



MEMORANDUM

Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District

Date: June 30, 2026
To: CLFLWD Board of Managers
From: Mike Kinney, District Administrator
Subject: Annual Review of Crisis Communication Plan



District Wide

Background/Discussion:

The Board approved the Crisis Communication Plan at its [May 22, 2024](#), regular board meeting. The District's annual meeting calendar has July earmarked for an annual review of the Crisis Communication Plan.

Staff will present an overview and refresher of the Crisis Communication Plan at the July 9th meeting. The Crisis Communication Plan is attached for your review.

Attached:

At-a-Glance Crisis Communication Guide
Crisis Communication Plan



At-A-Glance Crisis Communications Guide

Our Guiding Principles –

- Compassion and concern for any injured parties/individuals and resulting situation
- Acknowledgement and ownership of mistakes
- Transparency and openness
- Stewardship of natural and financial resources
- Watershed responsibility to report to its constituents and taxpayers

Top five first steps employees can reference in a crisis:

1. **Assess the Situation:** Gather information about the crisis, including its nature, scope, and potential impacts.
2. **Communicate Compassion and Concern:** Show empathy and concern for individuals affected by the crisis in all communications.
3. **Activate the Crisis Communication Plan:** Follow the established protocols and procedures outlined in the crisis communication plan.
4. **Provide Timely Updates:** Keep stakeholders informed with regular updates on the situation and response efforts.
5. **Seek Guidance and Support:** Collaborate with colleagues, leadership, and external partners to coordinate the response and ensure effective communication.

Who to contact:

1. If a staff person witnesses what appears to be a crisis, they will contact their supervisor immediately. If their supervisor is unavailable, they will directly contact the District Administrator. If a board member witnesses a crisis, they will report directly to the District Administrator.
2. The District Administrator is responsible for determining and initiating action when there is a crisis and for activating (or not activating) the Crisis Communications Plan in a timely manner. See the Crisis Communications Plan for more info.

Dos:

1. Establish an on-going relationship with key media contacts prior to any crisis situation.
2. Communicate promptly and transparently about the crisis and its impacts.
3. Show compassion and concern for any individuals or parties affected by the crisis.
4. Take ownership of mistakes and communicate corrective actions.
5. Report regularly to constituents and taxpayers, providing updates on the situation and response efforts.
6. Prioritize stewardship of natural and financial resources in all communication and decision-making.

Don'ts:

1. Avoid withholding or minimizing information about the crisis or its impacts.
2. Don't shift blame or avoid taking responsibility for mistakes made by the watershed district.
3. Avoid using jargon or technical language that may be confusing to stakeholders.
4. Don't neglect to acknowledge and address concerns raised by constituents and taxpayers.
5. Avoid making promises or commitments that cannot be fulfilled regarding crisis response or recovery efforts.
6. Avoid using "no comment" when talking with the media. This can be seen as an admission of guilt. Instead say "We will get back to you when we have the details."

These initial steps provide a quick reference for employees to respond effectively to crises while aligning with the guiding principles and objectives of the crisis communication plan for the watershed district. FOR DETAILED RESPONSE REFER TO THE FULL CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN.

CRISIS SITUATIONS SPECIFIC TO WATERSHED DISTRICTS

Pollution Events: Pollution from various sources such as industrial discharge, agricultural runoff, sewage leakage, or accidental spills can severely degrade water quality in a watershed. This can harm aquatic life, affect drinking water supplies, and disrupt ecosystems.

Natural Disasters: Events like floods, droughts, hurricanes, or wildfires can cause significant damage to watersheds. Floods can lead to erosion, sedimentation, and habitat destruction, while droughts can reduce water availability, impacting ecosystems and human water supplies. Wildfires can increase the risk of erosion and sedimentation, affecting water quality.

Habitat Loss and Degradation: Urbanization, deforestation, and land-use changes can result in habitat loss and degradation within a watershed. This can disrupt the balance of ecosystems, reduce biodiversity, and negatively impact water quality and quantity.

Invasive Species: The introduction of invasive species into a watershed can disrupt native ecosystems and biodiversity. Invasive species can outcompete native species for resources, alter habitat structure, and affect ecosystem function, leading to significant ecological imbalances.

Climate Change Impacts: Climate change can exacerbate many of the crisis situations listed above. It can lead to more frequent and severe extreme weather events, alterations in precipitation patterns, changes in temperature regimes, and rising sea levels, all of which can profoundly impact watersheds and the communities dependent on them.

OTHER CRISIS SITUATIONS

Human-Made Disasters: pollution, spills, fires, accidents, staff injuries, workplace violence.

Legal Situations: allegations of discriminatory practices, unethical or illegal conduct, or theft.

Political Situations: taxpayer grievances, political protests, social media attacks.



Crisis Communications Plan

Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District

Approved May 22, 2024

Crisis Communications Plan

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CLFLWD Crisis Communications Plan

Introduction

This Crisis Communications Plan will provide guidance and preparation for the Comfort Lake – Forest Lake Watershed District (CLFLWD / District) to effectively manage and guide communication and actions during and after crisis, emergency, and negative situations. It serves as an important resource to promote care and concern for the people and natural resources involved in a crisis. It also serves to reduce confusion and damage to the CLFLWD reputation. It utilizes best practices for coordinated, transparent, rapid, and responsible internal and external communications.

A crisis can be defined as any situation that has the potential to damage the CLFLWD's reputation or ability to operate, as well as any situation that harms or threatens to harm the life, health, or well-being of people and natural resources within our watershed boundaries. This includes, but is not limited to, a natural disaster that impacts the District's operations, a legal or ethical scandal involving staff or commissioners, a workplace accident, or an act of human violence. A crisis can also present challenges to the District meeting its mission or watershed management plan goals. The mission of the CLFLWD is to protect and improve its water resources through adaptive management and education of local stakeholders.

A crisis requires an immediate and coordinated response, because it has the potential to significantly impact the reputation and/or operations of the organization and the public it serves. This crisis communication plan will provide CLFLWD with processes, procedures, and tools to effectively communicate during difficult situations, however each crisis will require a unique public information response. The plan should be reviewed and kept current on a biennial basis.

The District thanks the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization for granting use of their crisis communication management plan as a template. Sharing and collaboration efficiently provide strong results.

A crisis can be defined as any situation that has the potential to damage the CLFLWD's reputation or ability to operate, as well as any situation that harms or threatens to harm the life, health, or well-being of people and natural resources within our watershed boundaries.

Guiding Principles –

This Crisis Communications Plan has been developed based upon the following guiding principles:

- Compassion and concern for any injured parties/individuals and resulting situation
- Stewardship of natural and financial resources
- Transparency and openness
- Acknowledgement and ownership of mistakes
- Watershed responsibility to report to its constituents and taxpayers
- Inclusion and respect for community stakeholders

Identifying a Crisis

It's critical to identify a crisis or potential crisis as early as possible. Ignoring a crisis can result in escalation, loss of control of the situation, and/or lost credibility. Staff should be aware of this Crisis Communications Plan and should proactively share information about situations or events that could develop into a crisis. CLFLWD leadership and the Education and Outreach Coordinator should be the most familiar with this plan, the possible situations that would require implementation, and the identified processes for responding to an identified crisis.

There isn't a single standard or set of criteria for identifying a crisis. In general, a crisis can be any situation that has the potential to damage the CLFLWD's reputation or ability to operate, as well as any situation that harms or threatens to harm the life, health, or well-being of people within our watershed boundaries.

The types of situations that give rise to a crisis are often sudden and unexpected. They can also be sometimes seemingly ordinary, ongoing situations that grow beyond control as new information spreads. All staff members are responsible for notifying their immediate supervisors when they believe there is a crisis or potential crisis. **When in doubt, say something; it is better to be safe than sorry.**

There isn't a single standard or set of criteria for identifying a crisis. All staff are responsible for notifying their supervisors when they believe there is a crisis or potential crisis.

Crisis Identification Checklist

Answering “yes” to any one of these questions may indicate a crisis situation:

- ☐ Is human life or health at risk?
- ☐ Is there a lawsuit or threat of one?
- ☐ Could the CLFLWD’s reputation be harmed?
- ☐ Is someone questioning the organization’s integrity?
- ☐ Is there a potential that the situation could escalate or “get out of hand?”
- ☐ Are there risks if CLFLWD chooses to be silent rather than respond to the situation?

Crisis Examples

Natural Disasters — floods, tornados, etc.

Human-Made Disasters — pollution, spills, fires, accidents, staff injuries, workplace violence.

Legal — allegations of discriminatory practices, unethical conduct or theft.

Political — taxpayer revolts, political protests, social media attacks.

Activating the Plan

The CLFLWD District Administrator is responsible for determining and initiating action when there is a crisis and for activating (or not activating) this Crisis Communications Plan. This decision may be made independently, with guidance or direction from the CLFLWD Board of Managers, or with the consultation of District staff members, as appropriate.

All staff members are responsible for notifying their immediate supervisors when they believe there is a crisis or potential crisis. The supervisor must then notify the District Administrator of the situation so that they can make an appropriate decision.

If a staff member identifies a potential crisis that is not determined to be actionable, the District Administrator must communicate the reasons for not elevating the situation to crisis level to the supervisor and/or the staff member who initiated the alert.

Crisis Communications Team

The District Administrator will determine the exact makeup of the Crisis Communications Team based on the nature of the crisis, staff availability and other relevant factors. He or she will activate the team once a crisis is determined, or to seek the team's counsel.

Core Team Members

The Crisis Communications Team should include, at a minimum:

- **District Administrator** — the lead decision-maker
- **Education and Outreach Coordinator** — the lead content creator for response
- **Subject Matter Expert(s)** — the relevant operations or technical expert for the crisis at hand

Other Team Members

In addition to the core team members, other individuals may be called on by the District Administrator to serve on the Crisis Communications Team as needed:

- **Board President** — relevant when the crisis involves a board action or decision
- **Additional Board Members** — relevant when a specific member community is especially impacted
- **Additional Staff** — relevant when additional content, operations, or technical support is needed
- **Human Resources Consultant** — relevant when the crisis involves a personnel issue
- **Attorney** — relevant when a crisis involves a personnel issue or legal issue
- **Safety/Emergency Personnel** — in the case of situations threatening human health and life (e.g. emergency medical technicians)

Crisis Communications Plan — Step by Step

Upon acknowledgement that a crisis situation exists, the District Administrator will immediately activate this Crisis Communications Plan and convene the Crisis Communications Team. If the District Administrator is going to be away for an extended period, they will designate a backup staff member to active the Crisis Communications Plan, should the need arise.

Immediate action is essential. Each of the steps laid out in this plan should be addressed as quickly as possible. The development and distribution of communication materials and all follow-up activities should be executed in a timely fashion and should be carefully documented. Documentation should continue as new facts are gathered and the crisis

evolves. Record-keeping demonstrates accountability and will enable accurate evaluation afterwards.

1. Notify Emergency Services (if applicable)

As a first step to addressing any crisis, make sure the appropriate emergency services agencies are informed of any situation that requires their attention.

2. Establish Crisis Communications Team

The District Administrator or their designee should select the Crisis Communication Team members and activate the team as soon as possible. The District Administrator should designate a primary media spokesperson as well as a backup spokesperson. Generally, this will be members of the Leadership Team, the Communication, Education and Outreach Team, or possibly a member of the Board of Managers.

3. Hold Crisis Meeting

The Crisis Communications Team should convene as soon as possible to review the situation and gather known information about the nature and scope of the crisis. The team should determine the information needs of all those who are potentially impacted.

See [Attachment 1: Crisis Meeting Agenda](#)

4. Prepare Statement/News Release

If deemed necessary, the team should also develop a brief news release that expresses the known, verifiable facts of the situation. In addition, the team should decide on a minimal statement with which to respond to media inquiries. As the team prepares to release this information, it should review and consider the Crisis Notification Flow Chart to help guide decision-making on who should be informed first.

See [Attachment 2: Crisis Notification Flow Chart](#)

See [Attachment 3: Initial News Release](#)

See [Attachment 4: Media Inquiry Statement](#)

5. Notify Key Internal and External Stakeholders

The District Administrator or their designee should issue a written (email) communication informing all CLFLWD staff, Board members, and citizen advisory

committee members of the situation. It should include the minimum verified facts and request that all media inquiries be directed to the designated media spokesperson.

In addition, key external stakeholders, such as partners and regulatory agencies who may be affected by the crisis, should be notified at this time and with the same information.

See [Attachment 5: Stakeholder Notification](#)

6. Issue News Release/Hold Press Conference

Upon approval by the District Administrator or their designee, a news release should be posted on the CLFLWD's website and emailed to the CLFLWD's media contact list. The designated news media spokesperson should also follow up with a phone call to media outlets. The news release should also be broadcasted on any CLFLWD social media platforms.

Depending on the severity of the crisis and the level of media interest, the District Administrator or their designee may elect to hold a press conference as well. If a press conference is being held, printed copies of the news release should be made available.

See [Attachment 6: What the Media Will Ask](#)

Note: At the time the news release is issued, the CLFLWD website should be updated so that the news release is the top item in "News" on the main page. (A generic, neutral image can be used as the image.) Updated communications about the ongoing crisis should remain the top item on the website for the duration of the crisis.

7. Monitor Situation and Issue Updates as Needed

After the initial news release/press conference, the Crisis Communications Team should continue to monitor the situation to be aware of new information as it becomes available. It may be advisable to schedule regular check-in meetings for the team.

The team should issue additional news releases and/or schedule new press conferences to keep the public informed of new information. Longer statements containing only fact-checked, verified information should be released in a timely fashion. The CLFLWD's legal counsel should review any statements regarding the cause of the crisis.

In addition, the Education or Outreach Coordinator or another designated team member should be continually monitoring news coverage and social media chatter on the crisis situation. To the extent possible, all inquiries should be treated equally and handled in a timely fashion.

8. Continuously Evaluate Response

The Crisis Communications Team should meet regularly to debrief, review media coverage, share new information, and discuss next steps. The team should determine if and when to release new statements or hold more press conferences. It should also ensure that internal stakeholders and key external stakeholders are kept informed of new developments.

Questions to ask:

- What was successful?
- What could be improved?
- What lessons were learned?

Appendix A

Crisis Communications Toolkit

Attachment 1: Crisis Meeting Agenda

During an initial briefing about the crisis, the following specific agenda items will be reviewed:

1. Situation report:

- What appears to have happened?
- Confirmed facts (when, immediate known consequences, likely consequences)
- Scope of proposed situation and proposed solution(s)

2. Initial response status:

- What is being done, why, and by whom?
- Likely implementation time and hoped-for results

3. Initial communications status:

- Who knows what?
- Who needs to know?
- What misinformation or disinformation is circulating?

4. Short-term response requirements:

- Delegate crisis communications responsibility.
- Identify spokesperson and backup, PR roles
- What must be done in the next several minutes/hours and how?
 - Decide on position and develop key messages
 - Coordinate with other spokespersons from other parties (EMS, city, county, state)
- What human and material resources are available or needed? (e.g., technical experts, follow-up materials, visuals)

6. Short-term communication process:

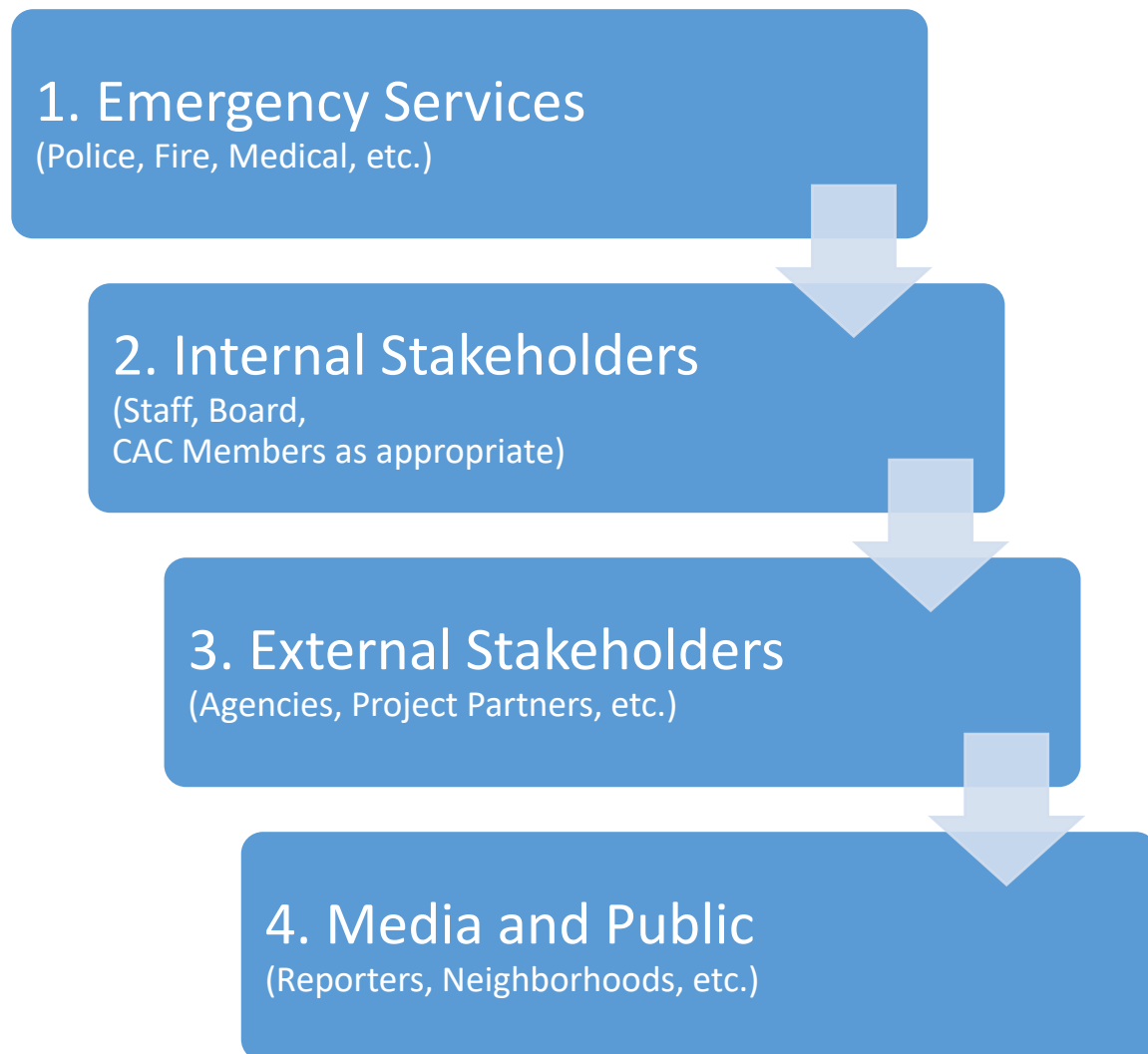
- Identify stakeholders, communication method and order of contact

7. Next meeting time

Attachment 2: Crisis Notification Flow Chart

Note the order of the flow chart. It is critical to keep internal staff, employees, board members and other “ambassadors” informed during a crisis. Openness and transparency build trust among all audiences. The more the Crisis Communications Team can share with the organization’s internal audiences, the better equipped they will be to act as ambassadors and convey the organization’s key messages.

At each stage of crisis communications, the Crisis Communications Team needs to be certain that it has included an internal communications component, reaching all levels of the organization. In some cases, internal stakeholders may need to be alerted before Emergency Services.



Attachment 3: Initial News Release

Basic Template

Headline: "CLFLWD-Statement on *[incident description]*"

The Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District is aware of an incident that occurred today involving *[what]*. The incident occurred *[where]* at approximately *[when]*. This incident is under investigation and more information will be forthcoming.

Check the CLFLWD website for up-to-date information or contact *[spokesperson name and contact info]*.

Information to Include

The following information should also be included, if relevant. Only include information that is known and verified.

- Plans to mitigate or respond to the crisis
- Compassion and sympathy for those who have been hurt, or who perceive an injustice
- Identification of authorities in charge
- When the next update will be provided
- Other pertinent information, such as numbers of casualties

Things to Avoid

- Speculation
- Blame

Attachment 4: Media Inquiry Statement

During the initial stages of a crisis, when little verified information is available, a statement such as one of the following may be used to answer news media inquiries:

- “We are aware of the situation and are currently gathering facts. If you give me your name and phone number, I can contact you when new information becomes available. We will also be posting updates on our website.”
- “We’re still gathering all the facts, but we plan to hold a press conference at [when and where]. We will also be posting updates on the situation on our website.”

Attachment 5: Stakeholder Notification

Greetings,

An incident occurred today involving ***[what]*** at ***[where]*** at approximately ***[when]***. The incident is under investigation and more information is forthcoming.

Please direct any and all media inquiries regarding this matter to ***[name, title]***. They can be reached at ***[email]*** or ***[phone number]***.

Thank you.

[Signature]

Attachment 6: What the Media will ask

Casualties

- 1) Number killed or injured or who escaped (use caution with initial numbers).
- 2) Nature of injuries received.
- 3) Care given to the injured.
- 4) Disposition of the dead.
- 5) Prominence of anyone who was killed, injured, or escaped.
- 6) How escape was handicapped or cut off.

Property Damage

- 1) Estimated value of loss.
- 2) Description of property.
- 3) Importance of the property.
- 4) Other property threatened.
- 5) Insurance protection.
- 6) Previous emergencies in the area.

Causes (Avoid Speculation)

- 1) Testimony of participants.
- 2) Testimony of witnesses.
- 3) Testimony of key responders—the crisis management team, police, fire, etc.
- 4) How emergency was discovered.
- 5) Who sounded the alarm.
- 6) Who summoned aid.
- 7) Previous indications of danger.

Rescue and Relief

- 1) The number of people engaged in rescue and relief operations.
- 2) Any prominent person in relief crew.
- 3) Equipment used.
- 4) Physically disabled persons rescued.
- 5) Care of destitute and homeless.
- 6) How the emergency was prevented from spreading.
- 7) How property was saved.
- 8) Acts of heroism.

Description of the Crisis or Disaster

- 1) Extent of emergency.
- 2) Blasts and explosions.
- 3) Crimes of violence.
- 4) Attempts at escape or rescue.
- 5) Duration.
- 6) Collapse of structures.
- 7) Color of flames.
- 8) Extent of spill.

Accompanying Incidents

- 1) Number of spectators, spectator attitudes, and crowd control.
- 2) Unusual happenings.
- 3) Anxiety, stress of families, survivors, etc.

Legal Actions

- 1) Inquests, coroner's reports.
- 2) Police follow-up.
- 3) Insurance company actions.
- 4) Professional negligence or inaction.
- 5) Suits stemming from the incident.

Appendix B

Sample Crisis Communications Scenarios

The following six crisis scenarios, with sample communications materials, are provided as a resource to help CLFLWD staff understand possible ways to respond to various types of crises. They were developed between the Mississippi Watershed Management Organization, Capitol Region Watershed District and Ramsey-Washington Metro Watershed District in 2016.

In the real world, every crisis situation is unique and demands a unique response. The materials presented here are merely intended to provide a frame of reference for how CLFLWD staff might respond to crises of varying scope and intensity. These materials are not meant to be copied and pasted directly into press releases, social media posts, etc. However, in the event of a crisis that bears some similarity to one of the following scenarios, it might be useful to review these materials to help frame an appropriate response.

Scenario 1: Flooding Causes Pollution Spill

Following torrential rainfall and massive flooding, a decades-old sewer pipe has burst spilling hundreds of gallons of polluted water into nearby lakes and streams. Emergency repair crews have been dispatched and are at work repairing the pipe, diverting the flow, and containing the pollution.

Immediate Response

- 1) If possible, be the one to break the news. Research consistently demonstrates that a crisis does substantially less reputational damage if the organization is the first to report it. In the case of a sewer pipe break, the watershed may work in tandem with the city or governmental entity that is responsible for the sewer line.
- 2) Quickly and accurately determine the level of public safety concern. Always err on the side of caution when making this determination. In the example of a burst sewer pipe, the public should be notified to avoid contact with affected lakes and streams in order to reduce risk to their health.
- 3) If you have the facts to do so, try to release a first statement within the first hour. (For where and how to release see #5, #6 and #7 below). Fill in the template below with information that is definitively known.

Initial Response Template:

Headline: Flooding Leads to Burst Sewage Pipe near (location)

Sub-heading: Public Advised to Avoid (location) While Repair Crews Contain Damage

Body: Following flooding and heavy rainfall, a sewage pipe at (location) burst today at (time), leaking sewage into (lake(s)/stream(s)). Emergency repair crews are at work diverting the flow and containing the pollution. The public is advised (advice, i.e. 'to avoid (lakes/streams)' or 'not to swim or do other activities in (lake)) until further notice. More information will be forthcoming. Check (website) for up-to-date information or contact (spokesperson contact number).

- 4) Do not include speculative information. Fact-check everything before including it.
- 5) Release statement on website, and update as additional, verified information becomes available.

6) Send statement to pre-determined contact chain, including employees, board of directors, advisors, and other stakeholders, such as the Minnesota Pollution Control Agency, your partner watersheds, and nearby residents.

7) Send text message to contact chain.

Sample Text message: *This is an important environmental and health message from the Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District: A burst sewage pipe at (location) is leaking sewage into (location). Emergency repair crews are at work. The public is advised (advice, i.e. 'to avoid (lakes/streams)' or 'not to swim or do other activities in (lake)) until further notice. Check (website) for up-to-date information.*

8) Send statement to news media. This can happen simultaneously with social media postings.

9) Release statements on social media. Include relevant information tailored to the platform.

Sample Facebook post, with link to website:

Link title: *Updates Regarding Sewage Leak Near (location)*

Emergency repair crews are at work diverting sewage flow and containing the pollution. Check back for up-to-date information.

Status: Following massive flooding, a sewage pipe at (location) burst (date) at (time). Emergency repair crews are at work. The public is advised (advice, i.e. 'to avoid (lakes/streams)' or 'not to swim or do other activities in (lake)) until further notice. More information is forthcoming.

Shorter Sample Social Media Post, with link to website:

A sewage pipe at (location) burst at (time). Emergency crews are at work. Please check our website for more info (link).

10) When more information is available, release a longer statement including all fact-checked information, keeping the cause of the incident (in this case, an act of nature) upfront. Your legal counsel may want to review this information so it's best to work in cooperation with them.

11) Keep the website up to date until the clean-up is complete. Once damage has been repaired and it is safe to enter the water for recreational uses, release a new statement to the media and publish it on the website, social media, and as a text message (see below.)

12) When complete information has been determined regarding the incident, publish the relevant data on your website, including health and safety reports and environmental impact statements. Statements like this send a positive message and reinforce the professionalism and care and concern of the organization.

Sample follow-up:

The Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District is pleased to report that, following the quick response of our repair crew, it is now safe to enjoy (lake) again. For additional information, and to view health and safety reports, please visit our website at (website).

Scenario 2: Residents Protest Tax Increase

An increase in the CLFLWD's tax levy has provoked the ire of a local activist, who has written a series of blog posts condemning the CLFLWD as a bloated and unnecessary government entity. The posts unexpectedly went viral, and the CLFLWD and its board of managers are facing a social media backlash.

**Note: Depending on the intensity of the protests, you may want to consider holding a public hearing to explain the tax increase and listen to citizens' concerns. Make note of concerns and address them. Publish an overview of the public hearing on the website to demonstrate that the watershed is listening to the public. If there is not a public hearing, proceed as follows.*

Immediate Response

- 1) Explain the reasons why this year's budget is necessarily higher. Explain in plain, easy-to-understand language, what projects the watershed district is working on and their importance to the community (in terms of impact to residents, environmental impact, and financial impact). Publish this to website and via social media.
- 2) Highlight these projects on social media. Include photos or video (under 45 seconds).
- 3) If there are media inquiries, distribute a statement, highlighting both immediate and long-term community benefits from the planned projects and their costs.

Sample Tax Statement:

Headline: Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District (year) Budget & Tax Levy Statement

The Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District has established its (year) budget and tax levy that will (goals, i.e. improve watershed health, expand fishing and boating areas, enhance wildlife habitat etc.)

The CLFLWD watershed, which drains to the Sunrise River, covers 49 square miles and serves 18,000 people in the cities of Forest Lake, Scandia, Wyoming, Chisago City, Chisago Lake Township, and Franconia. The (year) budget represents an (@) increase from (year prior). The increase is due to several factors, including (factors). For the average \$(#) market valued home within the district, the tax levy increase amounts to an additional \$(#) a year.

Among the projects scheduled for (year): (List of upcoming projects)

A copy of the (year) CLFLWD budget summary is available online at (URL).

Release this statement on website.

Scenario 3: Residents Protest Capital Improvement Project

Following announcement of a new capital improvement project in your district, there is a sudden, unexpected public outcry. Some residents believe the project will disrupt an area used as a playground by children from a low-income, minority neighborhood. Another resident objects because she has invested hundreds of dollars to donate a public bench dedicated to her recently deceased husband that will have to be moved. These two locally popular individuals' sagas have resulted in a highly charged social media campaign, a barrage of phone calls to your offices and protest signs are popping up in local yards. Reporters are asking for a comment and explanation.

Immediate Response

- 1) If you have not done so already, contact the citizens and ask to meet with them privately to address their concerns, either at the site, your offices or a location of their choice.
- 2) If you have not done so already, consider creating an online submission form for public comment about the project.
- 3) While waiting for the residents' response for a meeting, you draft the following statement for the website, employees and board members. In addition, you create and post an FAQ about the project. You may want to also consider a public listening session about the project.

Sample Statement:

Headline: *Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District Gathers Public Comments about (Project)*

The Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District has established an online public comment form to gather comments regarding (conservation project). Any interested citizen may submit comments on the (project). All comments will be reviewed by the project team. In addition, an FAQ about the project has been posted here: (URL).

Quote from District Administrator, (name): "Since announcing the (project name), we have received comments from residents in the area bringing to our attention new information. Citizen involvement is critical to a successful project and we are reviewing this new information in conjunction with our project plans. To facilitate additional public comments, we have created an online public comment form (URL) that we encourage residents to use to share their views. This comment page will remain open until (x date). We will then review all comments and report back to the community within (xx) days. Thank you for your interest and involvement in this project.

Release this statement on website, along with the FAQ, and send notification of the situation and response to all employees, board members, city/government partners/additional stakeholders, and issue statement to local media.

Scenario 4: Employee Theft Scandal

A member of watershed personnel is caught stealing money from the organization. Since the watershed is funded with tax dollars, this has the potential to become a source of public outrage.

**Note: This is a scenario that requires legal involvement. The communications staff should work closely with the legal department to respond to any media inquiry.*

Immediate Response

The best response is the simplest response. Do not say “no comment” (which research shows casts a very negative light on the organization) but instead say “we are looking into the matter under the direction of our legal team and cannot speak publicly for that reason.”

Sample statement for website:

Headline: (organization) Aids (city/county) Investigation

Following a report filed by (organization), the (city/county) department has opened an investigation into the actions of a former employee of the district. Due to the ongoing criminal investigation, and to aid the (city/county) to its fullest, (organization) cannot release further details at this time.

Additional information will be released once it is possible to do so on our website at (URL).

Release this statement in response to media inquiries and on the website.

Scenario 5: Workplace Shooting

A disgruntled former employee returns to the workplace and opens fire on employees. One person is killed and two others are injured.

Immediate Response

1) Focus on safety first. Before crisis communications comes into play, make sure everyone is secure and safe. **During the 2007 shooting at Virginia Tech, the campus was highly criticized for going into crisis PR mode before focusing on the safety of students.**

2) Utilize established contact lists to alert everyone who works at the organization, citizens nearby, and anyone else who is potentially in danger. Text messages are the most immediate and least time consuming to send. Ensure that your text system is able to send to all on your contact list by testing it annually. Remember to proof and test text messages first.

Sample text alert to employees and close-by stakeholders during active shooting:

EMERGENCY! LOCKDOWN IN PLACE Shooter at (name of organization). Go to nearest room, lock door, stay away from windows. If offsite, do not enter. Police are responding. More to follow.

3) Do not just rely on one communication method. Send a text message, email, website notice, Facebook post, tweet, and via whatever other communication outlets available.

Sample email:

Subject line: *Active shooter at (organization name)*

Email body: *EMERGENCY ALERT! LOCKDOWN IN PLACE IMMEDIATELY. Armed intruder at (name of organization). Go to nearest room, lock the door, and stay away from windows. If offsite, do not enter. Police are responding. More to follow. (URL to emergency website) (date)*

Sample Facebook post:

Title: *Active shooter at (organization name)*

Status: *Police are responding to an active shooter at (organization name), at (address). If you are nearby, do not enter. More to follow. (URL to emergency website)*

Sample Social Media post:

*Active shooter at (organization name). If you are nearby, do not enter.
Police are responding. Updates @ (URL)*

Sample website notice:

Armed intruder at (name of organization and address). If offsite, do not enter. Police are responding. More to follow. (date)

After shooter has been contained:

Sample website update (after shooter has been contained):

The shooter at (organization name) has been contained. Stay away from the location. Police are on the scene. If you are on site, please remain where you are until the situation is resolved. If you are off site, do not come to (organization name). We will provide updates via e-mail, text message, and at (URL).

Sample text message update (after shooter has been contained):

UPDATE The shooter at (organization name) has been contained. Stay away from location. Police are on scene. If you are on site, remain where you are until the situation is resolved. We will provide updates.

Sample Facebook post (after shooter has been contained):

Title: Shooting at (organization name) UPDATE

Shooter has been contained.

Status: The shooter at (organization name) has been contained. Stay away from the location. Police are on the scene. If you are on site, please remain where you are until the situation is resolved. If you are off site, do not come to (organization name). We will provide updates via e-mail, text message, and at (URL).

Sample social media post (after shooter has been contained):

UPDATE ALERT Shooter at (organization name) has been contained. Stay off-site. More @ (URL to emergency website)

After Event

1) Once everyone is safe or receiving medical treatment, contact the families of those affected. News must always spread from the most affected to the least affected. Victims and families of victims should be your first priority.

2) If you have the facts to do so, try to release the first statement within the first hour after everything is secure. Fill in the template below with whatever information is definitively known, keeping the following in mind:

- Do not include speculative information. Fact-check everything before including it.
- If the number of injured/dead is unknown, do not include it. If the number is known and verified, include it but not the identities of the victims until families have been notified.

Initial Response Template (after event) for website/other postings:

Headline: *Shooting at Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District*

Sub-heading: *Gunman apprehended by police*

Body: *At (time) on (date), a gunman opened fire on the offices of the Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District. Police responded and the shooter has been apprehended. At this time, the CLFLWD is gathering information alongside the (county name) police. For additional information, please go to (URL of website), or contact (spokesperson contact).*

3) Release statement on website, and update as more verified information becomes available.

4) Send statement via Text to pre-determined crisis contact chain.

Sample Text message: *Shooter at Comfort Lake-Forest Lake Watershed District apprehended. Check clflwd.org for further information.*

7) Release statements on social media. Include relevant information tailored to the platform.

Sample Facebook post, with link to website:

Link title: *Shooter at (organization name) apprehended*

"We are all deeply shaken and devastated by the injuries and loss of life."

Status: *At approximately (time), a (description) male/female armed shooter entered the (location) and, according to eyewitnesses, (sparse description of the event – for example, "began shooting randomly," "began shooting methodically," "began firing shots at the nearest individuals,"). Read More (URL)*

Sample social media Post, with link to website:

Shooter at (organization name) apprehended. (URL)

8) Release longer statement including all fact-checked information when it becomes available to contact chain, including employees, board of directors, advisors, stakeholders, and nearby residents. Also post on your website. Your PR counsel can help develop and plan release of the statement. Your legal counsel may want to review the statement prior to release.

9) Make empathy your primary motivation. If families of the injured or deceased do not want to be interviewed or included in your statements, honor their wishes.

10) Keep the website up to date long after the incident so journalists can easily find accurate information regarding both the incident and the organization as a whole.

Longer Statement (after event) for website and other communications

Headline: *Shooting at (organization) leaves (#) dead, (#) wounded*

Subheading: *Shooter apprehended on-scene; District Administrator of CLFLWD expresses “devastation” over event.*

Officials from (city/county) are investigating a workplace shooting at (organization) that left (#) dead and (#) wounded. The incident occurred at (time), (day), and at this point, details are still under investigation. At approximately (time), a male/female, entered the (location) with (weapon) and, according to eyewitnesses, (sparse description of the event – for example, “began shooting randomly,” “began shooting methodically”, “began firing shots at the nearest individuals,”). Police arrived on the scene (#) minutes later, where the intruder was (apprehended without further incident/shot and killed after allegedly refusing to comply with police).

For the following (#) days, the (organization’s) offices will be closed to allow police to investigate. (Organization) is aiding the police investigation.

(Quote from District Administrator) “We are all deeply shaken and devastated by the injuries and loss of life,” said (name), District Administrator of (organization). “Right now, our top priority is to support those injured and the family of the deceased during this unimaginable time.”

A memorial service for (name of deceased - if applicable OR “the deceased” if kept private) will be held on (date) at (time). As more information becomes available, the website (emergency URL) will be updated.

Scenario 6: Field Fatality

A staff member calls the office to report that a freak accident has occurred on a project site. A colleague is believed dead. Emergency personnel have been called and are responding.

Immediate Response

- 1) District Administrator is notified and assembles crisis communications team.
- 2) An emergency staff meeting is called and the Administrator makes this announcement:

We have received a report of a serious accident at (project site). Emergency personnel are on site and are responding. Do not go to the site at this time. We will update you as soon as new information is available. We are notifying other staff not on site and board members.

- 3) Send email statement to staff and board members with same information; make personal calls, as determined by Crisis Communications Team.

- 4) Create media statement:

We have been notified of a fatal accident at (project) site. Emergency personnel are on site. We are working with authorities to determine what occurred. This project is ... (give a brief description of conservation project). More information will be made available as we know it.

After Event

At this time the victim has been identified and family has been notified.

- 1) Release longer statement including fact-checked information when it becomes available to contact chain, including employees, board of directors, stakeholders, and the media. You may want to post it on your website. Your PR counsel can help develop and plan release of the statement. Your legal counsel may want to review the statement prior to release.

- 2) Make empathy your primary motivation. If the family of the deceased do not want to be interviewed or included in your statements, honor their wishes.

Statement (after event)

Headline: Work Stopped at Project Site Following Fatal Accident

Administrator (name) announced today that all work at (project location) has been stopped, pending an investigation of a fatal accident on (date.)

“We are all deeply saddened by this incident, said (name). “Our prayers and thoughts go out to the family of (victim). We are working with authorities to determine factors leading up to this accident.”

A memorial service for (name of deceased - if applicable OR “the deceased” if kept private) will be held on (date) at (time).

As more information becomes available, the website (emergency URL) will be updated.

Appendix C

Media Spokesperson Guide

The following section has been developed as a resource to assist CLFLWD staff in serving as media spokespersons during a crisis situation.

Crisis Spokesperson Tips

Before the Interview

- Write down key messages that you want to convey.
- Use pre-interview time wisely. If there is a pre-interview conversation with the reporter/producer/booker, this is the time to address what you'd like to discuss. This conversation is on the record.
- Drink room temperature water before the interview. Do not have too much caffeine – this will make your voice dry. Do not drink really cold liquids – this will tighten your throat.
- Time yourself. Practice using a stopwatch to keep your responses short. Sound bites are usually 10-20 seconds.
- You can pick the location for the interview. Take this opportunity if there will be a camera or TV crew.

During the Interview — What You Say

- Your goal is to be quoted with your key messages.
- Convey key messages whenever it's possible and natural to do so. Do not repeat messages verbatim, but view questions as opportunities to weave in the organization's key messages.
- Use transition phrases such as, "What we should keep in mind ..." or, "The important thing to remember is ..." in order to steer the conversation back to key messages.
- With each answer, lead with the most important information. Do not lead up to your conclusion, but instead start with your key points or you may lose the chance to articulate them.
- Present information clearly by avoiding jargon or technical terms. Lack of clarity makes people think the organization is purposefully being confusing in order to hide something.
- Avoid the phrase "no comment." People will think it means the organization is guilty and trying to hide something.
- Prepare in advance an answer to the question, "Is there anything else you want to say?" This is the time to repeat your key messages.

- If you don't know an answer, it's okay to say, "I don't know." If it's information that can be researched, tell the reporter you can find that information and call them back.

During the Interview — How You Say It

- Be as engaging as possible. Do not come across as a "talking head." Use gestures, be passionate, smile (if appropriate) and be sincere.
- Speak slightly louder than usual. Speaking in a "normal" tone of voice can lead to a muted and dull effect. Practice speaking loudly and clearly.
- When on camera, avoid nervous habits that people may interpret as deception. A spokesperson needs to have strong eye contact, limited distractions, such as "uhms" or "uhs," and avoid nervous gestures such as fidgeting or pacing.
- Do not become defensive. Even if a reporter asks a difficult question, take it as a welcome opportunity to correct a misconception about your organization. If you feel and look defensive, you will lose credibility.
- For phone interviews: Stand up. It will help you project and strengthen your voice.
- For TV interviews: Look at the interviewer, not the camera.
- For TV interviews: Keep your "game face" on and your intensity up until the interviewer gets up or moves away. The camera may be on you in a pre-shot or a post-shot, so be ready early and stay engaged until the camera has been turned off.
- Remember: You are always on the record.

Top Ten Basics of Media Interviews

(From the *What's Your Point?* media training guidebook by Mary Milla.)

Tell the truth. Remember: The cover-up is worse than any negative story that any reporter could do about you or your organization.

Have a personality. Speak and act in an engaging, confident manner. Don't feel as if you have to be stiff in order to be professional.

Prepare. Don't wing it. Otherwise, you'll have that awful "wish I'd said that" feeling after the interview.

Make news. When you prepare, develop talking points in which any normal person would actually take some interest.

Simplify. Even the rocket scientists at NASA can explain their subject matter in terms the rest of us can understand. You can too.

Avoid jargon. Think of your organization's oral shorthand as a foreign language no one else speaks. Translate your corporate-speak into plain English.

Make your points. Don't wait for the perfect question from the reporter. If it's logical for you to bring up your key messages, do so.

Be straight. If you can't answer a question because something is confidential, just say so. Don't try anything cute. Reporters hate cute.

Be honest. If you don't know the answer to a question, just say so. Don't guess. You'll be wrong, which makes the reporter wrong, and reporters hate being wrong more than they hate the cute stuff.

Just say no. If the reporter's inquiry doesn't seem like a good fit for your organization, decline the interview opportunity. [Caveats include if the reporter cannot be avoided, if the news outlet is the only one in town, or if the inquiry is unavoidable.]

Interview Preparation Worksheet

My goal for this interview:

Click here to enter text.

My three key messages:

Click here to enter text.

Click here to enter text.

Click here to enter text.

Examples/evidence to support key messages:

Click here to enter text.

Click here to enter text.

Click here to enter text.

Dream quotes/sound bites:

Click here to enter text.

Click here to enter text.

Click here to enter text.



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Annual Review of Crisis Communication Plan

- Crisis Communication Plan adopted on [May 22, 2024](#)
- Mississippi WMO's plan used as a template
- Drafted by staff in coordination with marketing/PR consultant

A crisis can be defined as any situation that has the potential to damage the CLFLWD's reputation or ability to operate, as well as any situation that harms or threatens to harm the life, health, or well-being of people and natural resources within our watershed boundaries.



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- One-page (front and back) guides printed and laminated for all staff and managers
- **Do you know where your laminated guide is?**

Don'ts:

1. Avoid withholding or minimizing information about the crisis or its district.
2. Don't shift blame or avoid taking responsibility for mistakes made district.
3. Avoid using jargon or technical language that may be confusing to taxpayers.
4. Don't neglect to acknowledge and address concerns raised by constituents.
5. Avoid making promises or commitments that cannot be fulfilled by the response or recovery efforts.
6. Avoid using "no comment" when talking with the media. This can be an admission of guilt. Instead say "We will get back to you when we have more information."

These initial steps provide a quick reference for employees to respond effectively to a crisis. The guiding principles and objectives of the crisis communication plan for the watershed are detailed in the full crisis communication plan.

CRISIS SITUATIONS SPECIFIC TO WATERSHED DISTRICT

Pollution Events: Pollution from various sources such as industrial discharges, agricultural runoff, sewage leakage, or accidental spills can severely impact water quality in a watershed. This can harm aquatic life, affect drinking water, and disrupt ecosystems.

Natural Disasters: Events like floods, droughts, hurricanes, or wildfires can cause significant damage to watersheds. Floods can lead to erosion, sedimentation, and habitat destruction, while droughts can reduce water availability, impact agriculture, and human water supplies. Wildfires can increase the risk of erosion and affect water quality.

Habitat Loss and Degradation: Urbanization, deforestation, and land use changes can result in habitat loss and degradation within a watershed. This can impact ecosystems, reduce biodiversity, and negatively impact water quality.

Invasive Species: The introduction of invasive species into a watershed can harm native ecosystems and biodiversity. Invasive species can outcompete native species, alter habitat structure, and affect ecosystem function, leading to ecological imbalances.

Climate Change Impacts: Climate change can exacerbate many of the issues listed above. It can lead to more frequent and severe extreme weather events, alterations in precipitation patterns, changes in temperature regimes, and rising sea levels, all of which can profoundly impact watersheds and the communities dependent on them.

OTHER CRISIS SITUATIONS

Human-Made Disasters: pollution, spills, fires, accidents, staff injuries, workplace violence.

Legal Situations: allegations of discriminatory practices, unethical or illegal conduct, or theft.

Political Situations: taxpayer grievances, political protests, social media attacks.



At-A-Glance Crisis Communications Guide

Our Guiding Principles –

- Compassion and concern for any injured parties/individuals and resulting situation
- Acknowledgement and ownership of mistakes
- Transparency and openness
- Stewardship of natural and financial resources
- Watershed responsibility to report to its constituents and taxpayers

Top five first steps employees can reference in a crisis:

1. **Assess the Situation:** Gather information about the crisis, including its nature, scope, and potential impacts.
2. **Communicate Compassion and Concern:** Show empathy and concern for individuals affected by the crisis in all communications.
3. **Activate the Crisis Communication Plan:** Follow the established protocols and procedures outlined in the crisis communication plan.
4. **Provide Timely Updates:** Keep stakeholders informed with regular updates on the situation and response efforts.
5. **Seek Guidance and Support:** Collaborate with colleagues, leadership, and external partners to coordinate the response and ensure effective communication.

Who to contact:

1. If a staff person witnesses what appears to be a crisis, they will contact their supervisor immediately. If their supervisor is unavailable, they will directly contact the District Administrator. If a board member witnesses a crisis, they will report directly to the District Administrator.
2. The District Administrator is responsible for determining and initiating action when there is a crisis and for activating (or not activating) the Crisis Communications Plan in a timely manner. See the Crisis Communications Plan for more info.

Dos:

1. Establish an on-going relationship with key media contacts prior to any crisis situation.
2. Communicate promptly and transparently about the crisis and its impacts.
3. Show compassion and concern for any individuals or parties affected by the crisis.
4. Take ownership of mistakes and communicate corrective actions.
5. Report regularly to constituents and taxpayers, providing updates on the situation and response efforts.
6. Prioritize stewardship of natural and financial resources in all communication and decision-making.



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Our Guiding Principles

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There isn't a single standard or set of criteria for identifying a crisis. All staff are responsible for notifying their supervisors when they believe there is a crisis or potential crisis.

Crisis Identification Checklist

Answering “yes” to any one of these questions may indicate a crisis situation:

- ☐ Is human life or health at risk?
- ☐ Is there a lawsuit or threat of one?
- ☐ Could the CLFLWD's reputation be harmed?
- ☐ Is someone questioning the organization's integrity?
- ☐ Is there a potential that the situation could escalate or “get out of hand?”
- ☐ Are there risks if CLFLWD chooses to be silent rather than respond to the situation?

Crisis Examples

Natural Disasters — floods, tornados, etc.

Human-Made Disasters — pollution, spills, fires, accidents, staff injuries, workplace violence.

Legal — allegations of discriminatory practices, unethical conduct or theft.

Political — taxpayer revolts, political protests, social media attacks.



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Dos:

1. Establish an on-going relationship with key media contacts prior to any crisis situation.
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Don'ts:

1. Avoid withholding or minimizing information about the crisis or its impacts.
2. Don't shift blame or avoid taking responsibility for mistakes made by the watershed district.
3. Avoid using jargon or technical language that may be confusing to stakeholders.
4. Don't neglect to acknowledge and address concerns raised by constituents and taxpayers.
5. Avoid making promises or commitments that cannot be fulfilled regarding crisis response or recovery efforts.
6. Avoid using "no comment" when talking with the media. This can be seen as an admission of guilt. Instead say "We will get back to you when we have the details."

These initial steps provide a quick reference for employees to respond effectively to crises while aligning with the guiding principles and objectives of the crisis communication plan for the watershed district.

FOR DETAILED RESPONSES REFER TO THE FULL CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN.