

The Prevention Marketing Initiative:

managing issues

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U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES
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CDC
CENTERS FOR DISEASE CONTROL
AND PREVENTION

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Introduction

Throughout the past ten years there have been a number of issues surrounding the AIDS epidemic that have stimulated public support, opposition and debate over HIV/AIDS prevention and education efforts. The following is a practical guide to assist your organization with handling issues that may stir public debate around HIV/AIDS programs or services.

Each section provides information on how to handle different aspects of managing controversial issues. The first section, *Get Started*, provides information on how to recognize a potential issue and assess HIV/AIDS programs that may be considered or perceived as sensitive or controversial to the public and media.

The second section, *How to Be Prepared for Controversy*, outlines the four steps for developing an effective communications plan.

The third section, *How to Handle Controversy*, provides information on what to do during the heat of an issue and includes tips for evaluating your communications efforts.

The fourth section, *How to Work with the Media*, provides information on how to interact effectively with the media.

At the back of this kit is an appendix that includes three worksheets designed to assist you in developing an issues management plan.

We hope you find these materials useful in your HIV/AIDS education and prevention efforts.

Get started

Learn to recognize potential controversy

There are two types of news controversy that an organization may encounter. The first is an external news controversy that is caused by an event outside your organization. External news controversies are often created by a surge in media attention, as in the case of Magic Johnson's announcement that he tested HIV positive.

Unlike an external controversy, an internal news controversy is triggered by an event taking place inside your agency, such as when a program or policy is introduced into the media spotlight for public attention. An internal controversy can be about a variety of issues, such as the debate about safer-sex education in the public school system, condom distribution policies or even local needle exchange programs for drug users.

It is common for a controversy to have both internal and external elements, such as when a community group releases a report critical of your department or policies. This controversy is external because it was triggered by an event outside your office, yet it is internal because it concerns internal policies and procedures. In either case, there are steps that an organization can take to better prepare for unforeseen issues that may arise.

How to Be Prepared for Controversy

Preparing for controversy doesn't have to be a long and complicated process; rather, it is a way of organizing your agency's approach to managing an issue. There are four key steps to crisis preparation:

Step One: Establish an Issues Management Team

Step Two: Conduct an Issues Audit

Step Three: Develop an Issues Management Plan

Step Four: Set Up an Early Alert System

Step One: Establish an Issues Management Team

Developing an issues management team will help to delineate the roles and responsibilities for staff members during a controversy. While your organization's team should be customized to fit your organization's structure and communications needs, the following is a sample of a team that outlines the responsibilities of each member:

HIV/AIDS Issues Management Team

Communications Director: Serves as the team leader, responsible for coordinating the activities of the team. As the leader, this person is responsible for coordinating all communications strategies and activities, including initiating internal meetings, determining what resources are needed and making final decisions.

Public Information Director: Works closely with the communications director; the public information director coordinates all communications, both externally and internally. This person may also make recommendations to the communications director on communications strategies, messages and specific communications tactics.

Health Director: Handles information regarding programs or services or operations and coordinates information from the field (e.g., changes in program services).

Research Director/Epidemiologist: Handles information regarding scientific issues relating to HIV/AIDS. Working closely with the health director, this person assists with advising the communications director on scientific or medical issues.

Public Affairs Director: Handles issues relating to other health programs, services or government agencies.

Official Spokesperson: This is the designated person or persons who will go before the media to make public statements or conduct interviews.

After identifying an issues management team, you should identify other managers and staff members who would also be involved in responding to a given issue. These personnel should be notified about the existence of the issues management team and be encouraged to provide their ideas and thoughts as well.

Every member of the team should be equipped with a team list, complete with telephone numbers (home, office, car) fax numbers and other pertinent information.

Step Two: Conduct an Issues Audit

Because the basic objective behind handling an issue or controversy is to prevent the erosion of public confidence in the services and programs your agency provides, it is useful to recognize programs, services, policies and procedures that have the potential for stirring public debate. Knowing how audiences such as the media, service recipients and the general public perceive HIV/AIDS issues is key to alerting staff to any issues that might evolve or trigger a controversial situation. Conducting an issues audit will help identify potentially controversial issues that an agency or department may need to address. (Use the issues audit worksheet in the appendix to assist you.)

Conducting an issues audit requires examining the external and internal environment within which your organization operates. To conduct an audit of your HIV/AIDS communications efforts, review the external environment and:

- Assess how the media—television, print and radio—approach the topic of HIV/AIDS prevention and education.
- Examine the community’s awareness and understanding about your agency’s prevention and education services and programs.
- Develop a list of issues that have in the past spurred debate related to HIV/AIDS prevention and education in your community. Review how these issues were handled by your agency. Consider:
 - misconceptions about HIV/AIDS transmission;

- federal, state and local funding for HIV/AIDS communications and prevention programs;
- criticism of inconsistencies or biases in HIV/AIDS policies or communications;
- local policy regarding the distribution of condoms in public schools;
- mandatory HIV testing for health care workers;
- misconceptions about condom efficacy;
- transmission of HIV through blood transfusions;
- misconceptions about the transmission of HIV in different populations, e.g. substance abusers, heterosexuals, men who have sex with men and ethnic/racial groups.

Next, take a look at how your agency is prepared to deal with issues that require an immediate response. This will help to identify areas within your agency that may be weak in responding to controversy.

Review the internal environment to:

- Think about which agency programs and services might be considered controversial and why. Are there elements of programs or services that can be considered sensitive? Consider funding sources, who the programs do or don't target, and whether programs are "in sync" with community perceptions.
- Assess how prepared the agency is for communicating messages quickly and effectively. Review how accessible agency policies and procedures are for use in responding to the public and the media.

Conducting an audit involves taking a hard look at your organization with the idea of identifying potential trouble spots and vulnerabilities in advance of a controversy. It also means documenting the current procedures and policies of your organization. This should help you develop guidelines for an ongoing management review process and prepare you for the next step in issues management planning for controversy. (Please refer to Worksheet #2, evaluating issue potential.)

Step Three: Develop an Issues Management Plan

Developing an issues management plan is a critical step because it provides a blueprint for responding to controversy. Developing your organization's plan should be a group effort, drawing on the knowledge and expertise of the best staff

members available. Make sure that you put together a well-prepared plan that is applicable to your agency's staff and resources. This should include:

- assigning the responsibilities for decision making;
- determining the internal planning procedures; and
- setting up a workable system for communicating with key publics.

Following are more specific elements that you will want to include in your issues management plan.

Issues Management Plan Elements

- 1. Identify potential spokespersons.** Use only one spokesperson to provide consistency and avoid media confusion about whom to contact. This spokesperson should be one of the issues management team members who is sufficiently senior in the organization to speak with authority. This person should be considered on call at all times to handle media inquiries and, if possible, should not have to focus on other duties during a controversy. It is also a good idea to have a list of experts on hand to handle specific subjects.
- 2. Assign responsibilities in advance.** Determine who will be in charge of media relations; who will write statements, news releases and background materials; who will be in charge of mailing lists; and who will oversee printing, photocopying and distribution of materials.
- 3. Develop position statements and background information** on topics that might surface during a potential controversy. Be clear about what your organization's position is on condom efficacy, promotion and distribution and other relevant topics, such as sex education. These positions should be articulated in written statements that are appropriate for internal and external release.
- 4. Establish a clearance and approval process for any public statements.** For the statements and information described in step 3, "pre-clear" them so they may be ready for release. Also, establish a list of 24-hour phone numbers for each person on the issues management team.
- 5. Predetermine the key audiences to contact.** Choose the media, service recipients, employees and other government agencies to be contacted in a controversy. Then develop and maintain up-to-date corresponding mailing lists for these target groups. Be sure to include complete addresses, telephone numbers and fax numbers.
- 6. Maintain an inventory of news release paper and preprinted envelopes** for quick distribution to the media.

7. **Consider facilities** and prepare a logistics checklist in case you need to call a press conference on short notice.

Step Four: Set up an Early Alert System

Most news controversies are preceded by warning signs. If detected early, these signs enable your organization to avoid or lessen the negative impact of a controversy. Heeding early warnings can also increase your organization's effectiveness in handling an issue.

To set up an early alert system, begin by making two lists: one of the issues the organization may face (as determined in the issues audit), and the other covering all the groups, internal and external, whose activities may affect your organization. Assign each group and/or issue to an appropriate member of the issues management team and set up procedures for communicating problems.

Another benefit of having an early alert system is that it can be used to help establish communication channels with the media. In developing and maintaining an early alert system, it is important to:

- keep current lists of health and policy reporters and editors from top circulation dailies, weeklies and news bureaus;
- develop a "critical" list of health reporters who will be contacted immediately in a controversy, including phone and fax numbers for priority access;
- keep a current list of assignment editors and producers from local TV and radio affiliates that target key audiences; and
- monitor coverage by the media of pertinent issues.

How to Handle Controversy

No controversy can ever be completely anticipated. However, it can be managed. The following are some basic guidelines for effectively managing a controversial situation. (Please refer to Worksheet #3, the issues checklist in the appendix.)

- 1. Before taking action, define the real problem.** Obtain copies of the article, television transcript, information from the state or federal agency or other documents that describe the situation. This action may be followed by telephone calls to the original source to verify the facts and get more detailed information.
- 2. Determine the scope of the problem** by assessing whether the problem is a local, regional or national concern. This will entail anticipating the extent of the media coverage and evaluating whether an issue, such as an allegation about a policy, is national or confined to one area.
- 3. Determine the potential impact on your organization,** such as whether the problem can be isolated to one department or issue, or whether it affects your entire agency. The impact also will depend on whether the problem has “staying power” or is limited to a “one-time story.”
- 4. Mobilize your issues management team.** When a controversy has developed, these individuals should be allowed to devote themselves entirely to the situation. An issues management plan should be in place and ready to go.
- 5. Centralize the control of information** that is flowing to the public. Be sure that your messages are consistent and clear. Appoint only one spokesperson, backed up by experts as appropriate.
- 6. Communicate with internal audiences.** This is critical during a controversy. Besides the media, be sure to communicate with your employees, local officials, service recipients and other government agencies throughout the controversy. Only by providing information quickly will it be possible to “speak with one voice” and avoid confusion.
- 7. Work with the media.** Try to accommodate journalists, reporters and producers by providing timely and accurate information. Local media do not treat stories in the same way as national reporters. Make sure your spokesperson understands the different needs of these media and can anticipate the kinds of information they are seeking.

How to Work with the Media

During a controversy, when information needs to be provided quickly to the media, working with reporters and journalists can be particularly demanding. It is best to try to establish a rapport with the media before a controversial situation may develop. Below are some proactive tactics for making sure that your message gets communicated clearly through the media.

Correcting errors in the media

Sometimes, regardless of how thorough and accurate the information that is provided to the media, errors will appear. These mistakes do not usually constitute a news crisis. Sometimes, however, an erroneous story may precipitate negative news coverage.

If an error does arise and it is significant or results in public misconceptions, take steps to correct it. Try contacting the reporter and providing the correct information. Offer documentation to support your claim. Explore with the reporter what you might do to correct the information. If it is a small factual error, the paper may print a correction in the next day's edition. It is unusual for the media to run a new story the following day.

If you think the error is serious enough to precipitate a decline in funding or other support, or raise concerns in the minds of your service recipients, take the initiative and write directly to supporters and service recipients. Do not restate the original error or assign blame; just discuss the facts.

Preparing a statement

During a controversy, your department may need to release a brief, prepared statement on a particular issue. A statement is a tool that enables you to quickly and widely distribute your views to all interested parties, such as the media, service recipients, etc. Any statement should be factual, no more than a page long and contain all the important information needed by reporters or the public. The key is to make it short, keeping in mind that it may be used as a "sound bite" on radio or television.

Writing Op-eds and Letters to the Editor

An op-editorial, or “op-ed” as it is commonly referred to, is the page adjacent to (opposite) the editorial page in newspapers that is used for columns and opinion articles by syndicated columnists, essayists and other newspaper non-staffers. Op-eds tend to focus on public policy and public interest issues and are usually managed by the editorial page staff of a newspaper.

Most newspapers think of the page opposite the editorial page as belonging to their readers and look for op-eds that reflect local concerns, issues and opinions. In general, op-eds are an outlet for an organizational response to an issue, while letters to the editor are used to reflect the “common reader,” or public citizen’s, point of view.

To find out more about the format, length, deadline and other criteria for successfully placing an op-ed or letter to the editor, contact your local newspaper’s editorial staff.

Giving Interviews

Interviews are an excellent—and often demanding—technique for reaching your target audience. Regardless of whether the media outlet is TV, radio or print and/or is done live, taped or over the phone, the goal in any interview is to deliver key messages. Below are some tips for preparing your designated spokesperson for an interview.

Key Messages

- Develop four or five essential points of information.
- Make them the basis of your presentation.
- Keep them short, concise, succinct “kernels” of information.
- Use them as headlines in answering questions.
- Use them to turn around negative questions.
- Use them at every opportunity.
- Use them to maintain control and direction of the interview.

Tips about Letters to the Editor

Who should sign the letter?

- A representative of an organization with an involvement in the issue or subject matter who can offer an authoritative yet objective view point.
- The general reader who has a compelling reason for writing, such as a personal experience with the issue. Newspapers always welcome letters to the editor, especially from the general reader. Readers have a “right of reply.”

What increases the chance of a letter being selected for publication?

- Further developing public discussion about a current issue. Providing new information or facts that weren't included in previous coverage.
- By taking issue with something that has been written recently, explain why the issue was inaccurate or misrepresented. Offer an alternative viewpoint to what appeared in the newspaper previously.

What are some pointers for writing a letter to the editor?

- Make sure the subject is an important one to the readers of the publication.
- Present the essential facts immediately, in the first paragraph.
- Strive for a simple, straightforward style, so information will be easy to follow and understand. Clarity is essential. Fancy, pretentious writing will only obscure the main point.

What's the competition like?

- Intensive. For example, the *Washington Post* runs about 50 letters a week of the estimated 1,000 letters they receive weekly.

How widely read are the letters?

- Although readers tend to link “prestige and dignity” to the op-ed page, more people, in fact, read letters than op-eds. The shorter the letter, the better. Readers zero in on the signature first, the affiliation second, the letter last.

Deliver your Message

- Choose 3-4 points you wish to make during the interview; then make them.
- Mention the organization's name periodically.
- Develop turn-around responses.
- Use facts and anecdotes.
- Be alert, enthusiastic, concise and positive.

Take Questions and Answers (Q&A)

- Remember, you know more about your subject than most of your listeners or readers.
- Use key messages to turn around negative questions.
- Don't be afraid to say "I don't know, but I'll find out."
- Don't think you must be able to answer every question — there is no way to know everything.
- Respond to a hostile question or comment in a mature, logical and friendly way and move on to something else. Avoid anger and sarcasm — stay on the high road.
- Use question-and-answer periods to relate directly to individuals and their specific interests and to involve them in your presentation.

“Do’s” and “Don’ts” for Interviews

DO

- . . . Repeat or paraphrase good questions.
- . . . Use silence to your advantage. Think before you answer, answer the question and then stop.
- . . . Be positive when discussing a damaging issue. Briefly concede there is a problem and focus on the positive steps being taken to remedy it.
- . . . Ask for clarification if a question is unclear.
- . . . Weave in references to convincing evidence, such as research or results of a survey or study.

DON'T

- . . . Be evasive.
- . . . Speak “off the record.”
- . . . Speculate or be drawn outside your area of expertise.
- . . . Respond to hypothetical questions.
- . . . Let yourself be hurried or bullied.
- . . . Be forced into “yes” or “no” answers.
- . . . Introduce negatives to the interview.
- . . . Talk to fill dead air; that’s the interviewer’s task.

Interviewer Types

Even the most skilled spokesperson can get tripped up by an interview, so it helps to practice and be on the lookout for these interviewers.

The Wanderer

The interview begins, and you quickly realize that the interviewer expects to discuss a wide range of issues that are somewhat related to HIV/AIDS, but not necessarily so. Don't try to argue with the interviewer about what you thought you were going to discuss. Instead, conduct transitions that allow you to get to the major points you want to cover. Establish yourself as an expert on some topics, but not others.

The “Let's just wing it” Interviewer

As the interview progresses, it becomes clear that the interviewer has not read the background information and expects you to run the show. Use this interview to feed the interviewer questions by highlighting issues of importance to the audience. Involve the host in your comments and stress key points.

The Interrupter

During the interview, the interviewer or another guest keeps interrupting you in mid-sentence. Politely tell the host or guest that you are interested in answering, but would like to finish explaining the issue. Be sure not to start interrupting those who interrupt you. The audience knows when someone is being rude.

The “Yes or No” Interviewer

Toward the end of your interview, the interviewer says there are only 50 seconds left and wants you to respond yes or no to a series of questions, many of which are complex. Don't be compelled to oblige. You don't have to answer yes or no. Apologize and say that there is not enough time for you to answer properly. Suggest that interested viewers or listeners contact your department or hotline for more information.

The Antagonistic Interviewer

It's a reality that you may encounter an interviewer who just doesn't like you, your organization or the topic of HIV/AIDS. Keep cool, don't personalize and stay enthusiastic. Answer hostile questions with a brief response and then move to a key point you wish to make.

The Paraphraser

Some interviewers will try to put words into your mouth — words that you may or may not agree with. These interviewers use phrases like, “So what you’re really saying is...” or “Wouldn’t you agree that...” Remember, you don’t have to agree or disagree with what the interviewer has said. Make the statement you wish to make and ignore the attempt to put words into your mouth.

The Machine Gunner

This is the interviewer who shoots several questions to you at once without stopping to let you answer. Acknowledge that the interviewer has asked a number of important questions. Ask which question the interviewer would like answered first and focus on that question.

The Know-It-All

Occasionally, you may encounter an interviewer who thinks he or she knows it all, but is actually uninformed about HIV/AIDS. Be patient and tactful with the interviewer. Don’t try to embarrass or argue. Look for opportunities to educate and explain; focus on making your point.

How to Evaluate Issues

Evaluating how controversy is handled can be used to improve future communication efforts. Once a controversy is over, it is important to assess how your organization handled the issue from both an internal and external perspective.

To gain a better understanding of how well your organization responded internally to the controversy, have the issues management team meet to discuss and answer the following questions:

- Were roles and responsibilities clearly defined for staff members during the controversy? Did everyone respond effectively?
- During the controversy, was the organization able to move forward with other work? Or were all staff members pulled to respond to the situation?
- Did the media receive clear and accurate information? Were requests for information, interviews and statements answered promptly? Were media able to meet their deadlines?
- How did your spokesperson do? Was he/she quoted accurately in the media? Did statements from your spokesperson appear frequently in stories and reports?

After reviewing these questions, the issues management team will be able to recommend steps to further refine the process for responding to a controversy.

Almost more importantly, once an issue tapers off, it is critical to assess whether there was any damage done to public opinion and/or awareness about your HIV/AIDS prevention and education programs.

Here are some suggestions for finding out how expertly your organization managed its issues.

- **Consider surveying the general public**, your target audience, service recipients and other groups to assess changes in attitudes and concerns. Send the survey results to these key groups with a letter outlining any changes or new procedures put in place to respond to their concerns.

- **Stay in touch with the media.** Even as a news controversy fades, the public is sensitized to it and needs to hear reassuring messages. Use mailing lists to send out regular updates about how your department is handling communications and list any new procedures or policies that may have been adopted. Keep an open line of communication with reporters and journalists.
- **Work with other organizations,** community-based organizations and government agencies who were also affected by the issue. Arrange follow-up meetings and identify ways to work together.
- **Survey your organization.** Formally or informally, find out what they heard, and how did they react to it? How did their families and friends react?

Worksheets

Appendix 1: Issue Audit Worksheet

Use the form below to help assess your organization's weaknesses and strengths in responding to a controversy. After convening your issues management team, discuss the answers to these questions and put one team member in charge of compiling a thorough evaluation memo.

1. How large is your organization?

Information related to size is important because the bigger and more diverse your organization, the more likely it is for communications to get confused. Review your organization's size and the complexity of your department to develop a better sense of how a controversy would affect your operations.

Number of employees in your department: _____

Available facilities: _____

States/localities with operations: _____

Range of services: _____

2. What is your organization's public profile?

What is the public's awareness of your programs and services? Assess your organization's visibility among service recipients, the media, community-based organizations, etc.

3. How prepared are you to get the message out?

Assess your internal procedures for communicating about your organization's HIV/AIDS programming and services by discussing the areas listed below. Determine how accessible this information is to your organization in a time of controversy.

Company policies and statements regarding:

Condom promotion and distribution

HIV/AIDS education in the public school system

Mandatory HIV testing for health care workers

Procedures for notifying key audiences: (internal mechanisms for reaching service providers in the field, employees, other agency departments)

Hotline for inquiries about HIV/AIDS programs, services

Status of mailing lists/fax numbers for local, state and federal government offices

Status of media lists

Status of background materials (what)

Inventory of supplies (news releases, paper, envelopes)

Appendix 2: Issue Potential Evaluation Worksheet

1. External Issues/Vulnerabilities

Staff Member in Charge

2. Internal Issues/Vulnerabilities

Staff Member in Charge

3. Important Groups

Staff Member in Charge

4. Key Publications

Staff Member in Charge

Appendix 3: Issues Checklist

1. Get to the heart of the matter.

- Convene the issues management team.
- Define the scope and potential longevity of the controversy.
- Determine whether it is of local, regional or national concern.
- Gather facts and share information as quickly as possible.

2. Implement the issues management plan.

- Select and brief one spokesperson, plus an alternate if needed.
- Make a simple statement immediately that the organization is aware of the situation, is investigating the details and will inform the public as soon as details are known.
- Develop statements and/or policies regarding the issue that will serve as a basis for all responses.
- Provide as much detail as possible about the nature and extent of the problem and the actions that are being taken.
- Stick to what you know to be the facts. If you are not sure of something or don't know the answers yet, say so.
- Be accessible. Have after-hour phone numbers available for reporters. Return calls as quickly as possible and keep a log of media calls.

3. Communicate promptly with key publics.

- Immediately inform employees so they can support efforts.
- Establish an ongoing information flow with government agencies, service recipients and other HIV/AIDS service organizations.
- Contact the media and advise them of your position and willingness to respond (if statements and spokespersons are ready).

4. Stay on top of the situation.

Update and provide information as available.

Release facts as they are received to keep communication open and to avoid rumors.

Record events as the controversy evolves in case you need documentation later.

Budget permitting, work with research organizations to track public opinion.

5. When the controversy is over.

Continue to monitor the situation.

Stay in touch with key audiences.

Prepare a report. Describe how the issue was resolved and measures adopted to avoid similar problems in the future.

Update your issues management plan based on the new experience.

