maintenance, etc.)
  - The positive facts about your camp, the facts that make you proud:
    - Number of children and adults served
    - Core values
    - Scholarships given
    - Staff and volunteers working with children background-checked
    - Level of training of lifeguards and camp staff
    - Number of years serving community
    - Number of years without a serious incident/accident
  - History or Backgrounder on your camp and its mission
  - Fact Sheet that includes basics, like the positive facts listed above along with physical description, programs, year founded, leadership, etc.
  - Media Contact – clearly indicate how press can get more info if they have additional questions as they prepare their stories
- Consider your camp's likely vulnerabilities (mission challenge, pool accidents, abuse allegations, bus accidents, accusations of mismanagement, etc.), and role-play "reporter" interviews with spokesperson on likely eventualities; include provocative, leading and even hostile questions
- Prepare very short "soundbites" (sometimes known as Strategic Overriding Communications Objectives — "SOCO's") as standard responses to given emergencies, include those facts that demonstrate camp as a safe, caring place and "good citizen" over prolonged period of time
- Conduct full-blown crisis drills, "giving out" a short statement with limited information during the "golden" first hour when the perception of your organization begins to gel
- Know and have established relationships with your local media, newspapers, radio, online media and television stations. Understand their deadlines. On a regular basis, share any *interesting or important* camp stories with reporters and editors. Customize to their needs. Do not inundate them with trivia. Consider taking your chief volunteer officer, president or executive director to meet by appointment with an editorial board or make a radio or television appearance; in other words, develop working relationships, even friendships, with members of the press.
- Cultivate allies of the camp who may be useful in times of crisis
- Be mindful of some enthusiastic members willing to be available for interviews about your camp
- Establish good communications with your attorneys

### Audiences

In a crisis, you must address both internal and external audiences

### Possible internal audiences

- Campers and their parents (including those affected and not affected by the crisis)
- Employees
- Volunteers
- Family members affected by the crisis
- Board members
- Other associated organizations
- American Camp Association
- Christian Camp and Conference Association

### Possible external audiences

- Medical authorities
- Fire officials
- Law enforcement officials
- Other government agencies

- Members and participants
- Donors and supporters
- Community leaders
- Community residents
- United Way
- Media

### The nature of the media

Reporters may be strong supporters of your camp, but their job is to cover legitimate news stories. They do so in a climate of lightning communications, immediate deadlines and intense competition. They are not “out to get you,” but public interests are frequently at stake and “news” means the unusual. As a communicator, you are in a reciprocal relationship with them, using each other to get your jobs done. This means good stories as well as the occasionally more difficult one.

The major conflict between the media and an organization with a crisis is one of control. It's important to know where you have it and don't have it. Providing information responsibly and quickly is your control lever, even when your story isn't perfect. However, you don't have control over what's actually printed. You only have influence. In the worst circumstances, institutions can ask for understanding and the public can be forgiving. Be your organization's best communicator, and if, on a given day, you have bad news to tell, do *your* best to deliver prepared messages calmly and with forethought. Lead with empathy. Project a forthright, cooperative and authoritative demeanor, but always keep your humanity. ***Stick to your messages.***

The reporter is the messenger that will tell your story to the public. The process is not always smooth. You may be misquoted. Reporters may incorrectly conclude something. Things may be relayed out of context. You can ask for corrections, but it may not be worth it if it will only give more “ink” to the crisis. Still, you may want to touch base with the reporter so he or she does not repeat inaccuracies. Media attention is never entirely positive. Don't expect a “puff piece.” And don't take it personally!

### The needs of the media

#### *Expect reporters to need:*

- Close proximity to the location of the crisis; for television, probably a live location that puts your camp behind the reporter as he or she introduces their story
- Visual opportunities (television “b” roll to carry a narration track); limited access to camp property if it does not interfere with an investigation or severely impede operations
- Interviews with accounts of the crisis and steps taken
- Interviews with people affected by the crisis
- Periodic updates

#### *Expect them to ask for interviews with:*

- Victims
- Witnesses
- Management spokesperson
- Campers and parents

#### *Expect them to seek additional interviews elsewhere with:*

- Knowledgeable outside experts (recommend your allies if possible)
- Local government leaders
- EMTs, physicians and others
- Former employees (either happy or unhappy with their previous employment experience)

### CRISIS COMMUNICATING — DO'S AND DON'TS

#### DO'S

- Remember people come first — lead with empathy, compassion
- Do your homework
  - Know your audience — talk from the viewpoint of your audience's interest
  - Be as knowledgeable as possible about the issue
  - Anticipate likely questions — have answers ready, short and concise
  - Prepare, believing that the question you dread, will be asked
  - Rehearse, rehearse, rehearse

- Take time to prepare, strategize and concentrate
- Escort reporters to an established media space, outside any danger zone
- Be sure and prompt with facts, cautious with conclusions
- Release bad news completely, clearly, quickly — it's worse if it comes out slowly, incompletely — then story lasts longer
- Keep it simple
- Speak from your experience — harder to contradict you
- Support your statements when possible,:
  - with facts, statistics, quotes from experts, comparisons, examples of real people
- When uncertain, feel free to say:
  - “I don't know.” “Hold on a second.” “I'll have (media person) get back to you on that”
  - “Please repeat your question ” — (you may get a ‘better’ question, on second try)
- Always answer the question the reporter should have asked. If question is aggressive or negative in tone, or even if it's off-base, but you know what he/she is getting at, your response should be to the question that should've been asked, and phrased more appropriately than the reporter may have asked it.
- Remember — The reporter is not your audience
  - The reporter is the interpreter and storyteller for your message — to readers, listeners or viewers
- Speak in personal terms when possible, to enhance credibility
  - Use “I,” not the less personal “we”
  - If appropriate, take some responsibility, to become more believable
- Talk and STOP. Let the reporter fill the silent spaces. These are vulnerable moments
  - Remember interview is *never* over while still in reporters' company. There is no such thing as “off the record.”
- Stick to your point

- Suggest other sources — those who agree and *your* choice of opponents (to minimize space for extremists)

#### DON'TS

- Don't release names of any victims without permission
- Don't give misleading information — when credibility is gone, it's *all* over
- Don't play down what happened
- Don't bluff — instead, say “I don't know — I'll find out — I'll get back to you.” (Then, do it.)
- Don't be a salesperson — Give well-thought out answers, backed by facts, friendly but business-like, and above all, authentic
- Don't do anything that can be interpreted as an attempt to influence or control the interview
- Don't request copy approval
- Don't give personal opinion — Reporters will always believe you speak for the camp
- Don't speculate or answer hypothetical questions — easier to prevent than correct
- No jargon — speak plainly avoiding technical terms
- No blame — take no sides, give no opinions on right and wrong
  - Don't violate the privacy rights of individuals
- No reporter favorites
- Don't feel you must answer every question
  - But don't say “No comment.” Instead, decline with courtesy and tact — “Don't want to answer that until we have all the facts  
... until we've investigated further ... because it's the subject of an investigation/litigation.”
  - Or “bridge away” – for example: “That's an interesting question but I think the *real* issue here is ....”  
“ Do you think so? That's not what we're hearing. Facts seem to indicate that ....”
- Don't ever go “off the record” — If you don't want it published, don't say it!

### Thoughts to convey

- What's known about the accident (don't speculate on cause).
- "The rest awaits completion of the investigation"
- "Our staff did their best [and, if necessary: "and they are traumatized by their inability to save \_\_\_\_\_."
- "Our thoughts and prayers — and those of our staff — are with the family of \_\_\_\_\_."
- Safety measures if any taken pending further investigation of the accident.

#### *Additionally: A few key points:*

- "We pride ourselves on being a safe place for children to play and to learn new skills."
- "We have been serving the community for \_\_\_\_ years. (Number) of children have learned to swim here or been involved in aquatics here in our pool, without a major accident in \_\_\_\_ years. Assuming this to be so, "Our training, facilities, safety procedures, etc. have been awarded \_\_\_\_\_."
- "Our staffing exceeds \_\_\_\_\_."

### Finally

- Plan and train before any crisis
- Train before the media arrive
- Put panic aside; listen to everyone
- Be friendly, always keep your temper
  - Always correct reporters' misstatements
  - Respond to a hostile questioner as you would to a friend
- Anticipate: What's next? How can you influence it?
- Having cultivated relationships with the media, rely on your understanding of how they work
- Be empathetic about the crisis — but without sentimentality
- Be confident — without ego
- Trust your judgment and life experience in making tough calls
- Provide necessary support for your employees
- Take pride in serving your camp — and the public

### Crisis Communications Plan

#### Camp Crisis Communications Team

|                         | <u>Home #</u> | <u>Cell Phone #</u> |
|-------------------------|---------------|---------------------|
| _____                   | (    ) _____  | (    ) _____        |
| <i>Team coordinator</i> |               |                     |
| _____                   | (    ) _____  | (    ) _____        |
| _____                   | (    ) _____  | (    ) _____        |
| _____                   | (    ) _____  | (    ) _____        |
| _____                   | (    ) _____  | (    ) _____        |
| _____                   | (    ) _____  | (    ) _____        |

Spokesperson(s): \_\_\_\_\_

Depending on the nature and location of the crisis, a news site for meeting with reporters will be established. It should be accessible, have sufficient electrical outlets and Internet access, telephones (if out of good mobile reception range), allow unhindered passage of campers, and cause minimum disruption (may be away from the camp).

#### Possible news sites

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

#### Communication Goals

- Compassion and understanding
- Accurately reflect camp actions
- Position camp as good citizen, credible source of information
- Report and interpret the crisis — damaging information in perspective
- Maintain contact with audiences
- Achieve quick resolution
- Gain knowledge

**Have prepared:**

*Camp Leadership:*

CEO: \_\_\_\_\_

Chief Volunteer Officer \_\_\_\_\_

*Collaborations with other organizations:*

Schools, city housing, juvenile courts

\_\_\_\_\_

Other outreach programs

\_\_\_\_\_

*Scholarships:*

Number of recipients: \_\_\_\_\_

Total value: \_\_\_\_\_

Value of program subsidy: \_\_\_\_\_

*Camp Statistics and Demographics:*

Years serving community: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of campers served: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of adults served: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of volunteers: \_\_\_\_\_

Number of hours donated: \_\_\_\_\_

Value of services: \_\_\_\_\_

Total staff: \_\_\_\_\_

Total Budget: \_\_\_\_\_

Total funds raised to support programs:

\_\_\_\_\_





### Initial Holding Statements

- (Front Desk/ Reception:) “Our spokesperson will get back to you immediately.”
- (Spokesperson:)
  - “We’re gathering information now and will call you back momentarily.”
  - “Our immediate concern is for the safety of our campers, but I should be able to give you the *right* information in just a very short time. I’ll call you back.”
  - “Emergency personnel are on the scene. I’m meeting with them again in a moment and will be able to give you a full report of everything we know. I’ll call you right back.”
  - “I understand that there has been an incident/accident. I don’t have full details, and I don’t want to give you bad information. Senior staff are on the scene, and I should be able to tell you what’s happening very shortly.”
  - “We’ve activated our Crisis Management Team to respond to this matter.”
  - “We’ll notify family and friends/members as soon as we have more information.”