

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Unfortunately, a crisis can occur at any time, affecting any camp at any location. It is for that reason that you should prepare for a crisis before it happens.

Communicating effectively during a crisis is critical. To help all camps prepare in the event of a crisis, we've developed this tool kit to help guide you in your communications. This should not serve as a substitute for the ACA Camp Crisis Hotline but rather should help you understand the components of a good crisis communications plan.

Crisis Communications Overview

1. Preparing for a Crisis

- a. Develop a crisis communications plan. The plan will help guide you through a crisis and help you stay on course during an emergency.
- b. Establish protocol. It's important to identify a list of key personnel to contact in the event of a crisis. Keep phone numbers, pagers, etc. available for the primary contacts.
- c. Consider calling the ACA Camp Crisis Hotline. Calls to the hotline are confidential. The Hotline staff can help you by talking through your crisis and helping you to identify options. The Hotline is available 24 hours a day, year-round at 800-573-9019.
- d. Identify your target audience(s). During a crisis, it's important to identify to whom you are speaking. Most often you are communicating with staffers, children, and parents. Remember the media serves as a gatekeeper to other external audiences.

2. Identifying a Crisis

- a. It's important to identify the crisis and understand its origins. Here are some questions you may want to ask yourself:
 - i. Did the crisis take place at camp?
 - ii. Did the crisis take place outside of camp but involve camp staff, camper(s), or camp families?
 - iii. Is the crisis immediate or ongoing?
 - iv. Is the crisis one that will remain local or will it have national media appeal?
 - v. Does the crisis concern a media hot button issue—an allegation of child abuse or outraged parents? If so, is this an issue best handled by a national spokesperson?

3. Handling a Crisis

- a. When a crisis occurs, it's important to gather the facts immediately. In gathering the facts, you should talk with camp staff only.
- b. You can contact ACA's Crisis Hotline. Determine whether it's a crisis or an issue, then consider contacting lawyers and your insurance company. (Crisis: missing person, death, arrest; Issue: getting trolled for inclusion, bed bugs outbreak).
- c. Designate one spokesperson to speak on behalf of the camp. Ideally this is the camp director, camp owner, or another person of authority. It is best to identify only one spokesperson to ensure consistency in message. However, the camp may ask you to act as the spokesperson – if you feel comfortable doing this. Or the camp may need help from ACA's national office.
- d. Remember the assistance of ACA's national office and the communications tool kit are not a substitute for the help and advice from their own attorney or PR counsel.
- e. If the crisis requires statements from you, control the flow of information. In other words, if the media calls, be courteous, take their information, and ask the deadline to return the call. You do not need to provide an immediate comment to the media, but you should not ignore their requests either.
- f. Develop a written statement. Work with your attorneys and/or your PR counsel to develop a written statement to share with parents and the media. The statement should include the facts only. Do not speculate and do not place blame. ACA staff can provide assistance as well.
- g. Develop key messages. This should be for your internal use only to help you in discussing the matter with parents and the media.
- h. Communicate the message and the facts. Provide the media with the written statement and be available for comment. Remember to stick to the facts. Do not try to hide bad news as negative media coverage is likely to result and will continue beyond the immediate crisis itself.
- i. Keep track of all calls and requests. Keep a list of reporters with whom you spoke.
- j. Respond to the media. Remember the media helps to shape public opinion. A "no comment" statement is seen as an admittance of guilt. Be fair and respond quickly to the media.
- k. Don't engage with comments or messages on social media. Don't let staff engage. You can turn off your page, even temporarily. Turn off social media comments and notifications.
- l. The media may ask to speak with other persons affected by the crisis. It is best to focus access and to refer all questions to the primary spokesperson.
- m. Keep track of all media coverage. Review all the media coverage for accuracy. Call the reporter when the information is not accurate.

In Summary

- Designate a crisis communications protocol.
- Manage the message and the media.
- Understand and prioritize your audience.
- Communicate early and often.
- Do not lie.
- Do not ignore the situation.