

# Crisis Communications for Hospitals and Health Systems: A SHSMD Resource Digest

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SHSMD members play an integral role in effectively communicating information while providing leadership during a crisis. View this collection of free crisis communication resources below:

- COVID-19 (Coronavirus) Communications
- Crisis Communications Preparedness: Best practices and real life examples of proven successes as well as lessons learned during health care crises
- During a Crisis and Immediate Aftermath: Reputation Management Strategies
- Additional SHSMD resources related to Crisis Communications

[Click here](#) to view the latest COVID-19 (Coronavirus) updates and resources.

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## COVID-19 (Coronavirus)

Please note that the COVID-19 situation is subject to rapid change. For the most current clinical and operational information, please refer to the AHA's regularly updated collection of resources at [www.aha.org/COVID19](http://www.aha.org/COVID19).

## Media and Public Relations

The American Hospital Association is urging members to take action to pave the way for effective relationships with the media as we respond to the COVID-19 crisis. These relationships will help to make sure patients and communities receive the essential information they need. Recommended action steps include:

- Engage local reporters and foster relationships as the situation evolves in your area.
- Focus your media messaging around:
  - The fact that your first priority is excellent care, safety and protection for patients as well as frontline caregivers and all other staff.
  - How your hospital is well prepared by having a disaster plan and/or specific COVID-19 response plan in place. Tell them about the plan and the steps your hospital is proactively taking to be ready. Show them aspects of your plan in action. This helps to build trust, credibility and reassure the public.
  - Emphasizing how your hospital is experienced in dealing with major health crises as the focal point for emergency and specialty care for the community.
  - Stressing your hospital is following CDC guidelines and other guidance from federal officials designed to maximize an effective and well-coordinated response.

Customizing your messaging to local media to address specific issues or situations your area is facing.

An [article on COVID-19](#) (Coronavirus) in *The Annals of Internal Medicine* describes the necessity of communications planning for hospitals and health systems and urges communicating across multiple vehicles. It recommends that communications include important metrics such as:

- Number of cases being triaged, investigated or managed.
- Bed capacity and availability.
- New or emerging data on treatments or care strategies.

A Hill+Knowlton Strategies' executive shared [advice for public relations spokespeople](#) or other communicators during a public health crisis:

- Trust and credibility are crucial.
- State what you know to be true, not what you think might be true.
- It's OK not to know everything.
- You may not be an expert in virology, but you should be an expert in what your organization is doing.
- Practice makes perfect.

*Becker's Hospital Review* [published a roundup](#) of how hospitals and health systems are responding that includes internal and public communications efforts.

*Harvard Business Review* shared [guidelines on communicating](#) during the coronavirus crisis, including the reminder that staff need to hear from trusted leaders.

To discuss COVID-19 (Coronavirus) signage, messaging and other communications issues or to share sample materials with your peers, join the [MySHSMD discussion groups](#).

## General Public Health Emergencies and Disasters

The CDC provides a [guide to communications during an outbreak](#) or public health investigation, including examples of communications used to build trust and tips for communicating about risk.

During a panel discussion about public relations and disasters, the participants emphasized the importance of customizing communications for the [different phases of a disaster](#) and the different tones each phase requires.

## Crisis Communications Preparedness

During a panel discussion at a conference, hospital leaders with first-hand experience in crises [shared guidelines](#) that take advantage of both old and new technologies. The newer technologies include providing staff with apps that let them upload pictures to a secure communications server and older ones include phone trees and even ham radios.

Some organizations [overlook less-obvious forms of preparation](#), such as establishing good working relationships between the legal and communications departments before a crisis, social media training and preparing the staff intranet.

Having a coordinated response is especially vital for multi-hospital health systems. When OSF HealthCare centralized its marketing and communication functions among its 13 hospitals, it developed a single coordinated crisis communications plan. This [presentation from SHSMD Connections](#) describes how.

Plans should include a full list of stakeholders and staff [should be notified of a crisis before the media](#), wherever possible. Every employee and volunteer should be educated on [what to say and what not to say](#) during and after a crisis, whether to the press or on social media.

## During a Crisis and Immediate Aftermath

In 2016, the Baton Rouge community endured multiple crises, including shootings and a devastating flood. In a SHSMD Connections presentation, Baton Rouge General team members describe what they learned and the [effective practices and approach](#) that enabled successful communications during the flood and its aftermath.

While there is no way to block negative media coverage entirely, there are ways for [PR professionals to minimize it](#).

The Department of Health and Human Services' Office for Civil Rights has issued [recommendations and resources](#) to help first responders provide language assistance to people with limited English proficiency and disabilities during disaster response and recovery.

Texting can [keep up communications](#) during times when employees might not be able to check email or apps.

The AHA has curated a collection of [resources for behavioral/mental health](#), including staff mental wellness, during and after a disaster.

University of Utah Health Care has implemented a rapid response process for social media and other vehicles that [restored and even enhanced its reputation](#).

The Department of Homeland Security has [risk assessment tools](#) to help organizations identify potential sources of risk.

## Other Crisis Communications and Management Guidance

### General

At the 2016 SHSMD Connections conference, communicators shared [30 tips on crisis communications](#), based on the experiences of hospital communications professionals who recently experienced crises. Their three most crucial takeaways are:

- Plan and prepare.
- Train and practice.
- Take care of your team.

Ragan.com shared [10 steps for building a crisis communications plan](#).

During a crisis, the CEO will have [vital expectations for the communications team](#), as shared in a presentation from SHSMD Connections.

[A Brief Guide to Crisis Communications for Hospitals, Health Systems, and Health Care Entities](#) is a general preparation tool from SHSMD, the American Health Lawyers Association (AHLA) and the American Society for Healthcare Risk Management (ASHRM), free for SHSMD members. It includes:

- A sample list of potential crises, such as public health, litigation, staffing/employee, administrative, facility, patient care and cybersecurity issues.
- Crisis communication preparedness basics.
- Operating guidelines for what to do during a crisis.
- Post-crisis evaluations.

To discuss crisis communication plans and tactics or to share sample materials with your peers, join the [MySHSMD discussion groups](#).

## Cybersecurity Breaches

Hospitals and health care systems are increasingly the targets of cybersecurity attacks and crisis communications plans [should include specifics](#) for this kind of breach.

The AHA has [extensive resources on cybersecurity](#), particularly on preventing breaches. John Riggi, the AHA's senior advisor for cybersecurity and risk, [is available for consultation](#) both to prevent breaches and after one has occurred.

## Crisis Communications Conference Recordings

[Rising Above How to Survive When Your Community is Rocked By Crisis \(2017\)](#)

[When Tragedy Strikes Will You Be Prepared? Insights and Stories from Orlando Health \(2017\)](#)

[Ditching the Silos: Developing a Crisis Communication Plan that Works Across a Health Care System \(2018\)](#)

[Keep Calm: How to Reposition Alarmist Language to Calm and Reassure Audiences \(2019\)](#)

[Internal Is Also External: Aligning Crisis Communications for Employees, Stakeholders and Media Across a Multi-Hospital Health System \(2019\)](#)

[How to Manage Crises: Effective Communication & Reputation Management Strategies \(On Demand\)](#)