

Chapter 1: Communications

"You are communicator-in-chief."

– Mayor Nan Whaley, Dayton OH

Chapter Summary

Your primary role after a mass shooting is to share facts with the community, correct misinformation, and communicate messages of safety, unity, and empathy. Your public speaking experience will guide your messaging. However, a public mass shooting is traumatizing and presents unique challenges. This chapter presents crisis communications resources and best practices from mayors that you can use to prepare for and respond to a mass shooting.

In the **preparedness** phase, you can develop a crisis communications plan in partnership with your chief of police, plan the location and operations of a Joint Information Center (JIC) (separate from the family reunification center), arrange crisis communications training for yourself and your team if needed, review communications systems and capacities, and learn about trauma-informed messaging.

During the first 24 hours after the shooting (the **response** phase), your goal is to stay ahead of the news cycle. Communicate early and often to prevent the spread of inaccurate information. Coordinate with law enforcement to get regular updates, deliver the facts as they become available, proactively correct misinformation, and coordinate your message with other agencies to present unified leadership. As "communicator-in-chief," you decide who will speak, about what, and when. You may opt not to be the lead spokesperson, instead allowing law enforcement officials to deliver information about the investigation. Your messages might instead highlight safety, unity, and healing. Above all, transparency is the goal.

You may be responsible for managing a stream of dignitaries. One mayor advised directing visitors to where they can provide comfort to the victims and their families. During visits of elected officials, you may need to work closely with them to prevent remarks that could politicize the shooting.

As you enter the **recovery** phase, your messaging may shift from providing facts about the shooting to messages of healing and availability of mental health resources. Consult with victims' assistance agencies for help crafting these messages.



Preparedness

Your primary role after a mass shooting is to share facts with the community, correct misinformation, and communicate messages of safety, unity, and empathy. You will develop these messages in response to the specific circumstances of the shooting. However, you can develop a crisis communications plan, form relationships with mental health experts, and obtain crisis communications training, if needed, in advance.

Crisis Communications Planning

In collaboration with your Police Chief and municipal communications staff, develop a crisis communications plan. It should be informed by the concepts developed by FEMA for responding to a crisis, as described in the National Incident Management System (NIMS). If you already have a crisis communications plan that covers natural disasters or other types of emergencies, review the plan for its applicability to a mass shooting. Elements of a crisis communications plan should include:

- A protocol for press briefings
- The operations and location of a Joint Information Center (JIC)
- A policy for the city's emergency alert system, if the city has one
- A protocol for managing social media accounts



Figure 1: Best practices in risk and crisis communication.¹

Protocol for Press Briefings

Meet with your Police Chief and determine the roles you will each play during press briefings. Often law enforcement officials take the lead communicating details about the investigation. You may opt to speak about public safety, the victims, and offer messages of unity and healing. Also, develop a system for receiving regular briefings from law enforcement officials. One staffer recommended appointing a dedicated law enforcement official in the Emergency Operations Center whose sole responsibility is to keep you informed.



Best Practices Tips for Press Conferences from a Law Enforcement Public Information Officer (PIO)

1. Speak with one voice. Assign one media contact.
2. No “off the record” remarks. Make sure everyone follows this guidance, even people who answer phones.
3. Plan in advance where your press conferences will be held.
4. Have some prepared remarks on hand so that you don’t have to start from scratch.
5. Initial remarks should include answers to “who, what, when, where (but not why), and what you are doing about it.
6. Think about the questions the media will ask and find the answers (*e.g.*, did the shooter have a record?)
7. Include directions to the families of victims (location of the reunification center) and to the public (road closures, lockdowns, etc.)
8. For the speakers: agree in advance on a signal for when you are ready to end your remarks so that your PIO can end the briefing for you. Keep your remarks short. Avoid redundancy.
9. Determine speaker order, length of remarks. Practice.
10. For speakers who like to read remarks: memorize your most important points and look up at the camera when you make them. That’s what the media will cover.



Joint Information Center

The Joint Information Center (JIC) coordinates interagency communication and manages the press during a mass shooting. Your planning should identify where the JIC can be located, as well as locations for the press pool and their vehicles. Brainstorm potential locations ahead of time, based on where a shooting could happen in your community. Ideally, the JIC should be located quite close to the site of the shooting. If a mass shooting happens, you may want to station yourself at the JIC to facilitate the flow of accurate information. Review with your staff the information technology (IT) systems and digital communications resources that are needed for activating the JIC.

The mayors we interviewed strongly recommended locating the JIC separately from the Family Reunification and Assistance Centers so that family members are protected from the press, and so that people working in the JIC are not distracted by the sounds of grief. (For other considerations for planning the Family Reunification and Assistance Centers, see Chapter 3.)



Key Resources: Joint Information Center



National Response Team Joint Information Center Model: this resource explains the JIC model, how to establish a JIC, functional responsibilities for staff, and worksheets/ other sample materials for use by JIC staff.

<https://www.nrt.org/sites/2/files>

FEMA basic guidance for Public Information Officers:

https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_nims-basic-guidance-public-information-officers_12-2020.pdf

Alert Systems and Capacities

If your city lacks an Emergency Notification System (ENS), determine whether to implement one. These systems send mass notifications via phone, text, social media, and email to the public in an emergency. In the case of a mass shooting, they can alert the public of immediate safety concerns, and order the public to shelter in place or to avoid a specific area if a shooter is still at large. For example, in the aftermath of the Boston Marathon bombing, shelter in place messages were sent multiple times during the manhunt for suspects that spanned days.²

Your plan should consider how an ENS will be operated, and who will be responsible for maintaining it (*e.g.*, the public safety office, emergency response office, or law enforcement organization). If the city has an ENS, it should be tested periodically. Review with your staff the IT needs (including materials and staff) that are needed for effective management of the ENS.

Similarly, familiarize yourself with hotlines operated by the city, or decide whether to establish a new hotline to provide information to the public in case of emergency. Emergency alert messages and hotline recordings can be recorded ahead of time.

Social Media Protocol

Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer conducted a tabletop exercise prior to the Pulse shooting. During that exercise, his team developed a social media protocol that they used in response to the shooting. The elements of that protocol include:

- Use the social media account of the public safety office or a law enforcement agency to provide regular updates to the public. Direct the press to this account, and retweet/share the content from mayor's office accounts and other agency accounts to amplify the messages. The advantage of this approach is two-fold: (1) messaging is unified, and (2) messages sent through public safety channels may be seen as more legitimate and less politicized.
- Normally scheduled social media messages on other topics may need to be cancelled across city accounts during the crisis.
- Use social media to directly and proactively correct misinformation.
- You can also include "how you can help" guidance to the public through social media channels (*e.g.*, identify the official victim's fund, where to donate blood, how to volunteer, what not to donate.)



- Post updates as quickly as is feasible, balanced with the need to clear posts through your internal review. Using a sole account reduces the number of clearances needed and ensures the messaging is consistent.



Image 1: Example of initial social media messaging used by a mayor following a mass shooting, amplifying a statement from law enforcement (Retrieved from: https://twitter.com/mayor_margo/status/1157730991265345536)

Key Resource: FEMA Social Media in Emergency Management Training

FEMA, Social Media in Emergency Management: This online training course (IS-42) covers the use of social media in emergency response plans. The course is for state, local, tribal, and territorial emergency managers and their staff. <https://training.fema.gov/is/courseoverview.aspx?code=IS-42>



Crisis Communications Techniques and Training

Learn the Basics of Crisis Communications

Establish relationships with your local victims’ assistance office, mental health experts, and public health officials. Meet with them in advance to discuss how to craft messages for a traumatized community. These mental health experts can also help should you need to establish a Family Assistance Center, direct community members to local mental health services, or organize vigils or other commemorative events.



Review available resources to understand the psychology of trauma. One excellent resource is the CDC's Crisis and Emergency Response Communication (CERC) manual. The chapter on the psychology of crisis is short and informative. According to the CERC manual, to be effective during a crisis your messages should be simple and:

- Be repeated
- Come from multiple credible sources
- Be specific to the emergency being experienced
- Offer a positive course of action that can be executed

Key Resource: CDC Crisis Communications Training and Manual



CDC Crisis and Emergency Response Communication (CERC) program: includes trainings, presentations, and the CERC Manual.
<https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/manual/index.asp>

CDC CERC: Crisis Communications Plan:
guide to integrating a crisis communications plan into the local emergency operations plan.
https://emergency.cdc.gov/cerc/ppt/CERC_Crisis_Communication_Plans.pdf

Key Resource: ATSDR Communications Toolkit



The Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry (ATSDR) protects communities from harmful health effects related to exposure to natural and man-made hazardous substances. The ATSDR Communications Toolkit is a simple "Message mapping" tool your PIO can use to develop simple messaging to help the public respond to a crisis.
https://www.atsdr.cdc.gov/communications-toolkit/documents/12_message-mapping-tool-final-111015_508.pdf

Crisis Communications Media Training

In addition, consider crisis communications training for yourself or your staff if you have limited experience handling the national press. Training can give you confidence in front of the cameras and help you craft appropriate messaging, properly handle information related to the investigation, and understand privacy laws.



Best Practice Tip

Assemble a duplicate supply of essential equipment, such as extra cell phones and chargers for you, your staff and visitors.

— Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto



During the response to the Tree of Life shooting in Pittsburgh, phones were waterlogged due to rain and backup phones were not available, interfering with the ability to provide social media updates to the public.

“Go-Kits” for Yourself and Key Staff

The core emergency response team (*e.g.*, you, your Chief of Staff, City Manager, Chief Administrative Officer, and City Attorney) should carry a cell phone at all times so they can be reached immediately in the event of an emergency. The team should consider assembling a “go-kit,” as described by FEMA’s guidance for Public Information Officers.³ The go-kit can be left in the car or office. Include extra cell phones and chargers, a jacket if you must unexpectedly appear before the press, snack bars, basic sundries, a sweater, etc.

Response

Initial Communication Decisions

During the first hours and days after the shooting, you will likely spend much of your time in the JIC, gathering information, planning and scheduling press conferences, managing visiting elected officials and dignitaries, and responding to requests from the press. The first decisions you will need to make include:

- Decide locations of the JIC and the Family Reunification Centers, if that hasn’t already been determined. It is important to keep them separate (see Chapter 3).
- Schedule your first press briefing with your Police Chief. Deliver the first press conference at the predetermined hour and announce the schedule for the following press conferences at the conclusion of the first.
- Determine your roles through a pre-conference “huddle” that takes place 30-60 minutes before the first press conference. Often law enforcement officials take the lead communicating details about the investigation. You may opt to speak about public safety, the victims, and offer messages of unity and healing.
- Limit the number of speakers to the minimum required. Too many speakers (especially elected officials), can be redundant and runs the risk of creating confusion or politicizing the tragedy.
- Consider whether to send out an emergency notification on the city’s ENS and/or declare a state of emergency (see Chapters on the Emergency Operations Plan and Legal Considerations).



- Consider including a “How You Can Help” section in your social media strategy, on the city’s web site, and in every press release or other communications issued during the response. Direct the public to where they can donate money, volunteer, give blood, or provide assistance to the response operations.
- Implement the protocol for receiving regular information from law enforcement officials. Best practice: ask for a dedicated police official whose sole responsibility is to keep you informed. Request regular meetings with your chief.
- Direct your communications team to proactively correct misinformation.
- Initiate your social media strategy. As noted above, a best practice is to release information relating to the shooting via a single social media account (operated by your public health office or the police PIO), which is retweeted by the city and other agencies. Direct all press inquiries to that account.

In some cases, law enforcement or the FBI may take the lead in a press conference (the decision is joint). To avoid bruised egos and hard feelings, focus on the needs of the victims and families. Remind the speakers and their staffers that you are on the same team and should present a unified front in the immediate aftermath of the crisis.

Mayors in Action: Negotiating the Order of Speakers



Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer: “We had a discussion with the FBI about who should take the lead in the first press conference. We felt strongly we should lead the press conference. Our rationale was that our community and the families of victims should hear first from somebody that they know and trust. They did not know the FBI Special Agent in Charge, so we felt he would be unable to convey the message of safety and unity we thought was needed. That message needed to come from the Mayor of Orlando. Eventually the FBI deferred to us.”

Your First Public Statements

Mayors told us their top priority at the first press conferences was to convey that the situation was under control and provide information about the victims. Be mindful that law enforcement considerations may limit what you can say and when you can say it. Work with the coroner’s office and law enforcement officials to identify the victims as quickly as possible so that you can convey that critical information to their families and to the public.

Keep messages simple, credible, and consistent. Your messages should express empathy and show respect and sensitivity for victims and families. Act quickly to correct misinformation. Provide actions the public can take to be helpful.

Messages that will be necessary to convey following the shooting:

- Where families and members of the affected community should gather.
- The status of the coroner's office investigation to identify the victims.
- Reliable sources of information, such as a dedicated social media account, a city web site where public information about the shooting will be posted regularly, and hotlines established for this purpose.
- Include "how you can help" guidance for the public (e.g., identify the official victim's fund, where to donate blood, how to volunteer, what not to donate).

One mayor said he avoided naming the shooter at all press conferences. Research has shown that naming the shooter repeatedly can contribute to a media focus on the perpetrator instead of the victims, contributing to a desire among some individuals to imitate the shooter's actions and/or to glorify the violence.⁴ For this reason, the Advanced Law Enforcement Rapid Response Training team and the FBI established a "Don't Name Them" campaign.⁵

Mayors in Action: Remarks at the First Press Conference

Dayton Mayor Nan Whaley: "If you are the family or friend of a victim, we invite you to come to the convention center or call [local helpline number]. And if you have any information on the incident, if you were in the Oregon District today and have information, please call [police tip-line]. Red Cross, the Greater Dayton Area Hospital Association, ADAMHS and support for our police and first responders are on the scene to help the situation. Of course we are incredibly grateful for our partners in this very sad incident."⁶



Key Resource: Full Press Conference, Indianapolis Federal Express Shooting

Full press conference from Indianapolis FedEx Ground Facility shooting in April 2021:

<https://www.wsls.com/news/2021/04/16/watch-live-press-conference-on-mass-shooting-at-fedex-facility-in-indianapolis/>.



Best Practice Tip

Coordinate messaging from every agency and office.

"It is important to speak with one voice."

– Former San Bernardino Mayor R. Carey Davis



Managing the Press



Image 2: Pittsburgh Mayor William Peduto speaks to the press following the Tree of Life Synagogue shooting (Photo by Alexandra Wimley, Copyright ©, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, 2021, all rights reserved. Reprinted with permission.)

Schedule the first press conference as soon as possible, even if you don't have much information to share. Inform the press that you will schedule regular press conferences and deliver them when you say you will. Tips for managing press conferences include:

- Secure the press conference site: many will want to speak but you need to control the messaging. You may need to restrict access to the press area.
- Provide all journalists and types of media equal access to information.
- Find a balance between local media (to provide relevant information to affected residents) and national media (to reach a broader public audience). One mayor suggested reserving time for press meetings with local press only.

Note that journalists from the same network compete with each other for your interview. Feel free to decline multiple interviews requests from the same network and provide access to other networks and local news.

Also, due to the newsworthiness of a mass shooting, press briefings, even with local media, may be aired nationally. Prepare yourself and your remarks accordingly. That said, one mayor chose to deliver messages intended for the local community, leaving messages geared to the national audience to others.



Prioritize the Needs of Victims and Families

One mayor recommended prioritizing the needs of the victims and their families in your communications strategy. Strategies for establishing effective communication with victims and families include:

- Designate a media liaison for victims and families at the JIC to facilitate the exchange of messages and information between the families and your office.
- Do what you can to speed the release of the names of the victims to their families and loved ones (the public's need to know is secondary).
- Tailor messaging to be respectful to the families.
- Visit the families at the Family Reunification Center as soon as possible so that you can communicate face-to-face.
- Prioritize your time. If faced with a choice between an interview and an invitation to meet with family members, for example, feel free to pass on the interview. The press will still be there when you are free.

Mayors in Action: Remarks About FAC Services

Orlando Mayor Buddy Dyer: "It's important to remember that these victims are having normal reactions to a very abnormal event...Services at the family assistance center range from grief counseling to financial assistance to obtaining visas...we can't thank these organizations enough for their tireless efforts in this difficult situation...If you don't feel comfortable coming down to the site, we would still encourage you to call us...and we will reach out to you. The Family Assistance Center will remain open throughout the weekend."⁷ (Video of full remarks available at endnote 7.)



Managing Visits from Elected Officials

In the immediate aftermath of a mass shooting, elected officials may converge on your city, from the U.S. President ("POTUS"), to your governor, to national and state legislators and officials from neighboring districts. Some of these visits could be controversial. They may burden your already overstretched staff and police force. Yet, hosting these visitors provides the opportunity to communicate your city's needs to policymakers who may be able to help. Mayors who welcomed VIPs following a shooting offered these tips:

- Decide whether to invite them to speak at press conferences.
- Give them something to do that can help victims and survivors.
- Help them develop appropriate messages to avoid politicizing the shooting or traumatizing the affected community.

For best practices for managing VIP visits, see Appendix B.



Recovery

Messaging: Shifting from Response to Recovery

As the public begins to process what has happened, your messaging will gradually shift from the “response” to the “recovery” phase. This process may begin within hours of the shooting and continue for months or even years. Your recovery messaging will focus on fostering long-term community resilience, restoring hope, and healing from trauma. Common themes include solidarity, unity, resilience, and strength (e.g., “Dayton Shines,” “Boston Strong,” and Pittsburgh’s “Stronger Than Hate”).

Use this opportunity to highlight the many caring actions taken by members of the community, from volunteers who bring meals to first responders, to community members who donate blood, to companies that make financial and in-kind donations and provide needed services to victims and families, to groups who contribute art and culture to lift the spirits of victims and their families. These people are “ambassadors of hope.” Their selfless actions and compassion can help make a tragedy bearable.



Image 3: 1500 quilts were handmade and distributed to victims, family members, first responders, and city officials who responded to the Pulse shooting (Photo by Paula Kennedy).

Consult Mental Health and Behavioral Health Experts

Your communications should include messages about available mental health services. Consult with mental health experts to understand the mental health impact on your community and for guidance developing trauma-informed messages. For example, to prepare messaging after the shooting in Dayton, Mayor Whaley consulted a countywide mental health services network with whom she had previously partnered to communicate about the opioid crisis.



Best Practice Tip

Whether promoting healing, planning vigils, or arranging services for victims and family members, remember to consult with mental health experts.



Engage Community Partners in Interfaith or Hate Prevention Work

In the wake of a hate-motivated shooting, it is especially difficult for the community to process and understand the event. Retaliation against the group associated with the shooter may be a risk. Consult with trusted community leaders to develop messages of religious pluralism, respect for minority groups, and unity across cultures.

For example, reflecting on his response to the shooting at the Sikh temple in Oak Creek, WI, Mayor Steve Scaffidi wrote, “The messages of diversity, mutual respect, and acceptance are important, and I began to talk about them in earnest at the vigil [three days after the shooting].”⁸ Other mayors also spoke of the importance of interfaith messaging, engaging the leaders of the groups targeted in a hate crime, and developing respectful relationships with these groups long before any attack happens.

Some religious groups have prepared prayers for victims of mass shootings, which may provide comfort to members of the community who turn to their faith for comfort.⁹

Engage Schools

If you are responding to a school shooting, you may need to include messages about school safety, mental health and counseling services for troubled students, and threat assessment. Work with the relevant partners, including school boards, superintendents, parent advocacy groups, and school nurses to understand your role in the school’s recovery and how to include relevant and timely messages to the school community as well as the broader public. See Chapter 6 for more information on school shootings.

Suicide Prevention

Research has shown that many public mass shooters were suicidal. If the shooter in your city died or took his own life while committing the attack, you might use this opportunity to speak generally about suicide prevention resources in your community, and the importance of preventing access to firearms when a member of the household is suicidal or in crisis. Doing so could help prevent suicides (two-thirds of gun deaths are suicides, over 25,000 annually). Additionally, educating the public about suicide may help prevent a future public mass shooting. See Appendix D for more information.



Advocacy

As communicator-in-chief, you may use your access to the press to educate the public about gun violence prevention topics of relevance to your community. Public health-related measures include calling for increased mental health resources, school safety measures, crime victim compensation, and more. It could be helpful to advocate for additional state or federal funding to help other cities respond to mass shootings.¹⁰

According to the CDC's CERC manual, it is appropriate to inform the public of ways they can give, volunteer, or advocate for change. Helping grieving community members play a positive role can promote healing.

Endnotes

¹ NATIONAL CENTER FOR FOOD PROTECTION AND DEFENSE, *Best Practices in Crisis Communication: An Expert Panel Process*, *Journal of Applied Communication Research*. 232-244, 2006.

² HOMELAND SECURITY OFFICE OF EMERGENCY COMMUNICATIONS, *Emergency Communications During the Response to the Boston Marathon Bombing*, 2013, available at https://www.dhs.gov/sites/default/files/publications/oec-case%20study-support%20for%20response%20to%20boston%20marathon%20bombing-2013_0.pdf.

³ FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY, *National Incident Management System Basic Guidance for Public Information Officers*, 2020, https://www.fema.gov/sites/default/files/documents/fema_nims-basic-guidance-public-information-officers_12-2020.pdf.

⁴ James N. Meindl & Jonathan W. Ivy, *Mass Shootings: The Role of the Media in Promoting Generalized Imitation*, 107 *AM J PUBLIC HEALTH* 368–370 (2017).

⁵ *Id.*

⁶ CITY OF DAYTON, *7 AM Press Conference, Mass Shooting Incident of Aug 4 (1:40-2:35)*, available at <https://www.facebook.com/cityofdayton/videos/841566729577954> (last visited Jun 3, 2021).

⁷ Jeff Weiner, Rene Stutzman & Del Quentin Wilber, *Pulse nightclub security video recovered by agents*, *ORLANDO SENTINEL* (2016), <https://www.orlandosentinel.com/news/breaking-news/os-shooting-developments-friday-20160617-story.html> (last visited Jun 3, 2021).

⁸ Stephen A. Scaffidi, *SIX MINUTES IN AUGUST: A STORY OF TRAGEDY, HEALING AND COMMUNITY* 66 (2015).

⁹ Michelle Boorstein, *Denominations have begun creating special prayers for fatal mass shootings*, *WASHINGTON POST* (2021), <https://www.washingtonpost.com/religion/2021/07/16/mass-shooting-newtown-parkland-pulse-new-prayer-litany-episcopal-mass-shooting/> (last visited July 16, 2021).

¹⁰ Sarah C. Peck and James Alan Fox, *Proposed policy would help mayors respond to a mass shooting* (April 6, 2021), *PITTSBURGH POST-GAZETTE*, <https://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/Op-Ed/2021/04/06/Proposed-policy-would-help-mayors-respond-to-a-mass-shooting-Pittsburgh-Boulder-Colorado/stories/202104060012> (last visited Jun 3, 2021).



COMMUNICATIONS CHECKLIST

Preparedness

- Develop a crisis communications plan with your Chief of Police and Public Information Officer. Review and update as needed.
- Establish relationships with your local victims' assistance office, mental health experts, and public health officials.
- Assess whether to establish an Emergency Notification System. Develop a policy for its use and request regular testing and operation of the system.
- Review the CDC's Crisis and Emergency Risk Communications (CERC) Manual. If you have limited experience speaking to the national media, consider crisis communications training.
- Ask your PIO to assemble messages that you can use in a crisis, and practice delivering them.
- Prepare a "go-kit." Program contacts into your phone and assemble supplies.

Response

- Establish a schedule for communicating with the press.
- Decide who will speak and in what order at press conferences.
- Seek the guidance of victims' assistance and mental health experts to develop trauma-informed messaging.
- Keep messages simple, credible, and consistent. Express empathy, show respect for victims and families. Act quickly to correct misinformation.

Recovery

- Focus your messaging on bolstering long-term community resilience, restoring hope, and healing from trauma.

