CRISIS+EMERGENCY RISKCOMMUNICATION

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CERC: Other Communication Channels

U.S. Department of
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CERC: Other Communication Channels

The following topics are addressed in this chapter:

- Communication channel attributes

- Channel characteristics and features

- Applying specific communication tools

Selecting and Using Communication Channels during a Public Health Emergency

There are major communication issues beyond working with the media that must be addressed in preparation for crises. At the community, state, and national levels, the public expects access to the government during an emergency.

Effective ways to provide access includes the Web, e-mail, social media, and toll-free information telephone lines. As the public health crisis evolves beyond the first 24 to 48 hours, the demand increases for information outside traditional media channels, such as radio, TV, newspaper, and websites that provide news.[1] Choosing the right communication channels to reach your target audiences is crucial to the public's health and safety. The public information official must select the right delivery methods for a particular set of circumstances.

Communication Channel Attributes

Channels of Communication during a Crisis

A channel of communication is simply the way a message is carried. In a crisis, messages are delivered in many ways. Message delivery might be low-tech, such as handwritten flyers or messages painted on buildings during floods. Message delivery may also be high-tech, such as two-way Internet channels used with social media.

Selecting the appropriate channels and methods for communication is important for reaching your target audiences. This is especially important with health risk communication, where participants can quickly feel excluded if they do not believe they are getting adequate information in a timely manner.

More and more, audiences are fragmented, turning to specialized and localized outlets for news and information. In addition, different channels of communication have different strengths. Newspapers are excellent for reporting detailed investigations and in-depth news. Television delivers information very

quickly and can present the visual elements of the story. Some channels are more interactive and even personal, such as telephone or call-in talk radio. Television, radio, telephones, and the Internet may have a wider reach but require working infrastructure, which may be damaged during emergencies such as in a hurricane, flood, or tornado.

The Demographics

According to a 2010 Pew Center study, about 92% of Americans use multiple channels of communication for news, and 59% use both online and offline news sources. Unlike offline news consumers, most of the online news readers use only a handful of favorite sites, and 35% use a single news site.[2]

News today is often described as portable, personalized, and participatory:

- About 33% of mobile device owners get news on their devices.[2]

- About 28% of Internet users have created personalized news options.[2]

- About 37% of Internet users report that they have created or reacted to a story online.[2]

Internet news users are younger, more affluent, and better educated.[3] Poorer and older audiences, those most vulnerable during a crisis, are less likely to receive their news from the Internet.[2,4] For many minority audiences, specialized news sources are particularly important. More than 3,000 ethnic media organizations operate in the United States, serving an audience of 57 million.[5] Many of these organizations are small foreign-language outlets, newspapers, cable news shows, or local radio programs.[2]

Channels can be classified in the following ways:

- Face to face, such as health-care professional to patient, organization's staff member to state partner organization, and organization's staff member to individuals in the community

- Group delivery, such as communicating to a small group and participating in smaller public meetings

- Public communication, such as public presentations to larger meetings

- Organizational communication by response stakeholders and partners, via organizational messages, web pages, and publications

- Mass media, such as radio, television, newspaper, and direct mail

- Social media, such as Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube

- Community, such as employers, schools, malls, health groups, and local government agencies

- Word of mouth

Your communication strategy should use a combination of any or all of these to reach a broad audience. During a crisis, use as many channels as possible. It is important to ensure the widest distribution of messages. In these cases, it is important to have close coordination and overall consistency of messages between channels. While messages will need to be adapted to the selected communication channel, consistency is key.

Channel Characteristics and Features

Multiple Options Available

During a disaster, television and radio are most widely used because they are the most immediate channels of communication,[6] but online channels are also used:

- Radio reports are nearly real time as people call in with reports of news.

- Many radio and TV stations have very close community connections, and are able to serve the needs of the community during a crisis.

- Social media channels are increasingly important. In many cases, the first news of a crisis will probably be shared via Twitter or Facebook.

- YouTube videos made with cell phone cameras can also be expected for many crises. (Social media will be discussed more fully in Chapter 9.)

As people try to connect with friends and family, word of mouth becomes an important form of crisis communication. They want to learn what others are doing in response to the crisis. Crises have a powerful emotional impact on people, and they often want to share the experience with friends and family as well as confirm that others are safe.

Crisis, in many cases, become news stories. One study of the September 11, 2001, attacks found that by noon that day, 99% of the respondents had heard of the attacks and approximately 91% turned to the media for more information. Most of them used television. The average viewer watched 8 hours of television coverage the day of the attacks. Word of mouth, television, and radio were the most common channels for learning about the attacks.[7]

KPBS Radio and the 2007 San Diego Wildfires[8]

In October 2007, a series of wildfires in the San Diego region burned more than 800 square miles, destroyed 2,200 homes, and caused the evacuation of millions of people. The local public radio station, KPBS, had covered such crises before, such as the 2000 wildfires and the 2001 shooting at a local high school. KPBS became the primary news source for the community thanks to its forward-thinking crisis-coverage plan and use of online technologies.

Along with 80 hours of continuous live coverage, KPBS used an interactive Google map, cell phone alerts using Twitter, and Flickr photos to chart the fires' paths and to update information about relief centers and evacuation routes. The information came from the station's reporters, emergency authorities' news releases, and residents' call-in reports. The radio station and its online website soon became the definitive wildfire news source, receiving more than 132,000 visits per day.[8]

Other organizations recognized the radio station's coverage and stepped in to help. When KPBS servers got overloaded, Google offered to host its Google map and increase its bandwidth. When the station's radio tower was consumed by the fire, it still streamed their broadcast online and a local FM radio station agreed to switch over and carry KPBS' news feed.

A study of those residents affected by the wildfires showed the impact of KPBS' coverage. One citizen commented, "I used KPBS' Twitter page and their excellent Google map overlay. Listened to KPBS via an Internet stream when their radio transmitter burned."[9] People felt that KPBS was a timely and accurate source of local information and appreciated its use of social media and online streaming broadcasts when other traditional news formats became compromised. KPBS' cutting-edge coverage and close ties with the community made the station a credible and trustworthy news source for the public.

Questions to Ask When Selecting Channels

- Which channels are most likely to reach your target audience?

- Which channels are most appropriate for the health-risk problems, issues, and messages?

- Which channels will be most accessible given the specific event?

- Which channels will the target audience find credible?

- Which channels will deliver the message in the appropriate time frame?

- Which channels fit the program's purpose? (Are you trying to inform, influence, allay fears, sway attitudes, or change behaviors?)

- Which channels should be used and how many channels are feasible, considering the schedule and budget?

Telephone Call Centers during an Emergency

The telephone can help your organization keep in touch with audiences during a crisis and allow for transparency and feedback.[10] Typically, a crisis response will include some form of toll-free hotline to a call center where the public can call with questions. Consider the following when planning for toll-free number services:

- Decide between rapid expansion of an existing phone number or a new toll-free number generated specifically for the emergency.

- Make sure the service is expandable in terms of number of calls managed per hour or day and the hours of operation.

- Make sure the toll-free number is answered by trained people who reassure callers, provide requested information, and can refer callers as needed.

- Make precleared materials on multiple subjects easily accessible during an emergency.
  - Confirm that your materials are specific to the emergency and the community.
  - Make certain they are easy to read and understand. Use plain language.
  - Have them available in multiple languages based on community needs.
  - Field test them during your pre-crisis phase for word choices, readability, cultural sensitivity, and other preferences.

- Establish standards of performance and evaluation, such as customer satisfaction, response capacity, and accuracy.

- Call managers must be able to quickly integrate new information into their responses during an emergency.

E-mail Services

Many organizations include a public e-mail response option.[10] Consider the following in advance:

- At the start of the e-mail response service, publicly state how long it might take for members of the public to get a response to an e-mail. Response time frames such as 2 hours, 24 hours, or within the same week are helpful.

- Provide a way that is faster than the standard e-mail response service for the public to reach the organization if the need is more urgent.

- Advise people to contact their health-care providers or 9-1-1 for a personal medical emergency.

Social Media

Social media channels are increasingly important. The first news of a crisis may be reported through them. For example, within one week of the 2010 Haiti earthquake, more than one in 10 Americans, including 24% of those younger than 30, say they received or shared information about the Haiti earthquake through Facebook, Twitter, or other social networking sites.[2]

Social media may provide opportunities to reach members of the public. Even though social media are increasingly used by organizations during an emergency, the public uses these channels on a much greater scale to seek and share information just after the event. People who join and use Twitter during a crisis or disaster are more likely to adopt long-term use of the technology.[11] This approach is useful in communicating the most up-to-date information to the public during a crisis.

Applying Specific Communication Tools

Making Your Selection

The tools you use will depend on your audience and the situation:

- What channels are available (after a fire, tornado, power outages, etc.)?

- How does your audience prefer to receive information?

- How do you wish to provide the information using your available channels?

- What are your overall goals under the present situation?

Following are tools that may be useful during an emergency. They include briefings, community mailings, exhibits, flyers, newsletters, open houses, presentations, public meetings, focus groups, and personal telephone contacts.

Briefings

A briefing is a session with many state and local officials, media representatives, and community leaders.[10] Briefings help to inform them of response-related developments at the site, such as results of studies or actions that should be taken to protect health. You can use a briefing to introduce your organization and explain its role and work process. Briefings are not usually open to the general public in the manner of an open house.

Conducting briefings:

- Schedule briefings in a small public room, in a neutral location, such as a hotel meeting room or a conference room.

- Prepare a fact sheet or question-and-answer sheet.

- Present a short, official statement about the agency's findings, health concerns, or recent developments.

- Use simple language. Avoid jargon, acronyms, and overly technical terms.

- Answer questions about the statement.

- Work with other organizations to coordinate briefing plans.

Benefits of briefings:

- Briefings allow state and local officials, the media, and community leaders to ask questions about any activity before the public release of information.

- Briefings prepare officials and citizen leaders to answer questions from their constituents when the information becomes public.

- Briefings allow for the exchange of information and concerns.

Limitations of briefings:

- Although briefings can be effective, they may become the only means of communicating with site-specific communities. Make sure they are followed by activities to inform the general public, such as small group or public meetings.

- Be aware of negative feelings or bad publicity after briefings as a result of leaving people out who believe they should have been invited. Be sure not to exclude such persons or convey the perception of favoritism.

Community Mailings

A community mailing is a way to send information to key contacts, and concerned or involved members of the community. Mailings disseminate information easily, in writing. They are particularly useful when there are updates for the community.[10] However, many crises disrupt local mail service and can delay or impede mailings. As electronic forms of communication have grown, traditional mail delivery has become less popular and less expected.[12]

If the updates are straightforward, not controversial, and easy to understand, the mailing can stand on its own. However, if the updates are more complicated and require discussion or further explanation, the mailing should be made in conjunction with a public meeting or small group meetings. The community mailing can announce upcoming meetings and provide advance information or serve as a follow-up for people who did not attend previous meetings.

Developing a community mailing:

- Compile your mailing list, which should include the following:

  - State and local officials, who can be identified by checking with city, county, or parish officials

  - Community leaders, who can be identified by checking with the local chamber of commerce and other officials

  - Leaders from faith-based organizations (FBOs), businesses, nonprofits, schools, civic groups, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs)

  - Local residents of the site area, who can be identified by checking with the city clerk for assistance

  - Community members who have signed up to receive information

- When creating mailing materials, do the following:

  - Provide a cover letter that introduces you, briefly explains the purpose of the mailing, and provides contact information for comments or questions.

  - Include a fact sheet, newsletter, report, or other documents as well as suggestions about where to get additional information.

  - Keep materials simple, focused, and encourage plain language. Plain language (also called plain English) is communication your audience can understand the first time they read or hear it.[13]

Benefits of a community mailing:

- May require less planning time than a meeting

- Allows for coverage of an entire geographic area, such as every household in a specific postal zip code

Limitations of a community mailing:

- It is not as quick as electronic methods of delivering information

- Mailings allow no interaction or opportunity for community members to ask questions.

- Residents may not read the mailing.

- Mailings are only an option if mail service is available.

- Large mailings may present logistics concerns and cost challenges.

Exhibits

Exhibits are visual displays such as maps, charts, diagrams, or photographs and can help illustrate issues and proposed actions.[10] Effective exhibits can make technical information accessible and understandable. Exhibits can be used during any phase of site work and can be installed in locations where there is high traffic or where specific target audiences may be reached.

Creating an exhibit:

- Identify the target audience, such as the following:
  - The general public
  - Concerned residents
  - Media representatives
  - Public officials
  - Community leaders

- Include specific messages, such as the following:
  - Descriptions of a specific health risk
  - Remedies and actions to protect community health
  - Processes or methods, such as how to file forms or claims
  - Historical background information related to the issue
  - Community relations activities.

- Decide where it will be placed, preferably in a highly visible location, such as an evacuation center, public library, convention hall, or shopping center. This is especially applicable when residents are your target audience.

- Set up a temporary exhibit at a public meeting if a segment of concerned community members is the target audience.

- Design it according to the message to be transmitted and include photos or illustrations. Use text sparingly. A bulletin board could suffice, if appropriate.

- If possible, staff the exhibit with someone to answer questions, guide people through complicated issues, and gain feedback.

Benefits of an exhibit:

- Stimulates public, partner, and stakeholder interest and understanding

- Creates visual impact and leaves a lasting impression

- Provides a physical presence for an agency

Limitations of an exhibit:

- If not staffed, will be a one-way communication tool that does not provide an opportunity for community feedback

- May become obsolete if circumstances change

- May be damaged or changed

- Takes time and can be expensive to produce

Flyers

A flyer is a brief statement, usually one page, sharing current or proposed activities, announcing or clarifying some activity, or seeking or presenting some specific information.[10] Flyers are appropriate whenever new information is available. They also can be produced and distributed quickly in response to emerging information and can be an effective on-site tool.

Flyers can be useful for the following:

- Introducing your organization and explaining its role

- Explaining specific health risks and guiding community members in precautionary health actions

- Announcing new findings or information

- Reaching audiences at public meetings or community gatherings

- Disseminating information when other channels are not available

Flyers contain the following types of information:

- Explanation of the triggering event that caused a health-risk situation

- Timetable for some proposed actions

- Description of health concerns or problems

- Description of recommended health actions

- Description of public participation opportunities

- Name, address, and phone number of contact person who can provide additional information on request

Create flyers following these guidelines:

- Select a simple, one-page format.

- Be clear and concise.

- Avoid jargon, acronyms, or highly technical language.

- Clearly identify the agency.

- Include the date the flyer was released.

- Include contact information for additional assistance.

Benefits of flyers:

- They briefly summarize key facts, issues, and actions.

- They provide background for information discussed during a meeting.

- They can be produced very quickly.

- They are low-tech and flexible.

Limitations of flyers:

- They are a one-way communication tool.

- They require careful writing and balance between the need to make technical information easy to understand and the need to deliver an accurate message.

- Your organization must have physical access to deliver them.

- They will require clearance.

Newsletters

A newsletter is a paper or electronic publication informing community members about activities, findings, health precautions, and other information.[10]

Newsletters are generally assumed to be ongoing communication tools. There is an expectation of more than one issue. You may need to structure them to include several articles on a related topic.

Newsletters topic areas may include the following:

- Overview of the agency and background of its involvement at the site or in this event

- An open letter from the director or agency head

- Plans for your organization's onsite work and findings, if available

- Health guidelines, if applicable

- A description of upcoming activities and previous organization activities that have taken place in the community

- Frequently asked questions and answers

- Contact information for the organization, as well as resources for additional information

- Timelines of key events

Consider the following in your newsletter design:

- Add dates and edition numbers to your newsletters.

- Use simple, easy-to-understand language with headlines, boxes, lines, type variations, and other effects to make the newsletter attractive and easy to follow.

- Establish a page limit.

- Use two colors if resources allow.

- Electronic newsletters can include links to other sites and sources of information.

Distribute the newsletter to the mailing list. You can also distribute it at public or small group meetings. If there is a central gathering place in the community, ask to leave copies there for community members. Place newsletters on your website.

Benefits of a newsletter:

- Explains activities and findings to the community

- Serves as a written document that community members can keep and refer to later

- Allows for multiple messages on a related topics

- Allows community organizations to become a central point for disseminating information

Limitations of a newsletter:

- Can cause problems if community members do not understand or are angered by the messages

- Does not give community members the opportunity to ask questions or provide feedback (Always include contact information in your newsletter so people have a way to ask questions.)

- Creates the expectation of ongoing communication

- Printed newsletters may be expensive and difficult to disseminate.

Open Houses and Availability Sessions

An open house or availability session is an informal meeting where community members can speak with agency staff one on one, in a more relaxed informal manner.[10] It is most appropriate when key milestones or major decisions have been reached.

Conducting an open house or availability session:

- Determine community interest in the site before planning an open house.

- Select a date, time, and location for the open house. To encourage attendance, choose evening hours or weekends at an easily accessible building familiar to residents, such as a public library or local meeting room.

- Anticipate the number of attendees and plan accordingly. Consider holding two open houses to enable staff to greet and talk with each attendee. One staff member per 15 to 20 attendees generally fosters an informal atmosphere for conversation and helps avoid the condition of speaking to a crowd.

- Publicize the open house at least 2 weeks before the event. Send announcements to newspapers, television stations, radio stations, residents on the mailing list, and any interested community organizations that publish newsletters.

- Create exhibits and fact sheets to provide background information. This enables residents to ask more informed questions during the open house.

- Include personnel that are prepared to discuss technical information in an easy-to-understand manner.

Benefits of an open house:

- Allows for one-on-one interaction and feedback.

- Creates the image of accessibility and transparency.

- Helps build trust and establishes a rapport between community members and agency staff.

Limitations of an open house:

- It requires extra staff time for planning and conducting an open house.

- Turnout may not justify the effort.

- Physical location may not be adequate.

Presentations

A presentation can be a speech to a community organization, civic or faith-based groups, businesses, nonprofit organizations, ethnic groups, schools, or similar local audiences.[10] Presentations often focus on such major milestones as accomplishments, research findings, or health recommendations. They may also serve as a way to create community interest and commitment.

Developing a presentation:

- Organize the presentation according to your goals and the information you have.

- Describe the issue and how it affects the audience.

- Talk about what the organization is doing to address the situation.

- Discuss how residents can assist and obtain additional information.

- Select materials to support the presentation, such as slides, graphics, and exhibits to hold the audience's interest.

- Conduct a trial presentation in front of colleagues and rehearse the presentation several times.

Benefits of a presentation:

- Offers the audience a chance to ask questions allowing the agency to gauge community concerns

- Reaches many people simultaneously, reducing individual inquiries

- Provides an opportunity to inform and persuade

Limitations of a presentation:

- Requires presentation skills

- If poorly presented, distorts your audience's view of the situation

- Can only address individual community concerns during a question-and-answer period following the rehearsed presentation, which could try people's patience

- Presenter may face difficult or argumentative questions from community members
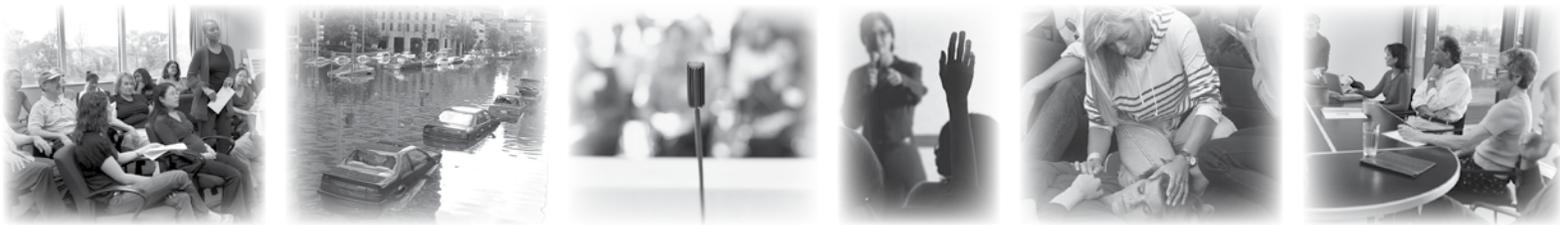
Public Meetings

A public meeting is generally a larger assembly, open to the public, where experts present information and answer questions, and community members ask questions and offer comments.[10]

Arranging a public meeting:

- Develop an agenda with the involvement of residents and other interested groups.

- Hold the meeting in a public space, with a comfortable setting that is easily accessible, well lit, and has adequate parking and seating, especially for people with disabilities.

- Be sensitive to special needs of your audience:
  - Consider hiring translators for people who do not speak English.
  - Use sign language for hearing-impaired participants, if possible.

- Announce the meeting through local media outlets two weeks in advance if possible. Distribute flyers to community members and groups interested in attending. Announce the meeting through social media. Explain that the meeting is not a formal public hearing but, rather, a place to exchange information and comments.

- Follow up with members of the media closer to the meeting time to encourage attendance. Send a media alert, which contains brief information about the meeting date, time, and topic. Consider making phone calls to key contacts.

- Conducting the meeting:
  - State the purpose of the meeting then outline the agenda and the procedures for making statements.
  - Present preliminary findings and proposed courses of action.
  - Distribute materials, including fact sheets and other materials, for participants to take home or read ahead.
  - Prepare a transcript of the meeting, make the transcript publicly available, and announce how it can be obtained.
  - Have a finite time for the meeting.
  - Allow time for comments. Include a question-and-answer session. Meetings should last from 1 to 3 hours.

"There were town hall meetings in communities along the coast and we put together news releases. We put together talking points for our administrators and medical directors who worked in those communities. So they could speak on behalf of the state and on behalf of DHH to assure the people that we had their best interest at heart, that we were doing everything we could to show them that everything was fine and if there were any problems we would let them know that there were health issues."

Ken Pastorick,
Public Information Officer,
Louisiana Department of
Health and Hospitals

- Consider audio or videotaping the meeting so you can refer to it to refresh your memory on community concerns, if necessary.

- Consider posting video on the website.

Benefits of a public meeting:

- Creates an image of openness and transparency

- Provides an opportunity for community members to hear from others

- Allows the audience to express concerns and your agency to present information and respond

Limitations of public meetings:

- They require skill in managing discussions.

- Public meetings can intensify conflicts rather than resolve controversies. If public meetings have failed in the past, use an alternative method, such as small group meetings or a formal public hearing, to transmit information and obtain feedback.

- Consider that your available facilities may not be favorable for holding public meetings.

Small Group or Focus Group Meetings

Small group meetings allow for more interaction between members.[10] At a small group meeting, for example, agency personnel share information with interested community members, stakeholders, partners, and state and local officials. It is especially useful for informing and keeping in touch with community concerns, answering questions, and clearing up any misconceptions or misunderstandings. Small groups can also be used to test messages before they are released to the general public.

Preparing for a small group meeting:

- Identify interested residents, key contacts, leaders from all sectors, and officials.

- Contact each resident, group, or local organization directly affected by site activities. Offer to discuss public health issues at a convenient time.

- Limit attendance to between 5 to 20 people. If more community members and officials are interested, schedule additional small meetings.

- Decide whether to invite the media. Media presence may intimidate your participants. You may want to hold a similar meeting for media only.

- Select a meeting place conducive to two-way interaction. Place chairs in a circle or other informal arrangement.

- Select a date and time that allows for maximum participation. Make sure that the date and time do not conflict with other public meetings, holidays, or other special occasions.

Conducting a small group meeting:

- Ask, but do not insist, that people provide contact information so you have a record of who attended.

- Begin with an overview of current and future activities and findings.

- Encourage participation.

- Distribute fact sheets and other written information for attendees to take home.

- Follow up on major concerns. Stay in touch with the group and contact newly formed groups.

Benefits of a small group meeting:

- Allows two-way interaction with the participants

- Provides a method for acquiring direct feedback

- Enables participants to engage in consensus building

Limitations of a small group meeting:

- They require a day or more of staff time to reach only a few participants.

- It may be perceived by community groups as an effort to limit attendance or a tactic to prevent large groups from exerting influence. If this happens, hold additional small group meetings with organizations that express concern about being left out of the process.

- Irate groups or individuals may accuse your organization's staff of giving different information to different groups. Avoid criticism by inviting a cross section of community representatives to each small group meeting and by keeping a record. The record may be written, audio, or video.

Personal Telephone Contacts

Personal telephone contacts with state officials, local officials, and concerned community members can be used to build important relationships. Personally informing them of your organization's activities, finding out who is involved, and gathering information about the event can be helpful in building trust. After an initial contact is made, follow-up calls can inform these individuals and monitor the extent of community concerns.[14]

Make calls periodically to inform key contacts of any major findings and the progress of activities. Telephone contacts help you understand community concerns and gather information for your organization.

When making telephone contacts, know exactly what information to request, such as additional references, site specifics, or background information, and tailor questions accordingly. Information to solicit from these contacts might include:

- Background on the problem and recovery process

- Recent government activities

- Nature and extent of citizen involvement

- Names, addresses, and telephone numbers of other possible contacts

Always test your messages with a small group before public release to ensure that the meaning is clear.

Conclusion

Selecting the right communication channels is necessary for effectively delivering your message, and thus is crucial for public health and safety. The public information official must select the right delivery methods for a particular set of circumstances. This choice should be strategic and based on your audiences' needs, message you need to convey, available resources, nature and scope of the event, and goals of your organization.

In addition, some communication channels have a particular utility in a crisis situation and some crises may limit the viability of some channels. Most crises will require multiple channels to reach all of your audiences.

As a crisis develops over time, the mixture of channels may change. Regardless of which channels are selected, it is important to coordinate content so messages remain consistent.

> *"I think that interoperable communications is the greatest single challenge to managing catastrophic incidents in the United States of America. And unless we improve and continue to improve in that area, we will continue to struggle in the immediate response to catastrophic incidences."*
>
> *Col. Terry Ebbert, USMC Retired,*
> *Former Director,*
> *Homeland Security,*
> *City of New Orleans*

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