

Running Head: DEVELOPING A CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN

Developing a Crisis Communication Plan for the Fort Osage Fire Protection District

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CERTIFICATION STATEMENT

I hereby certify that this paper constitutes my own product, that where the language of others is set forth, quotation marks so indicate, and the appropriate credit is given where I have used the language, ideas, expressions, or writings of another.

Signed: _____

ABSTRACT

Emergency service personnel are trained in fire suppression, emergency medical treatment and triage, hazardous material response, and rescue operations and they train every day to mitigate these emergency's they face. But our emergency responders prepared and trained in communicating before or during a crisis event such as a tornado, hurricane, or even a terrorist attack? Communication is the key to effective preparedness of emergency service personnel and the community they protect. The overarching purpose of this research project was to identify the how, when, what, and why of crisis communication for emergency service personnel and the public through the development of a crisis communication plan for the Fort Osage Fire Protection District. Five questions were asked. 1) What is a crisis communication plan? 2) What type of information should be disseminated during a crisis? 3) What current crisis communication systems are in use in the Fort Osage Fire Protection District region? 4) What stakeholders should be involved in developing a crisis communication plan? 5) What are the psychological benefits of a crisis communication plan? Research was conducted by the examination of literature and internet resources related to crisis communication plans and the components of the plan. Questionnaires were utilized to provide actual data of current receiving and notification utilization before or during a crisis event. Literature review provided the importance and emphasis of the development of crisis communication plans within public and private organizations. Results indicated the need for involvement from all internal and external stakeholders in the area of continuing community risk reduction through effective and efficient communications before or during a crisis event.

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INTRODUCTION

The public wants to know what emergency services know during a crisis event. Today's technology and communication access is available to the public more than ever before. The public wants to view every move and watch every passing emotion of those responding during a disaster, crisis or emergency. We as emergency responders must remember every word and action counts. We must provide vital communication to the public so that community risk is reduced effectively and efficiently. Emergency services must have the ability to disseminate critical information to their residents and businesses in an effective and time sensitive manner. The public is facing risk more than ever before, we are seeing an increased population density in high-risk area, increased technological risk, an aging population, emerging infectious diseases and antibiotic resistance, increased international travel and increased domestic terrorism. It is our responsibility to reduce these risks by providing effective and efficient communications.

The problem addressed in this research paper is the Fort Osage Fire Protection District does not have a crisis communication plan to disseminate vital and life-saving information to the residents, businesses, and schools during a crisis event such as a local emergency or disaster. This lack of planning affects the operations of the Fort Osage Fire Protection District (FOFPD) and the overall safety of the communities we protect. The purpose of this research paper is to identify a crisis communication plan and how it can effectively be utilized to provide time sensitive and critical information to the public of FOFPD during emergency situations or local and regional disasters. The author utilized a descriptive research method for this research paper.

Toward the purpose of this research paper, descriptive research will be utilized to answer the following questions: (1) what is a crisis communication plan; (2) what type of information should be disseminated during an crisis; (3) what current crisis communication systems are in

use in the Fort Osage Fire Protection District region; (4) what stakeholders should be involved in developing a crisis communication plan; (5) what are the psychological benefits of a crisis communication plan? This research paper will assist the FOFPD by providing the foundation to begin developing a crisis communication plan to effectively notify the public during a crisis or disaster event. The overarching goal of the FOFPD is to reduce community risks at every level and effective and efficient communication will assist in obtaining this goal.

BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE

The Fort Osage Fire Protection District (FOFPD) is located in the west central region of Missouri in Jackson County. The community is a rural and bedroom community, covering 110 square miles and has a population of more than 15,000 people. The FOFPD's three fire stations and administrative facilities are staffed by thirty (30) career personnel and nine (9) volunteers, and one (1) civilian personnel. Fort Osage Fire Protection District personnel provide structural fire suppression, rural fire suppression, community risk reduction, public education, fire inspections, special rescue, hazardous materials response, and emergency medical services with advanced life support transport with an annual budget of 2.2 million dollars.

Fort Osage Fire Protection District spans approximately twenty (20) miles in length and encompasses suburban and rural areas. The district is considered mainly a bedroom and agricultural community with no major commercial base. Fort Osage Fire Protection District protects four (4) incorporated jurisdictions in addition to the other surrounding unincorporated areas. Two of our three fire stations are staffed with twenty-four (24) hour coverage and the third station is a training facility and volunteer station. Besides serving a large bedroom and agricultural community the District also serves the Fort Osage School District which include a senior and junior high school, two (2) middle schools, three (3) elementary schools, one (1)

alternative school, and one (1) vocational/technical school. The school district also has numerous ancillary buildings that include bus services, storage, and maintenance facilities. The school district provides education to approximately 5,500 students with a staff of 400 employees.

Fort Osage Fire Protection District also provides services to two (2) wastewater treatment facilities that handle wastewater for the Kansas City metropolitan area, one (1) coal steam powered electric plant, one (1) lumber treatment facility, two (2) drinking water treatment plants and twenty-three (23) churches. The mission of the FOFPD is to serve to protect your health, safety, and property (Fort Osage Fire Protection District [FOFPD], 2012). It is important for FOFPD's employees to understand the mission statement and have a clear understanding of what it means. This is done through our annual strategic planning process, monthly officer meetings and quarterly shift meetings with all employees. The district responds, on average, to 1500 emergency incidents annually and as many as 1700 emergencies in 2012. Fort Osage Fire Protection District has an Insurance Service Office (ISO) class of 3/5/10 due to the complexity of our response area. The new ISO ratings were provided to us in 2012 after participating in an extensive review process.

Fort Osage Fire Protection District also serves as the Emergency Management Agency (EMA) for the 110 square miles. As any EMA, the district is prepared for an all-hazard response and has a formal all-hazards plan approved by the State of Missouri Emergency Management Agency (SEMA). The emergency management system design utilizes the all-hazard plan which also includes a common hazard mitigation plan. Emergency management personnel from fire, emergency medical services, law enforcement, city administrators and county administrators participate in training and various types of exercises. The FOFPD is a member of the Local

Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC), Metropolitan Emergency Managers Committee (MEMC), and Mid-America Regional Council Emergency Responders (MARCER).

The problem with the FOFPD's all-hazard plan is the lack of a crisis communication plan. Even though SEMA does not require a formal crisis communication plan, the leaders of FOFPD feel and see the need to research and develop a crisis communication plan to either be part of FOFPD's all-hazard plan or as a stand-alone plan.

In the last 15 years FOFPD has experienced many challenging and complex incidents in which a crisis communication plan would have assisted in the dissemination of vital information. In 2002, the district experienced a crippling ice-storm which affected residents and businesses for five days. In 2007, the district experienced flash-flooding which affected over 40 homes, water system collapse, and roadway closures. In 2009 and 2011, the district faced flooding from the Missouri River in areas which were affected by the 1993 flood. This flooding affected an entire city within our response area and affecting over 300 residents and 20 businesses. In 2013, the district experienced its first line-of-duty death during a structural fire response that affected our personnel greatly but also the communities we provide service to. The district faced a crisis and people wanted information quickly and systematically which included friends and family of the firefighter. The district has also encountered many severe thunderstorm events causing straight-line wind, micro-burst, hail, and nearby tornado damage.

The need for a crisis communication plan is now, not later and this is the background and significance of this research paper is to provide FOFPD the information and foundation to move forward with developing a crisis communication plan. During any significant emergency or disaster, there is no formal plan or means of communicating vital information to the residents or

businesses within the district. The district has no defined plans or processes to utilize the internet, social media, phone lines, and local cable channels as information channels to provide crucial information to the public or businesses. The residents and business now only get their information from local media news channels which can cause a delay in vital information being disseminated in a timely and urgent manner.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The literature review was conducted through a review of text books, professional journals, national standards, emergency service periodicals, and the internet in order to provide information on current crisis communication plans both in the public and private sectors. On-line sources provided the most current and applicable data in many arenas. Through this literature review and research it became apparent that many organizations are not familiar with crisis communication plans, however, many have the need of developing a crisis communication plan for their organization.

Crisis communication is information activities provide by an organization or agency facing a crisis. The need to communicate about the crisis to stakeholders, public, and businesses is in great need. A crisis may be defined as any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of an organization and is normally brought on by adverse or negative situations. The underlying thread in both forms of crisis communication is that an unexpected and or threatening event requires an immediate response. The content, form, and timing of the communication can help reduce and contain the harm or make the situation worse. A crisis may also imply lack of control by involved organization based on the timing and resources available to respond or mitigate the incident. (CDC, 2012)

Crisis communication plans must have an overarching message. The key is to know what information needs to be provided to the public. The crisis communication plan must present a short, concise, and focused message with limited detail. The messenger must cut to the chase and provide relevant information only. Give actions steps to provide positive results and not negative results. Phrases like “Stay calm,” Stay in your home,” Boil drinking water,” is all positive responses to the public. Repeat the message within your message frequently. Create short informative action steps for the public to follow. Avoid technical jargon and acronyms the public will not understand. Do not use unnecessary filler within your message. Avoid condescending or judgmental phrases by attacking the crisis, not the person or organization. Do not use humor within your message and avoid discussing liability. These are all vital information components that must be taken into consideration when communicating your crisis message to the public. (IFSTA, 2004)

Organizations cannot just plan for day-to-day problems. They must consider what could happen when crisis hits their community and the spotlight of public interest is greater than ever before. The public looks to emergency service agencies for information and the answers during a crisis event. Emergency service agencies have known for years that they must develop and test crisis communication plans on a regular basis. Communications is a central function of crisis management, particularly when the crisis could involve huge loss of life and property. (Seymour, 2007) A formal crisis communication plan is the organizational stand-alone response document, which is intended as the “playbook” before or during a crisis event affecting the community that threatens the public’s safety and value of life.

It is important for organizations to conduct a stakeholder analysis when developing a crisis communication plan. Who has an immediate need to know about crisis? What categories of

stakeholders exist, internally and externally? These normally involve elected officials, board members, employees, neighboring agencies, business partners, customers, and many others could be identified. During the development of a crisis communication plan it is important for organizations to reach out and invite stakeholders with the development of the plan. The more information and feedback provided upfront the more thorough and complete the crisis communication plan will be. Many stakeholders will want an opportunity to ask questions or obtain more information from the organization during the crisis event. By allowing stakeholders a place at the table, they will have a more informed perception of what a crisis communication plan entails and requires to be successful. (Barton, 2008)

Organizations must plan for those 1 percent events, meaning those events we encounter 1 percent of the time. Many emergency service agencies do not concentrate on those 1 percent events until they have faced one. When the 1 percent emergency, disaster or crisis occurs something bad has happened or is currently happening, that is surprising on some level, and that and immediate response is required by local emergency agencies. A crisis involves many players, and depending on the location and the nature of the event, different agencies and groups take different roles. Government agencies and local agencies that may be involved in the response at some level include the following: (CDC, 2012)

- State public agencies
- Federal public agencies
- FEMA
- The U.S. Department of Homeland Security
- Fire departments

- Police departments
- Emergency medical services
- Health-care organizations
- American Red Cross / Salvation Army
- Faith-based organizations
- Businesses

When private organizations with large public relations departments find themselves experiencing a crisis, they have the luxury of turning to a large team of writers and trained spokespeople who have a variety of resources at their fingertips to disseminate proper and effective communication to the public. “Most public organizations don’t have adequate crisis management tools. Even when they do, the demands of the unique situation they face – a tornado damage path or large chemical leak for example – will stretch the skill sets of even the most accomplished professionals” (Barton, 2008, p. 214). Many emergency services are so involved within their day-to-day operations; they do not put any planning or organizing of the 1 percent event. And likely so, human nature allows us to concentrate and work in the areas we face day-to-day and not the event that is a once in a life-time. Why do you think buying a home, getting married, going through a divorce or having a kid is such a stressful situation? It is because they are events that we do not face day-to-day but maybe only a few or even once a lifetime events, organizations are no different when it comes to planning or preparing for a crisis.

The value of a strong crisis communication plan is hard to measure. There is currently no recognized method to measure the number of emergency’s or disasters that are prevented by effective crisis communication plans. Emergency management remains critical to all-hazards

functions and communication is the foundation of effectively and efficiently notifying the public when an emergency or disaster is near. The most important psychological effects of crises may be helped with the right communication. “Effective communication is not an attempt at mass mental therapy or a magic potion that will fix all problems. It is critical, reasoned, and necessary strategic response involving the selection of the message, messenger and method of delivery” (CDC, 2012).

It is important for emergency agencies utilizing a crisis communication plan to fully understand the psychological impact of a crisis. The public wants to feel empowered to take actions that will protect themselves and their family from harm. These physical and mental preparations may help relieve anxiety in the public arena. Many people want to help and having vital information allows them to make an informed decision that may assist them or their families. This is our responsibility to provide this level of communication.

In general, the public want access to as much information as possible. While in some cases too much information may be problematic, too little enhances the psychological stress. If information is incomplete or not present at all during a crisis, this will increase anxiety and increase a sense of powerlessness. It will also lower trust in government agencies and how they respond during a crisis event. The amount of media coverage of a traumatic event directly affects audience response partly by setting the public agenda. In many instances, such coverage can be damaging. (Sullivan, 2007, p.13)

It is important to understand these psychological effects of crisis on the public when developing a crisis communication plan. The importance of simplifying the message is of great importance because the public is going to hold on to their current beliefs, look for additional

information and opinions, and they normally believe the first message they hear. Emergency services must communicate quickly by providing a simple and effective message to the public.

The components identified within a crisis communication plan include: identifying the crisis communications team, identifying a spokesperson, training the spokesperson, establishing notification systems, identifying your internal and external stakeholders, develop possible short to the point messages, identify key messages, and training and education of the plan. Research indicates by having these components in place is like having a crisis information insurance policy for any organization. Any organization that has the components listed above developed and implemented will be closer to being prepared for communicating with their stakeholders than an organization that does not have these in place. (Barton, 2008)

The only effective way to prepare for a crisis event is to put the organizations crisis communication plan to the test through simulation events. It is amazing at the amount of data that can be provided by holding these simulated events with your agency administrators and public officials. Many times organizations are able to identify gaps within their communication crisis plan and are able to minimize or eliminate these gaps by continued training and revisions as needed. Public officials must understand in all phases of crisis planning and management – preparing, managing the crisis, or recovering afterward that these critical support elements must support the organizations efforts and provide the comprehensive support needed. (Stuver, 2006)

The National Fire Protection Association Standard 1600 – Standard on Disaster/Emergency Management and Business Continuity Programs which encompasses the standards or purpose of assisting organizations with crisis events and communication before and during the event. “Emergency communications and warning protocols, processes, and procedures

shall be developed, periodically tested and used to alert people potentially impacted by and actual or impending emergency” (National Fire Protection Association [NFPA-1600], 2004, 5.9.3).

Many severe weather outdoor warning sirens would fit this explanation in NFPA – 1600. For example, the MEMC’s metropolitan’s outdoor warning siren testing policy is as follows: outdoor warning sirens should be tested the first Wednesday of each month at 11:00 a.m. in conjunction with the routine weekly test (RWT) conducted by the National Weather Service. This test may be postponed or canceled based on the current or forecast weather for the day by the authority having jurisdiction. Some municipalities may opt out of this suggested time period due to other local factors. For instance, Fort Osage is a bedroom community and prefers to test its siren system on Saturday’s when a higher percentage of residents are home or in the community. (MEMC) This is an example of one warning or notification procedure that can be included within a crisis communication plan.

There are four crisis communication systems identified, implemented and tested across the United States on a regular basis. These communication systems are media based systems, outdoor warning sirens, computer based systems that utilize GIS and telephone interfaces and an all-hazard radio system. (Rowe, 2004) According to Rowe’s research media based systems are rated the least effective means of communicating during a crisis event. Outdoor warning systems are not effective because people have become complacent and the public has to something following the siren such as turning on local news media or searching the internet. A reverse 911 system allows public agencies to call citizens to notify them of events that could affect their safety and well-being. All-hazard radio systems such as the National Oceanic and Atmospheric

Administration (NOAA) radios can provide information to 90% of the public at any given time but only 5 – 10 percent of the general public own and all-hazards radio. (NOAA.gov)

During the 2009-2010 H1N1 and seasonal flu outbreak, the CDC and U.S. Department of Health and Human Service worked together to create a social media plan that provided information to the public through social media channels. By utilizing multiple formats to disseminate information, users had the option to participate based on their current up to the minute information based on the knowledge provided by the CDC and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The Center for Disease Control (CDC) developed portable content such as widgets, and online videos which were shared on their local Facebook page. This not only provided large amounts of information to the public in a crisis but also empowered the public to become health advocates by sharing the information. (DHS, 2012)

PROCEDURES

This research project utilized a descriptive research method to compile information and data relevant to how crisis communication plans can be attributed within the fire service. This research project was conducted to provide public officials and the leaders of FOFPD an understanding of how, what, and why crisis communication plans can benefit the employees, residents and businesses of the FOFPD. The Fort Osage Fire Protection District participates in LEPC, MEMC and MARCER within the greater Kansas City metropolitan area. All of the data used in this analysis was manually tabulated and analyzed by the author.

A questionnaire was developed on the current crisis communication systems being utilized by their organizations for their jurisdictional area. (*Appendix A*) The questionnaire was

sent via electronic-mail to our local distribution group which includes all local participants within the Metropolitan Emergency Managers Committee.

The author then began research using books, articles, and other literature sources. Notes were taken and resources tracked in the areas associated with crisis communication plans. Resources were obtained in the Learning Resource Center (LRC) at the National Fire Academy in Emmitsburg, Maryland and the Jackson County, Missouri Mid-Continent Regional Library system and the FOFPD fire service library. The author also conducted research via the internet providing vast amounts of information related to crisis communication plans. The author also utilized his current graduate studies on-line library. The research collected for this applied research project provided the author a holistic view organizational preparedness through crisis communication plans. Private, educational, and public organizations and resources were utilized in collecting the research for this paper.

This applied research aided in the ability for the author to answering: (1) what is a crisis communication plan; (2) what type of information should be disseminated during an crisis; (3) what current crisis communication systems are in use in the Fort Osage Fire Protection District region; (4) what stakeholders should be involved in developing a crisis communication plan; (5) what are the psychological benefits of a crisis communication plan?

All questionnaires have the potential for error and or misleading information for the author. This can be due to the way the questionnaire was structured and or on how the questions were interpreted by the respondent. This is a disclaimer from the author recognizing there is no way to determine if any misinterpretation exists or errors due to the structure of the questions. The author will assume that all respondents were honest and accurate while representing their

local jurisdictions. It is also important for the author to point out the research conducted and referenced has not be scientifically based or tested.

RESULTS

Through descriptive research, that included reviews of many written resources, internet sources, and analysis of the data provided by a questionnaire. The author found extensive resources and data supporting the five (5) research questions. The written and internet resources reviewed by the author described and explained what are within and required for the beginning of a crisis communication plan. The questionnaire conducted with this research was developed on the current crisis communication systems or notification systems being utilized by their organizations for their jurisdictional area.

Research question one: What is a crisis communication plan?

A crisis communication plan is the organizational stand-alone response document, which in intended as the “playbook” before or during a crisis event affecting the community that threatens the public’s safety and value of life to provide and disseminate vital information. Organizations cannot just plan for day-to-day problems. They must consider what could happen when crisis hits their community and the spotlight of public interest is greater than ever before. The public looks to emergency service agencies for information and the answers during a crisis event. Emergency service agencies have known for years that they must develop and test crisis communication plans on a regular basis to ensure validity and correct content. A formal crisis communication plan must be vetted to ensure quality not only for the organization but also for the public. Communications is a central function of crisis management, particularly when the crisis could involve huge loss of life and property. (Seymour, 2007)

The components within a crisis communication plan include: identifying the crisis communications team, identifying a spokesperson, training the spokesperson, establishing notification systems, identifying your internal and external stakeholders, develop possible short to the point messages, identify key messages, and training and education of the plan. Research indicates by having these components in place is like having a crisis information insurance policy for any organization. Any organization that has the components listed above developed and implemented will be closer to being prepared for communicating with their stakeholders than an organization that does not have these in place. (Barton, 2008)

Research question two: What type of information should be disseminated during a crisis?

A crisis may be defined as any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of an organization and is normally brought on by adverse or negative situations. The underlying thread in both forms of crisis communication is that an unexpected and or threatening event requires an immediate response. The content, form, and timing of the communication can help reduce and contain the harm or make the situation worse. A crisis may also imply lack of control by involved organization based on the timing and resources available to respond or mitigate the incident. (CDC, 2012)

Crisis communication plans must have an overarching message. The key is to know what information needs to be provided to the public. The crisis communication plan must present a short, concise, and focused message with limited detail. The messenger must cut to the chase and provide relevant information only. Give actions steps to provide positive results and not negative results. Phrases like “Stay calm,” Stay in your home,” Boil drinking water,” are all positive responses to the public. Repeat the message within your message frequently. Create short

informative action steps for the public to follow. Avoid technical jargon and acronyms the public will not understand. Do not use unnecessary filler within your message. Avoid condescending or judgmental phrases by attacking the crisis, not the person or organization. Do not use humor within your message and avoid discussing liability. These are all vital information components that must be taken into consideration when communicating your crisis message to the public. (IFSTA, 2004)

The information provided through crisis communication plans can simply make or break an organization. It is important for organizations to ensure the information obtained through the crisis communication plan is vetted and is approved by crisis communication team or agency administrator. There is a systematic process that must be followed and the process must be implemented immediately for organizational success of providing the correct and proper life-saving information to the public.

Research question three: What current crisis communication systems are in use in the Fort Osage Fire Protection District region?

There are four crisis communication systems identified, implemented and tested across the United States on a regular basis. These communication systems are media based systems, outdoor warning sirens, computer based systems that utilize GIS and telephone interfaces and an all-hazard radio system. (Rowe, 2004) The author utilized a questionnaire (*Appendix A*) for this research question. A total of 46 emergency management agency representatives were provided the questionnaire. A total of 32 agency representative responded providing a total of 70 percent return of the questionnaire. The questionnaire was basic in requesting how or what notification

systems their agency disseminates crisis communication information to the public on a regular basis.

Summary of crisis notification systems available in FOFPD region

Question/Answer	MEMC Count	Response Percent
Internet (Social Media)	32	100
Local Cable TV	12	37.5
Face to Face	2	6.25
Local News Channels	32	100
Reverse 911	5	15.6
Code Red™ or Nixle™	24	75
Other	13	40.6

The results of the questionnaire showed that 100% of the agencies representatives utilize internet, social media or local news channels to disseminate crisis information to the public. When using other systems such as Code Red™ or Nixle™ 75% of the agency representatives utilize these types of systems for crisis notification to residents and businesses. The author was surprised to see that two organizations actually utilize face to face communication for crisis notification, which provides proof that questionnaires are not a 100 percent reliable for data collection for applied research projects. Cable TV channels were utilized 37.5 percent of the time and were more than likely dependent on access to local cable TV channels. Other data elements were outliers in which the author took note of, however, did not provide any significant data available.

Research question four: What stakeholders should be involved in developing a crisis communication plan?

It is important to realize in emergency services we have numerous internal and external stakeholders. These stakeholders are identified to our employees and their families to the general public. Through this research it was derived that when developing a crisis communication plan you must ensure that stakeholders have a seat at the table. This will ensure a diverse crisis communication plan and a plan that the local stakeholders have identified for themselves.

Stakeholders normally involve elected officials, board members, employees, neighboring agencies, business partners, customers, the public and many others. The more information and feedback provided upfront the more thorough and complete the crisis communication plan will be. Many stakeholders will want an opportunity to ask questions or obtain more information from the organization during the crisis event. By allowing stakeholders a place at the table, they will have a more informed perception of what a crisis communication plan entails and requires to be successful. (Barton, 2008)

Research question five: What are the psychological benefits of a crisis communication plan?

Through the research conducted by the author it was apparent that by providing information to the public in a timely manner during a crisis actually decreased the psychological effects on the public. In some cases it actually allowed the public to become more of an advocate for life-saving information rather than the victim of the event. The importance of simplifying the emergency message during a crisis is of great importance because the public is going to hold on to their current beliefs, look for additional information and opinions, and they normally believe the first message they hear.

Emergency services must communicate quickly by providing a simple and effective message to the public to reduce psychological effects. “While in some cases too much information may be problematic, too little enhances the psychological stress. If information is incomplete or not present at all, during a crisis, this will increase anxiety and increase a sense of powerlessness” (Sullivan, 2007). This process will also degrade the effectiveness of the emergency agency and how they inform the public during a crisis event.

DISCUSSION

In order to obtain an understanding of crisis communication plans and the required components and facets within a formal plan, the author analyzed the research provided through literature review and the results from the questionnaire. Through research it was identified that communicating effectively and efficiently during a crisis event is challenging for many public organizations. This is due to lack of preparation, planning and training at public organizational level. Emergency providers are good at mitigating the crisis but not communicating how, when, what and where the crisis event is occurring or being mitigated.

Literature review provided an understanding of what a crisis is and what a crisis communication plan entails. Crisis communication is information activities provide by an organization or agency facing a crisis. The need to communicate about the crisis to stakeholders, public, and businesses is in great need. A crisis may be defined as any situation that threatens the integrity or reputation of an organization and is normally brought on by adverse or negative situations. The underlying thread in both forms of crisis communication is that an unexpected and or threatening event requires an immediate response. The content, form, and timing of the communication can help reduce and contain the harm or make the situation worse. A crisis may

also imply lack of control by involved organization based on the timing and resources available to respond or mitigate the incident. (CDC, 2012)

Emergency services must understand and take ownership in developing crisis communication plans for their organizations. This allows the organization to have a “playbook” to get things started. Without a crisis communication plan many organizations are not working toward the overall strategy of community risk reduction. All information is crucial during a crisis and this information should be shared with the public in a systematic and proper format. During a crisis event, an organization’s ability to communicate vetted and consistent information increases the perception and ability of the organization to effectively and efficiently mitigate the incident.

As the author discussed earlier within this paper, effective communication early reduces psychological effects on the public and responders allowing them to take their time and make informed live-saving decisions. The FOFPD has a full-time emergency manager who coordinates the all-hazards planning, training and procedures. However, the emergency manager is also tied to other operational duties of basic fire suppression and emergency medical services. This does not allow for a full-time emergency manager to concentrate effectively on providing crucial information to the public in a timely manner.

The components within a crisis communication plan provide a lot of coordination and planning by emergency management personnel and stakeholders. The public and our stakeholders depend on us daily. Without proper preparation and the ability to have a crisis communication plan presents a large gap in the service we provide. The fire service is always preaching the importance of communication on the fireground, in the station, and in the public,

however, we are not preaching the importance of communicating with our customers during a crisis event. The public has a high level of confidence with many emergency service organizations, in order to keep the confidence level high, we must communicate and communicate effectively at all times, especially during a crisis event involving a large emergency or disaster.

Literature review supports that communication is one of the most important aspects for an effectively informing the public of a crisis or during a crisis. Results from the questionnaire provided the author data supporting that there is no set way of communicating with the public during a crisis. Many organizations all use different types of notification systems which may or may not work effectively. The author believes many emergency service organizations are comfortable with their current crisis communication processes and have not truly reviewed what is possible. With the technology advances of smart phones and internet usage the public has access to communication channels during a crisis at their fingertips. Many agencies are utilizing software programs such as Code Red™ or Nixle™ and social media networks such as Facebook, Twitter, and even Instagram to notify residents of a crisis event. The American Red Cross has applications available for crisis events that notify your phone or pager with immediate communication. Emergency service agencies must take hold of this progress and implement technology into their crisis communication plans. It is important to understand that no community or public and private organizations are immune to crisis. It is not a matter of if but a matter of when the crisis event occurs, is you organization going to be prepared to communicate effectively and efficiently to the people we serve to protect?

RECOMMENDATIONS

Through problem identification and the research process this author understands what components are required within the beginning development and facets of a crisis communication plan for emergency service organizations. The recommendation section will provide the foundation to the beginning of developing a crisis communication plan for the Fort Osage Fire Protection District (FOFPD). In the last 15 years FOFPD has experienced some crisis events in which a crisis communication plan could of have been utilized. It is apparent with FOFPD leaders and directors that a plan should be developed and be integrated within our all-hazard planning.

The leaders of FOFPD will begin with this applied research paper as the basis to support the need and foundation of a crisis communication plan. The research provided valuable information and a gap analysis for the FOFPD one what to communicate and when to communicate before or during a crisis. As the research proved that the gap in crisis communication is apparent and should be addressed by the FOFPD as soon as possible. It is apparent that FOFPD must improve the way they communicate before or during a crisis with the public and businesses. Based on this research project the following recommendation shall be made.

Fort Osage Fire Protection District must evaluate and conduct a needs assessment gathering data of what the public and business need or want when it comes to communication during a crisis. The author recommends developing an advisory committee made up of local and regional stakeholders. The advisory committee will develop the strategic plan and beginning stages of a crisis communication plan. This is not a plan that is developed and then put on a shelf

and pulled down every so often, just to say FOFPD has a plan. This plan should be initiated during training and educational events so members are familiar with the plan and understand the premise of the plan. Continuous feedback must be obtained through the evaluation phase during these events and during crisis events. The plan will need to be reviewed at a minimum annually and revised as needed. As technology continues to evolve and the culture of our communities evolves along with technology, FOFPD must stay ahead and be prepared to revise the plan to fit the needs of our community.

Once the crisis communication plan has been developed we must educate the public, businesses and schools on crisis communications. Since the public is not under the direct order of the FOFPD, the public should be educated on how and why we communicate during a crisis. By educating the public, we reduce the psychological effects of our residents and visitors. “Effective communication is not an attempt at mass mental therapy or a magic potion that will fix all problems. It is critical, reasoned, and necessary strategic response involving the selection of the message, messenger and method of delivery” (CDC, 2012).

These efforts should be led by the FOFPD’s emergency management director who already has strong connections with local civic groups and governmental agencies. A task force should be developed within the FOFPD to assist the emergency management director to assist the advisory committee towards the development, education, and implementation of the FOFPD crisis communication plan.

The author would also advise other emergency service agencies to develop crisis communication plans if not already in place. And if your agency currently has a crisis communication plan, when was the last time it was utilized, updated and revised to meet the

needs of your community? “No community and no organization, public or private is immune from crises. Even in cases where there are clear warning signs, most people are still surprised when a crisis occurs” (Seeger, 2006). It is our responsibility and duty as emergency service providers to ensure that proper and vetted communication is provided to the public in a quick timely manner before or during the crisis event.

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Appendix A

Fort Osage Fire Protection District Crisis
Communication and Notification Questionnaire

Fort Osage Fire Protection District / Emergency Management Agency is providing your agency with a brief questionnaire of your communication capabilities during normal operational periods and during a crisis event. Through this questionnaire FOFPD is reviewing their current operations in order to provide a more timely dissemination of verified information to the public during a crisis event such as tornado, severe thunderstorms, winter storms etc...

Please feel free to contact me Deputy Chief Jeremy Young at 816-650-5811 or jyoung@fortosagefire.org if you have any questions or concerns with this questionnaire. The data provided will be utilized within an Applied Research Project for the Executive Fire Officer program through the National Fire Academy.

1. How do you receive information before or during a crisis event such as a tornado, severe thunderstorm, flash flooding, and severe winter storms occurring within your community or local area?

☐ Social Media
☐ Internet
☐ Local Cable TV
☐ Local News Media
☐ Face to Face
☐ Code Red or Nixle
☐ Reverse 911
☐ Other

2. How do you notify the public before or during a crisis event such as a tornado, severe thunderstorm, flash flooding, and severe winter storms occurring within your community or local area?

☐ Social Media
☐ Internet
☐ Local Cable TV
☐ Local News Media
☐ Face to Face
☐ Code Red or Nixle
☐ Reverse 911
☐ Other