Emergency Operations Centre (EOC)
Communications Toolkit

Note that this document is meant as a general guide only. Suggestions within can be scaled up or down depending on the severity of the emergency, the needs of the public, and resources available.

BRITISH COLUMBIA | Emergency ManagementBC

COMMUNICATIONS DURING AN EMERGENCY

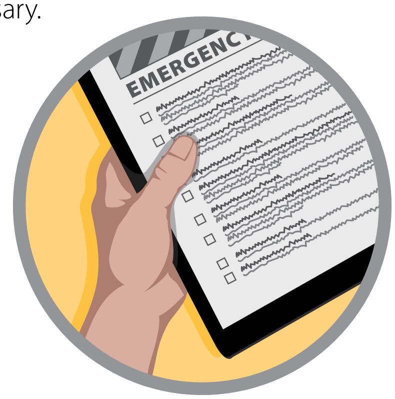
Emergency Management BC (EMBC) is here to help. If, during an emergency, you have communications-related questions, concerns, or would like to discuss messaging or an issue, please get in touch with your area's Regional Duty Manager (RDM) at 1-800-663-3456 or, when activated, your Provincial Regional Emergency Operations Centre (PREOC). The RDM or PREOC can connect you with our communications team.

Prior to an emergency, it's critical to identify someone within your organization who will be able to act in a Public Information Officer (PIO) role. This function serves as the coordination point for all public information, media relations and internal information sources during an emergency response and recovery.

When acting in a public information role, it's critical to consider and remain in contact with your primary audiences:

1. **Media:**
   a. Radio, TV, newspaper, online.
2. **The public:**
   a. Those who are directly impacted.
   b. Those in the community who may not be directly impacted at this time.
   c. People in surrounding areas.
3. **Stakeholders:**
   a. Partner organizations, people within your organization, etc.

It's important to provide these groups with clear, concise, timely information on what's happening. This will help build trust and maintain order and calm in the community. It will also allow you to direct people on what to do, including preparing their properties or preparing for evacuation, if necessary.



PIO Functions:

- Collect and validate information about the response.
- Prepare/develop/distribute materials like news releases and media updates.
- Coordinate and liaise with other communications staff or members of partner agencies (provincial government, health authority, non-government organizations) to ensure you're on the same page.
- Act as the point of contact for the media or other organizations seeking information directly from the incident or event.
- Monitor community reaction, social media and local media channels to understand what the public is saying and needs to know.

A PIO promotes effective, two-way communication and allows the Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) to provide consistent, accurate information. This helps keep pace with 24/7 information demands and promotes calm within a community.

IDENTIFYING A SPOKESPERSON DURING AN EMERGENCY

Choosing an appropriate spokesperson during an emergency is one of the most important decisions you can make.

A spokesperson should be the face of the emergency. They should have authority, credibility, good local knowledge and inspire confidence and calm.

BEFORE

1. Identify available spokespeople within your organization.
2. Make sure they're prepared to deal with media.
3. The spokesperson should have good local knowledge of the: organization, community and area's geography.
4. If possible, it should be someone who is established or well-known in the community, such as a mayor, the chief of a First Nations community or lead government administrator.
5. It should be someone who is credible. For example, a doctor speaking during a health crisis is better than a public relations person in terms of reassuring the public.
6. Have their contact information on hand to provide to media: work and cell numbers, email address and availability.

DURING

1. If possible, the spokesperson should be an expert in their field.
   - If the emergency gets worse or involves many areas of expertise (e.g., wildfire and public health) consider selecting different spokespeople for different issues.
2. Ensure your spokesperson is continually updated on the situation and is ready to provide the latest information.
3. Have more than one spokesperson in mind, as people may be away or unavailable when the emergency hits.
4. Plan as much as possible. Emergencies are 24/7, 365 days a year. A roster during traditional busy seasons (flood and fire) is a good idea to ensure a spokesperson is available.

AFTER

1. Your spokesperson will have become a brand during the emergency – the person the public looks to for guidance and direction. It would be a lost opportunity to not use them through recovery.
2. This is why it's important to have a spokesperson who is already a part of your organization (rather than contractor, where possible).

MEDIA RELATIONS DURING AN EMERGENCY

Media are public safety partners in an emergency. They can help amplify the critical messages and timely information you want to provide to the public and they are one of the first places your community members will go for information.

It's important to keep the media updated, as they will help update the public.

BEFORE

1. Have a database of media contacts in your area and develop a media contact list.
2. Build relationships with media before the emergency.
3. Find an appropriate venue for media briefings and interviews at your Emergency Operations Centre (EOC) or in the community.
4. Prepare a template for news releases or information bulletins. For example: evacuation notices, emergency response information, and recovery updates.
5. Prepare general messaging that can be used in the event of a disaster or emergency (templates available in this toolkit).

DURING

1. Release updates in a timely and appropriate manner.
   a. Consider establishing a regular time for releases or media briefings so you work toward the same time every day. You can always cancel if there is nothing of importance to note. This will help take pressure off your spokesperson and reduce media demand.
   b. When making a media statement, be CLEAR, CALM AND CONCISE.
   c. Express:
      i. CONCERN/SYMPATHY about health and well-being of those involved.
      ii. ACTION – steps/processes being taken to help people.
      iii. COMMITMENT – the goal is to support those impacted.
      iv. Keep the information as factual as possible, DON'T SPECULATE and don't speak for other agencies.
   d. Remember the five Ws:
      i. Who's affected, who's not affected.
      ii. What has happened (situation), what they need to be doing to prepare/respond.
      iii. Where it is.
      iv. When it happened.
      v. Why: the circumstances, what we know about the situation.
2. Show rather than tell – use photographs, charts and maps when appropriate. Providing appropriate photographs can help prevent the media from using stock photos of other emergencies or otherwise inappropriate images (e.g., burned down houses when owners may not be informed yet).
3. Monitor media and social media, and listen to people in the community. This will allow you to prepare for potential questions from the media or the public.
4. Prepare spokesperson for interviews.

AFTER

1. Ensure that you update the media list with anyone you communicated with during the emergency.
2. Determine what went well and what you could improve for next time.
3. Consider checking in with core media contacts and ask about their experience to determine how you can help them better communicate with the public.

PUBLIC ENGAGEMENT DURING AN EMERGENCY

Media is only one of many tools you can use to reach people in your community. It's important to engage with the community directly and facilitate two-way communication so you gain an understanding of how people are feeling and what their needs are.

BEFORE

1. Know your audience. Identify the different ways people get information in your community.
    a. Find key, influential groups or community leaders who can help.
    b. Ask how information is usually received or disseminated.
    c. Identify a few venues (small, medium, large) for different levels of emergencies to be used for public meetings.
        i. E.g., if 30 people are likely to attend, a gymnasium is probably too big, so consider a community hall or First Nations community administrative office or band office. If a large audience is likely, pick a larger venue.

DURING

1. Hold regular public meetings with a Master of Ceremonies (MC) to manage respondents and questions.
    a. These help keep people informed about the situation.
    b. Try to have experts available to speak to their areas of expertise, e.g., wildfire, first responders, Emergency Support Services staff, local government staff.
    c. Let people know if there's something they can be doing to help the community.
    d. Give a timeline as to when they can expect further information.
    e. Set realistic expectations and be prepared to answer tough questions.
        i. Don't make promises or assumptions on specific outcomes (such as when an evacuation order might end).
    f. Record community concerns at these meetings to ensure they are being addressed.
2. Face to face updates:
    a. Ensure people familiar with operations are visiting evacuation centres and evacuees.
    b. Distribute information to affected citizens as necessary, using materials like pamphlets and news releases.
3. Provide information to the community.
    a. Make sure you're sharing information where people will see it. For example, if your community reads a local message board outside of the community hall rather than using online methods include it as part of your information distribution.
    b. Make sure you have information available in the evacuation centres.

AFTER

1. It's important to continue to engage, even after evacuation orders and alerts are lifted. Consider public meetings around recovery, next steps, and how your organization is working to get the community back on its feet.

USING SOCIAL MEDIA DURING AN EMERGENCY

Social media is a valuable tool for every phase of disaster management. It can be used to disseminate warnings and alerts, share event information and rapidly understand the needs of your community. Get started in 10 steps.

BEFORE

1. Do your research: Learn which social media channels people use most in your community and create accounts on them to share disaster information. The most popular platforms for this purpose are Twitter and Facebook. You can also consider using an existing social media account if you already have a strong following.
2. Spread the word: Make sure people know about the social media channel(s) you'll use during emergencies and how they can follow along. The key is to build your audience before disaster strikes.
3. Set expectations: Let followers know what to expect from your social media channel(s), for example, what information you'll provide and for what types of emergencies.

DURING

4. Share: Communicate verified information in a timely manner, in other words what you know as soon as you know it. If you're waiting for information to be confirmed, let people know that too. Silence can cause concern and send people elsewhere for information.
5. Listen: Pay attention to what community members are saying across platforms. Use this info to proactively address issues and counter misinformation.
6. Respond: Engage with people online by answering questions and addressing concerns. This can be time consuming, but builds confidence and helps alleviate stress.
7. Engage: Use consistent hashtags to make your information easy to find. It will also make it easier for you to follow trends. Popular examples are #BCFlood, #BCWildfire or #BCEarthquake, but be aware new ones may pop up depending on the event.
8. Be consistent: All responding agencies should work together to ensure messaging is consistent across channels. This applies to hashtags as well.

AFTER

9. See it through: Following a disaster, continue sharing information about recovery efforts in your community, as well as tools and supports to help manage stress.
10. Stay connected: Once recovery efforts have concluded, continue to engage with your followers by sharing info on how to get prepared for future emergencies.

Twitter:
@emergencyinfobc

Website:
emergencyinfobc.gov.bc.ca