

**[INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME]**  
**Crisis Communications Plan**

**Definition**

A crisis is defined as any emergency or disaster incident that involves significant injury, loss of life, or damage to property, including but not limited to mass casualties, natural disasters or violent crime, that requires a public response from the City. Crisis communications may be required for any incident or situation that has the potential to generate negative publicity for the City or negatively affect citizens' trust or confidence in the City or its leaders. These incidents may include data breaches, data interruption, major lawsuits, governmental malfeasance, citizen activism, rumors or hoaxes. The duration of a crisis situation can vary significantly, lasting from only a few hours to several weeks or months.

The **[INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME]** is committed to providing residents and members of the public with accurate and timely information. Print, digital and social media outlets and platforms play a critical role in providing Town-related information to the community, especially in the event of a crisis. Effective crisis communication provides clear and concise information to residents, the media, and members of the public, instills a sense of confidence and reassurance to the community, expresses a message of empathy to the parties involved, and provides overall situational awareness during a crisis.

**Executive Summary**

Any crisis can be looked at as an opportunity to tell the “rest of the story.” The universal factor governing all crises is that they all require detailed and continually updated preparation and practice. A crisis may be acute or chronic, but in either case, it has the potential to generate media interest. How a crisis is handled in the media can have a significant impact, either positive or negative, on the **[INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME]** and its residents.

The stakes are much too high to overlook crisis management and communications planning. Many organizations now have a Crisis Communications Response Team (CCRT), whose principal duties include working together to develop a strategy for minimizing the impact of the crisis.

Preparation is only the first step. It must then be rehearsed and practiced by all concerned parties.

This Crisis Communications Plan outlines strategic planning considerations for major crises that could occur within our community, establishes an action plan for responding to a crisis, and creates internal staff actions as well as external media considerations for any crisis.

This Plan is intended to be a working, living document that reflects how City leadership relates to City employees, residents, the media, and the public. If it is practiced, the results during media exposure will reflect honesty and integrity through words and actions.

The purpose of this Crisis Communications Plan is to aid **[INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME]** leadership, and specifically our Crisis Communications Response Team, in quickly and effectively:

- anticipating issues that could escalate into a crisis
- assessing the potential impacts of a crisis on key audiences
- developing communications plans and strategies to deal with the crisis
- disseminating information or instructions to key audiences directly or indirectly impacted by the crisis

The Crisis Communications Plan is designed to mitigate the impact of the crisis, provide important safety information to residents, preserve the trust of residents and stakeholders, and protect the organization's reputation. The plan recognizes that every crisis is different and will require critical judgment to evaluate different options and outcomes. This document provides a set of guidelines, templates and checklists to guide and support strategic decision-making in a crisis.

## **Action Plan**

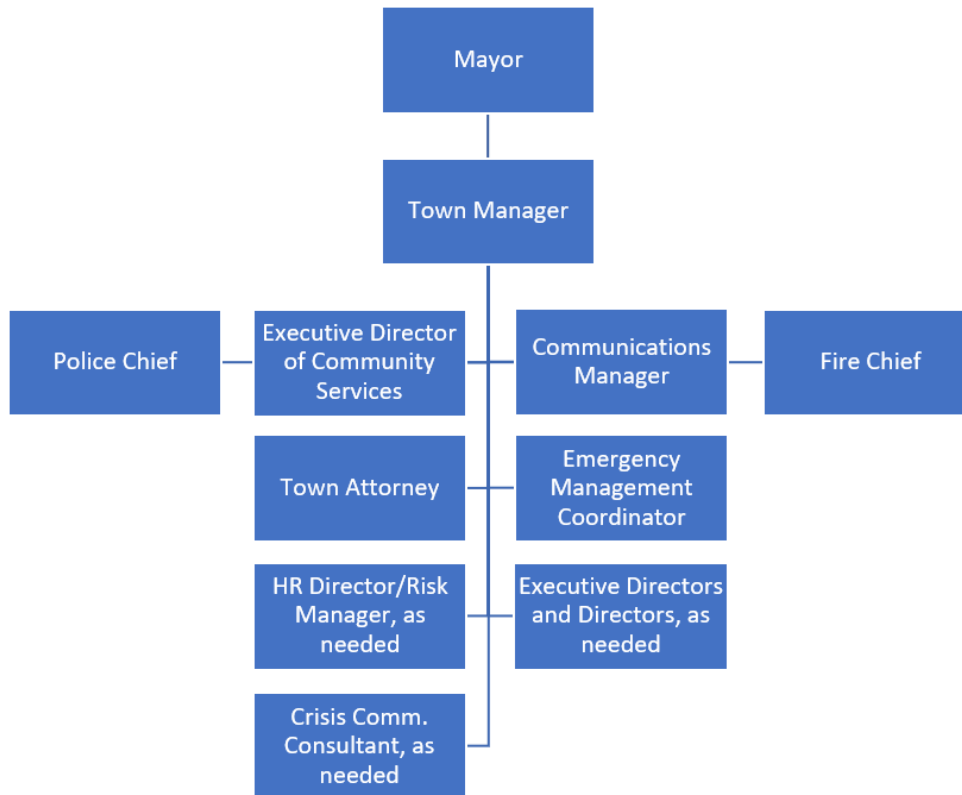
### **Crisis Communications Management Steps**

- **Notification** – Notify the Mayor, City Manager, Deputy City Manager, and Public Information Officer immediately.
  
- **Definition of Communications Crisis** - Any emergency or disaster incident that involves one or more of the following situations requiring a public response from the City:
  - significant injury, loss of life, or damage to property, including but not limited to mass casualties, natural disasters or violent crime
  - an incident that could generate negative publicity for the Town or negatively affect citizens' trust or confidence in the City or its leaders, including but not limited to data breaches, data interruption, major lawsuits, governmental malfeasance, citizen activism, rumors or hoaxes
  - the duration of a crisis situation can vary significantly, lasting from only a few hours to several weeks or months.

**Crisis Communications Response Team (CCRT)** – Convenes immediately after crisis is identified. Information shall not be released until the core CCRT convenes, reviews the situation, and develops a strategy. The CCRT will convene via email, phone, virtual meeting or in person to strategically review the situation and manage the external communications surrounding the issue. The CCRT is comprised of the following key staff members:

- Mayor
- City Manager
- Deputy City Manager
- Public Information Officer
- Police Chief
- Fire Chief
- City Attorney
- Emergency Management Coordinator
- Human Resources Director/Risk Manager (as needed)
- Deputy City Managers or Department Directors (as needed)
- Crisis Communications consultant

## Crisis Communications Response Team (CCRT)



Only the Public Information Officer or someone he/she assigns should release information to the media and to the public. This includes information via social media. All other employees should be professional and helpful to the media by connecting them with the Public Information Officer, but employees are discouraged from speaking with or providing information to the media. Communications staff will work closely with state and federal entities as needed.

- **Internal Communications** - the City Manager, Deputy City Manager, Public Information Officer and Human Resources Director will convene via email, phone or in person to manage the internal communications surrounding the issue.
- **Assessment/Strategy** - The CCRT will assess the situation, determine facts, and begin delegation. Questions to help devise appropriate crisis communications response include, but are not limited to:
  - What is the situation? What will happen next?
  - Who on staff needs to be involved?
  - What immediate steps need to be taken?
  - What is known and who knows it?
  - Is there potential public interest? Does the issue have traction (will it become anything more than a blip on the evening news)?
  - Who will be affected?
  - What are people feeling – what emotions need to be considered?
  - What information is needed and who beyond City staff need to be informed?
  - When will the information be available?

- What should the City do about it? Is a proactive vs. reactive response required?
  - What CAN and CAN'T be said? What are the City's privacy, legal and insurance policies?
  - Is legal counsel needed?
  - How will the response be communicated?
  - Should a resource list be compiled of additional City spokespeople?
  - What media will be contacted? What elected officials? Others?
- **Developing Key Messages** – The Crisis Communications Response Team (CCRT) will collaborate to develop factual, responsive messages to be used by the City. It will also provide a script for the receptionist and voicemail system if needed. All media inquiries and inquiries from the public should be referred to the Public Information Officer for comment.
    - Responsive messages should be prepared for media inquiries, City Council, City staff (as needed), and proactive correspondence with critical stakeholders.
    - Messages should reflect the City's overall message, leadership role, and resource status. They should attempt to reinforce the positive and be action/solution-oriented, if possible.
    - All comments should be guided by professionalism, transparency, and serve to mitigate the crisis.
    - Consider what media know about the situation and what their potential interest is.
    - Recognize that unfavorable, inaccurate information, if not corrected, could have future negative consequences requiring additional responses.
    - Consider questions that will be asked in order to prepare answers for them, including the questions you hope will not be asked.
    - Develop a written statement for the receptionist and/or the representatives greeting members of the general public. Decide if it is appropriate to change the City's or particular staff members' voicemail messages.
    - "No comment" is never an acceptable response. If an answer is unknown or cannot be immediately answered, make note of the question, tell the inquirer you will get back with him/her, and do so. If the question cannot be answered due to a policy or an ongoing investigation (such as sharing personnel information, etc.) let the inquirer know that.
    - Recognize and express empathy for individuals who have been impacted by the crisis.
    - Consider the need for additional materials such as a fact sheet, website resources, FAQs, etc.
- **Staff Notification** – As soon as practical, the City Manager will communicate information regarding the crisis to the Mayor, City Council and employees, if appropriate. If the crisis occurs at a time when staff are not in the office and disseminating the information is critically time sensitive, the Director of the affected department will be responsible for communicating information to his or her staff. The impact of the crisis on staff should be taken into consideration. If necessary, make resources such as an employee assistance program available. Staff should be reminded that all inquiries (media, etc.) must be referred to the Public Information Officer and that they should not make any comments to the media or on social media platforms.
- **Media Releases** – The Public Information Officer will distribute a media release or statement to the media.
    - The release should be posted on the website and social media and distributed to the

- City Council and Executive Team at the same time it is distributed to the media.
  - A prepared written statement or talking points for the Mayor and City Council should accompany the media release and be used to guide all interviews, ensuring a consistent message.
  - If necessary, establish a media staging area for the media to gather to receive periodic updates from the City. Media access to City facilities and job sites should be supervised at all times. Know ahead of time who the journalist is and what he or she is planning on covering. Be sure the area into which the media are invited does not have sensitive information such as reports, personnel information or other papers visually available.
- **Key Group Notification** – Notify the City Attorney or other necessary stakeholders, such as local elected officials. (Some of these parties may need to be contacted prior to contacting the media.)
  - **Record-Keeping** – Document critical conversations, decisions, details and media questions regarding the crisis situation in order to effectively evaluate crisis communications management. Remember that any written correspondence, including emails, texts, or other documents may be subject to a Public Information Request (PIR).
  - **Media/Message Evaluation** – Evaluate the appropriateness and relevance of messages throughout the situation. Revise as appropriate, but don't stray from the original theme.
  - **Communications Updates** – Ensure key audiences are kept up to date. Methods may include:
    - Sending communications to members and residents via email.
    - Updating the City's social media platforms regularly.
    - Promptly returning phone calls.
    - Posting a statement on the website and updating it regularly.
    - Updating the City's voicemail.
    - Post-crisis wrap-up communication and calls.
  - **Loose Ends** – Ensure all loose ends are secured (i.e. follow-up calls, email updates, etc.)
  - **Conduct an After-Action Meeting** – schedule a time to debrief with the CCRT to identify strengths and weaknesses of the crisis response. Discuss and take notes on what was done well and what could be improved in handling future PR crises.
  - **Post-Crisis Clean-up** – File notes, correspondence, digital and print assets, and after-action report from the crisis.

## CCRT Guidelines

The CCRT and Communications staff will make every effort to:

1. Communicate as quickly as possible, as facts become available.
2. Be honest and transparent in all communications (to the extent that any ongoing investigation permits).
3. Exhibit empathy for those affected by the situation.
4. If the **[INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME]** has a role in or is responsible for the situation, accept responsibility and apologize to the affected parties.
5. Ensure all messaging is consistent to all audiences.
6. Reassure key audiences by providing regular updates.
7. Demonstrate attentiveness to those affected by the crisis and respond to stakeholder concerns.
8. Announce the resolution of the issue as quickly as possible.

## City Employees' Responsibilities During an Emergency Event

Anytime the City experiences a crisis or emergency event of any magnitude, the Communications staff enacts an emergency response plan, and the information is disseminated to the public in an orderly fashion.

In the event of a large-scale crisis or a credible threat whereby a large number of residents in the **[INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME]** could be in imminent danger or have actually experienced a crisis that has placed residents' safety and well-being in danger, the need may arise to rapidly mobilize a larger-than-normal number of City employees to assist, even as a pre-planned emergency response communications strategy is implemented.

If the City Manager determines an emergency event necessitates employees assisting during or in the aftermath of an emergency situation before, during, or after normal business hours, employees should expect to:

1. Be immediately on-call via text message, email, or phone call and subject to reporting for duty, as assigned.
2. Work extended hours beyond the normal shift.
3. Work shift hours different from the normal practice.
4. Perform other duties as assigned.
5. Work under the direction of different supervisors or to directly report to emergency officials.
6. Work in different departments or areas other than their usual assignment.
7. Operate under procedures and policies that may have to be suspended or amended by department directors to cope with unusual situations.
8. Refer any media/press to the Public Information Officer or to the City website or social media accounts.
9. Abstain from providing any details or responses on any City social media platforms unless instructed to do so as part of their job duties. Misinformation can be critically dangerous in the aftermath of a crisis. If an employee (who would be a "credible source" to a reporter) is putting erroneous information out in the public forum, the results could be critically dangerous.

In the event of a crisis where communication signals are lost, employees are encouraged to report to their normal work site as soon as is safely possible for briefing and instruction. In the event that a City facility is inaccessible, employees should report to City Hall.



## Media Briefings

Media briefings will be organized by the Public Information Officer and the Town's Crisis Communications Consultant, as needed. When the **[INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME]** holds a media briefing it is because the City has determined that the need to communicate with the media in person is necessary. The City will not call a media briefing without new facts or elements of the story that it considers vital. Frequent briefings are a good habit to keep the media from wandering around trying to get information elsewhere. The goal is to give information to the media regularly, and to provide accurate and complete information.

The Public Information Officer shall organize and lead all media briefings and will assign staff members to assist who can best respond as a subject matter expert regarding the City's operational response during a crisis. This is usually a member of the Fire Department or Police Department, unless the crisis falls under the jurisdiction of another agency. The Mayor and/or City Manager may be called upon during a media briefing to provide a sense of confidence and reassurance to the community, express a message of empathy, and provide overall situational awareness.

If necessary, the **[INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME]** will provide media kits and make them available to all members of the media as soon as they arrive. The media kits may include fact sheets with relevant information and background about the situation.

The following is a list of spokespersons in order of priority:

<b>Town Spokespersons:</b>	<b>Office Phone:</b>	<b>Cell:</b>
<b>[INSERT NAME]</b> , Mayor	XXX-XXX-XXXX	XXX-XXX-XXXX
<b>[INSERT NAME]</b> , City Manager	XXX-XXX-XXXX	XXX-XXX-XXXX
<b>[INSERT NAME]</b> , Police Chief	XXX-XXX-XXXX	XXX-XXX-XXXX
<b>[INSERT NAME]</b> , Fire Chief	XXX-XXX-XXXX	XXX-XXX-XXXX
<b>[INSERT NAME]</b> , Public Information Officer	XXX-XXX-XXXX	XXX-XXX-XXXX
<b>[INSERT NAME]</b> , Deputy City Manager	XXX-XXX-XXXX	XXX-XXX-XXXX

All spokespersons should not only have a backup person immediately available when they are not on location, but should also let an Administrative Assistant or staff member know where they are, and how they can be reached. Spokespersons should have a cell phone with them at all times when not on City premises.

**Town of Prosper Staff Directory**  
(cell phone numbers are for staff and Council use only)

**[DEPARTMENT TITLE]**  
**[NAME]**

Cell:  
Office:  
Email:

**[DEPARTMENT TITLE]**  
**[NAME]**

Cell:  
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Email:

**[DEPARTMENT TITLE]**  
**[NAME]**

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**[NAME]**

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Email:

## **Crisis Communications Tools**

- Checklist (internal & external)
- Additional Tools
- Key Audience Checklist
- Media Statement Template
- Frequently Asked Questions in a Crisis
- Tweet Template
- Media Log
- Media Guidelines for Town Employees
- Social Media Guidelines
- Spokesperson Guidelines
- Emergency Communications Kit

## **Crisis Communications Checklist**

This checklist is designed to enhance the City Communications staff's ability to reach key audiences in a crisis.

### **Internal**

- Cell phone and/or laptop
- Teams or Zoom meeting capability
- Employee email lists
- Employee cell phone numbers
- City voicemail notification system
- Employee text message notification system
- Employee intranet
- Media Relations Policy
- Social Media Policy
- Designated meeting place for staff if cell phones are out
- Other:

### **External**

- Media contact list
- Email addresses for key audiences/influencers
- Office and cell numbers for key audiences/influencers
- Email notification system access (Constant Contact)
- Social media access and monitoring – all platforms
- Website access – Homepage, Hot Topics and/or Media Releases page
- Free news coverage monitoring (Google Alerts, etc.)
- Paid news and social media monitoring (Meltwater, Cision, TV Eyes, etc.)
- Customer inquiry monitoring **[INSERT GENERAL EMAIL]**
- Media assembly area
- Other:

## **Additional Tools**

In a crisis that could impact public health and safety, property, or the environment, or has gained major public attention, consider using one or more of the following tools to enhance your communications efforts:

- Media log (see template)
- Media email address to direct incoming emails to one location
- Media voicemail to direct incoming calls to one location
- Media alerts/invitations to media briefings and press conferences
- Media briefings – for larger groups of reporters/bloggers in person or via live stream video or conference call
- Live video streaming – Facebook Live, YouTube, Zoom, etc.
- Virtual meeting technology – Zoom, Teams, etc.
- Media interviews – one-on-one
- Separate website or web page dedicated to a prolonged crisis
- Instructional videos
- Infographics
- Conference calls with influencers/key customers
- Crisis hotline: 800-number with recorded message or call center
- Phone scripts to assist customer service, other personnel in responding to incoming calls
- Outbound phone calls/automated call scripts
- Community/Town Hall meetings
- Flyers, letters, door hangers
- Door-to-door visits
- Local/national ads

## Key Audience Checklist

Consider all of the audiences that you may want to reach or influence in the crisis. Prioritize your list to help you select communications tactics to target the most important audiences.

- Management
- Employees
- Employees' family members
- Strategic Partners
- Investors/Shareholders
- Affected constituents
- Donors/Sponsors
- Influencers/Advisors
- Volunteers
- Vendors
- Subcontractors
- Consultants
- Neighbors
- General public
- Social media followers – all platforms
- City, County, State Legislators and their key staff
- Government regulators
- Public agencies
- Industry/trade association leadership
- Professional association leadership
- Nonprofit leadership
- Nonprofit members
- Environmental organizations
- Consumer advocacy organizations
- Local news media
- National news media
- International news media
- Trade/professional media
- Ethnic/specialty media
- Other:

## Media Statement Template

At the first sign that a crisis is brewing, the CCRT will develop a “standby statement.” The standby statement will enable the Town to quickly respond to media calls, social media posts and internal and customer inquiries. Know that you won’t have many facts early in the crisis, when the pressure for information is most intense. Offer the facts you have at the time. Update the statement as you learn more.

When you release the statement to the media, you may choose to post the statement on your website, relay it via social media and provide it to key audiences via email, text, Intranet and other communications tools.

### Template

On (date/time), (describe situation) occurred OR (name alleged XYZ incident occurred.)

We have learned (describe known facts about the situation). We understand that (estimate/number) of (people/property/other) were involved. This is all we know at this time.

*We are in the process of (gathering the facts about the situation/working with investigative authorities/other actions) to determine (how/why) this happened. OR, we have investigated and concluded that (describe conclusion.)*

### Additional Messages

In the event of illness, injury or death, add an empathy statement:

- a. We are in the process of notifying the families of these individuals. Our heartfelt concern/condolences go out to all of them.

Describe any instructions for people to follow or plans to continue to communicate:

- a. We are working with (police/fire/health/other authorities) to protect the (health/safety/other) of our (employees/residents/volunteers/other).
- b. We have advised the (employees/residents/volunteers/other) to (describe action you have asked them to take).
- c. We will post more information on our website at (address) as it becomes available. We will also provide updates via (describe communications tools)
- d. We plan to (hold a press conference/issue a news release or statement) on (day/time).

## Frequently Asked Questions in a Crisis

### Core Questions

- What happened?
- Who was impacted?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- What are you doing about it?

### Other Potential Questions

- Was anyone harmed? Who?
- Are those that were harmed getting help? How?
- Are people out of danger?
- Is the situation under control?
- Has this ever happened before?
- What does this all mean?
- Who is in charge?
- What can we expect next?
- What are you advising people to do?
- When do you expect to resolve the situation?
- Who else is involved in the response?
- Did you have any forewarning that this might happen?
- Why didn't you prevent from happening?
- Could this have been avoided? How?
- What else could go wrong?
- Who is to blame?
- When did you find out?
- When did you respond?
- When did you disclose the situation?
- Who is conducting the investigation?
- What are you going to do after the investigation?
- What have you found out so far?
- Has anyone broken the law?
- Has anyone made mistakes? Who?
- Have you told us everything you know?
- What are you not telling us?
- What effect will this have on the organization, constituents and the public?
- Do you accept responsibility for what happened?
- Can this happen in another location?
- What is the worst-case outcome of this crisis?
- What lessons did you learn?
- What will you do to prevent this from happening again?



## Tweet Template

### Potential tweet elements:

- @ (author)
- # (Alert/MediaAdvisory/Update/Today)
- # (event/incident/subject)
- links to your website and/or external authority websites (police, fire, American Red Cross, etc.) for more information
- photos/instructional videos/other images as appropriate

### Sample tweets regarding backpacks found on Boston Marathon finish line, April 2014:

**Boston Police Dept.** @bostonpolice Apr 16

UPDATE: One Arrested for Hoax Device at Marathon Finish Line

<http://bpdnews.com/news/2014/4/16/update-one-arrested-for-hoax-device-at-marathon-finish-line> ...

**Boston Police Dept.** @bostonpolice Apr 15

#BPDSafetyPublicAlert: To ease fears & concerns relating to backpacks - #BPD again discouraging their use at this year's #BostonMarathon.

**Boston Police Dept.** @bostonpolice Apr 15

#BPDPublicSafetyAlert: #BPD confirming a male suspect in custody in connection to the unattended backpacks found at the Finish Line.

**Boston Police Dept.** @bostonpolice Apr 15

#BPDMediaAdvisory: For officer safety - media outlets are discouraged from showing any live video of backpacks found near Finish Line.

**Boston Police Dept.** @bostonpolice Apr 15

#BPDPublicSafetyAlert: #BPD Bomb Squad still on scene in the area of Marathon Finish Line investigating call for 2 unattended backpacks.

**Boston Police Dept.** @bostonpolice Apr 15

#BPDPublicSafetyAlert: Boylston St has been closed & MBTA Green Line service temporarily suspended. Community members asked to avoid area.



## Media Guidelines for City Employees

The goal of our media guidelines is to try to prevent unauthorized spokespeople from talking to the media. While these are part of the Town's guidelines, it is good to distribute at the first warning signs of a crisis or when it has hit.

### Sample Email:

**To:** [INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME] Employees

**From:** City Manager

**Date:** (Month, Day, Year)

**Re:** [INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME] Media Guidelines

The [INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME] has Media Guidelines regarding calls or visits from reporters. If a member of the media wants to talk with you, please do not answer any questions. Follow these steps:

1. Tell the reporter, "I am not an authorized spokesperson for the [INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME]. Please contact [PIO NAME] at XXX-XXX-XXXX or [EMAIL]"
2. If a member of the media attempts to ask you questions in person, repeat the above. Do not agree to go on camera or answer any media questions. Ask, "Do you have a business card?"
3. Immediately call, text or email the complete contact information to [NAME], Public Information Officer.

We appreciate your cooperation in following this media policy.

## Social Media Guidelines

The goal of our social media guidelines is to try to prevent unauthorized spokespeople from speaking on behalf of the City via social media.

### Protocol/Rules of Engagement:

- Abide by **[INSERT ORGANIZATION NAME]** social media guidelines and policies
- Pause all prior scheduled social media posts until the crisis has passed.
- Posting authority:
  - Communications staff may access the social media channels and the social media dashboard.
  - During a crisis, any content posted on social media sites must be approved by the Public Information Officer.

## Town Spokesperson Guidelines

1. Express compassion to those directly impacted by the crisis. Offer empathy messages first, before the facts.
2. Think of messages as your quotes. Persuasive messages interpret, explain and educate. Simplify complex information.
3. Take an active role in the interview. Ask the reporter for a quick overview before you begin. Make the first answer count to ensure you get your key points across.
4. Focus 100% on the interview. If you're on the phone with a reporter, remove all distractions. Have the Q&A or statement handy either in print, on your smart phone, tablet or laptop. Jot down reporter questions to help you focus on what they are asking and how to respond.
5. Practice bridging to the information you want to convey. Briefly answer a negative or irrelevant question, then introduce or bridge to your message. Elaborate when asked positive questions. "Yes, that's correct, and what's more..." Provide brief answers to negative questions. Set the record straight when the reporter has his or her facts wrong. Say, "No, that is not correct, and let me explain."
6. Decline to speculate on the motives or actions of others. Politely say, "I wish I could help you, however you should contact them directly."
7. Don't feel obligated to answer every question on the spot. It's perfectly fine to say "I don't know" vs. risking off-the-cuff answer that may turn out to be wrong. If you don't know the answer, say so. Add that you or someone from the organization will try to get back to them with the answer as soon as possible.
8. If you are unable to comment, explain why; either because of confidentiality, litigation or because police, fire or other authority has requested that you refer questions to them.
9. Never say anything "off the record." The reporter could inadvertently use your comment, or your "anonymous" quote could be traced back to you. Always assume that anything you say or put in writing could be used in a sound bite or news story.
10. Stay on message. Even if the reporter uses an accusatory tone or is rude, remember that it is often a tactic to provoke a reaction. Don't take it personally. If the reporter persists in using a hostile tone, consider ending the interview and suggest talking at a later time.

11. The toughest rule for most people to follow, and the most important, is to stop and think before answering questions. It only takes a few seconds to shape a quote that will be on the record for years.
12. Do not feel obligated to conduct a live or recorded interview either in-person or over the phone. In most cases it is acceptable to ask the reporter to submit their questions in writing and respond via email.
13. Be respectful of the reporter's deadlines. If you are unable to respond immediately, ask when they need to receive a response and try to accommodate them if possible.