

# COMMUNITY CRISIS COMMUNICATION

## Guidelines in the case of an event

*Crisis communications is about caring for and instilling confidence in your community and its stakeholders, while at the same time preserving and protecting your image and brand in the marketplace.*

Over the years, our senior living clients have faced many serious events that attract widespread public attention and media inquiry. Our team at CAC Specialty is frequently called upon by operators for advice and guidance on how to respond to family, community, or media inquiries when serious events occur. Incidents such as violence, abuse, cyber-attacks, environmental catastrophes, and senior living in the age of COVID-19 have been lightning rods for controversy. As a company in the business of caring for vulnerable older adults, there is a higher expectation that you have not only planned for these types of events but have sound processes, plans and responses prepared.

This white paper is a brief overview of some best practices on how to prepare for and ultimately respond to any public media firestorm over an adverse situation at your community. **There are several overarching ideas which are important for consideration:**

- **Authenticity, sincerity, and compassion are key impressions** that must consistently resonate in your crisis and emergency communications. This boils down to how well you carry out your mission, vision, and values in all that you do and say. Several pressing considerations quickly become apparent:
  - Will your response ring true to primary stakeholders, employees, current and prospective residents, and their families?
  - How will secondary stakeholders- regulators, vendors, lenders, and investors react to you?
  - Are your statements consistent with what stakeholders have experienced with you day in and day out? This is about your company culture: Who you are as a company and developing trust with your respective audiences/stakeholders. If you have that trust with your key stakeholders, you have a better chance to build trust with the public. These same stakeholders will also become key allies in any ongoing management of the crisis.
- **The communication process for how you respond requires forethought and planning** ahead of the adverse event. Doing this in the midst of a firestorm is always a daunting task. Develop a small team who can look at the overall process strategically as a part of your organizational planning. Examine the process after assessing the various areas of risk that most likely could become a public crisis for your company. Most organizations prepare well for what they can predict but are woefully unprepared for what they do not see coming. This team needs to be available to come together at the first indication of a potential public crisis for the company. Consider the use of outside resources such as a PR firm or your broker partner. CAC Specialty may be one of those resources.
- **As quickly as possible, diligently learn the underlying facts, stay abreast of them, and their context.** By context I mean how complex is the matter. I have been involved in cases that had criminal and regulatory investigations, insurance coverage issues, and civil claims. Correctly sizing up the potential implications as early as possible is vitally important. A delay in being proactive in your communications will damage the key qualities mentioned previously around authenticity, sincerity, compassion, and trust.

- **Notifying your broker and carrier as early as possible** is crucial. Knowing that you have insurance coverage, the extent of that coverage and the resources that may be available to you will help you navigate your next steps and bring some degree of peace and clarity to the process.
- **Don't guess or assume.** Transparency is critical, especially early on. Consistently communicate **FACTS** that you know to be true in a short and concise manner. Questions outside of that scope should be politely rebuffed: When we know more, you'll know more. Saying that you "have no comment", blaming others or playing down an obviously serious situation will immediately damage your credibility and you may find yourself playing defense moving forward.
- **Develop a few basic and true talking points in advance** and stay on message throughout the communication process. Establish a few consistent positive messages that you can lead with and use in response to almost any questions. In doing so, it is also important to keep in mind the big picture, the total organization and what it does well. Do not be pulled off message by antagonistic, accusatory, speculative, or leading questions that will try to elicit more from you than you need to say. These questions will come. Be prepared!

#### Examples of positive pre-developed responses might include:

- ✓ "We are investigating the matter carefully with our team"
- ✓ "We are cooperating with state officials or regulators"
- ✓ "We are working closely with those affected families, residents, employees, etc."
- ✓ "We are first and foremost concerned with the safety and welfare of all of our residents."
- ✓ "We are protecting our residents by housing them in alternative living arrangements in the community."
- ✓ "We have been and will continue to follow CDC and state infectious disease guidelines and protocols for this disease."

You can tailor these to the type of event at issue; weather or property related, resident fatality, cyber-attack, employee issue, etc. The more detailed you can be about how or what you are specifically doing the better.

- **Who responds is critical.** You'll want someone composed and articulate as your public face on the issues. Someone who will be available on a moment's notice. Some clients use a third party, be it a lawyer or PR firm. Others prefer a senior person specifically trained to take on communication during a crisis. These are all viable options, but in my view, a leader in the company or at the community level who can stay focused and on message is best. Similarly, you want one point of contact in the organization to field questions as they come in. This is important for effectively tracking who is asking the questions while ensuring consistent, accurate answers. You may also want to consider providing answers to some basic questions on your website or social media outlets, but do so with caution.
- **Don't become antagonistic with any inquiries** because you will likely lose these confrontations in the court of public opinion. Your spokesperson needs to stay collected, focused and calm. If you do not know an answer, say so and that you will get back to them (then do). If you do not agree with a premise in a question, say so politely but firmly. Things will be said that are not true, and stopping any untrue statements, explicit or implicit, in a question or statement, should be thoughtfully and carefully addressed.

For example, an appropriate response might be: “We do not agree with your statement of facts, and I will repeat (what you know to be true)”. Or return to one of your boiler plate responses: “We have the safety and care of our residents as our foremost concern, and we are doing all things necessary to ensure this”. This can also be a good time to revisit your mission, vision or values statement.

- **Media includes online social media platforms.** Anticipate that social media may light up over the issue, whatever it may be. On these platforms, there will often be adverse commentary, ranging from people who know nothing to former employees and families who have an axe to grind. Things are often said that are personal and simply not true. Being prepared will allow you to strategically and carefully respond (or not) to these various social media sideshows. Emotionally, you will want to respond forcefully. Be restrained and calculated in your decision to respond or not. In one such event which involved a non-stop social media barrage, the client made use of a third- party social media monitoring service and a PR firm. They helped decide if, when and how to respond to social media pressure.
- **There will always be a “dynamic tension” between what lawyers want you to say, which is generally very little, and what you need to say to protect the immediate challenges to your brand and reputation.** There are two courts out there: those being “courts of law”, as well as the “court of public opinion”. This dynamic tension requires a thoughtful balancing of the issues in how you communicate. The keys of transparency, authenticity, trust, and compassion must be a part of this balancing act.

## CONCLUSION

To quote a popular proverb: “The best time to plant a tree was twenty years ago. The second-best time, is now.” With the thoughts and ideas outlined previously, now is the time to prepare because it’s not a matter of “if” but “when” you will be called upon to respond to a community event. In closing, remember, the goal of your crisis/emergency communication process is twofold. **First, to convey trust, sincerity and authenticity in your actions and responses** among your stakeholders and the public. **Second, maintaining your reputation and brand in the marketplace** consistent with your espoused mission and values. By following the above outline of best practices, you will not only be better prepared, but you’ll be much closer to achieving these crucial objectives.

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