

Communications

Crisis Communications Planning

Issued by The Elections Group



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Five Steps for Creating a Crisis Communication Plan

During a crisis, it is critical for election offices to communicate pertinent information to internal and external stakeholders. The level of detail, urgency and involvement of various individuals and organizations may vary depending on the situation.



Step 1 – Develop an Internal Communications Plan

Internal communications plans assist with consistent messaging, help ensure internal understanding of the issue, and provide a clear system for handling concerns and questions from the public.

When developing your internal communications plan, consider the following:

- How and when to brief elected officials, appointees, executive leadership, directors and managers
- How and when to hold an all-hands staff meeting to maintain agency continuity and accuracy of internal communications
- Ensure that everyone is briefed on the agency's plan for who makes decisions and any other emergency procedures
- Include any available continuity plans and emergency procedures, or where to find them in the plan.

Five Steps for Creating a Crisis Communication Plan

- Plan to assign someone to recap the meeting via email and/or messaging platform (webEOC, Teams, Google Chat, etc.)
- Designate one person and a backup in your organization to communicate with the media
- Develop language and include procedures for staff who may be responding to unofficial requests for information from the public (e.g., incoming calls to a public hotline)
- Include and regularly review a list of internal and external stakeholders and their corresponding contact information
- Identify and include contact information for agencies to establish and maintain interdepartmental communication and coordination
- Build and include a schedule to update executive leadership and staff

Internal Crisis Communication Plan Template

| Crisis | Crisis Media Liaison | Response Activity | Activity Date & Time | Internal Stakeholders | Communication Tools | Audience | Goals | Delivery Method | Project Owner | Link to relevant policy and procedures | Additional Notes |
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Internal Contact Information Template

| Internal Contact Information Template | | | | | |
|---------------------------------------|-------|------|------------|------------|-------|
| Name | Title | Role | Desk Phone | Cell Phone | Email |
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Step 2 – Develop an External Communications Plan

The goal for an external communications plan during a crisis is communicating with the public and maintaining trust and confidence in your office and the election system.

When developing your external communications plan, consider including the following:

- Establish clear, concise and consistent core messaging
 - As a trusted source of information, it is important to maintain clear and concise messaging across all channels of information
 - Ensure all staff is trained and have a clear understanding of the information that needs to be conveyed
- Identify your audiences and determine their need for information. Potential audiences to keep in mind as you are crafting your plan:
 - Voters
 - Employees outside of the election office
 - Families of staff
 - Election workers
 - Vendors
 - Community organizations—especially those that conduct outreach to voters
 - Government (elected officials and agencies)
 - Candidates
 - News media
- Create talking points for your audiences
 - Ensure that talking points are brief, include plain language, and are not overly complicated
 - Include and regularly update a list of external stakeholders
- Coordinate the release of information, keeping in mind:
 - There may be limited information about the incident or its potential impacts
 - You may be coordinating with external entities to address the situation
 - The facts may change as the situation develops and new information becomes available
 - Avoid communicating too much too soon – or too little too late.
 - Adjust messaging as needed to address new and emerging concerns from the public

External Crisis Communication Plan Template

| Crisis | Crisis Media Liaison | External Stakeholders | Communication Tool | Audience | Goals | Published? (Y/N) | Project Lead/Owner | Press Conference? | Collaborating Entities or Agencies | Link to relevant policy and procedures | Additional Notes |
|--------|----------------------|-----------------------|--------------------|----------|-------|------------------|--------------------|-------------------|------------------------------------|--|------------------|
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Step 3 – Create External Communication Tools

External communication tools help election offices relay updates in a crisis and can help shape public opinion, trust and confidence. They help spread information quickly to a wide and diverse audience and dispel misinformation that threaten the voting and elections process.

Often, the external communication strategies used will depend on various factors. From the timing and severity of the crisis to which stakeholders may be involved. While there's no one-size-fits-all solution to accessing the advantage of external communication, several external communication tools and samples are included in this section for consideration.

These include but are not limited to:

- Email notifications
- Media advisories or press releases
- Press conference plans
- Text messages or emergency alert notification system rollout
- Social media

Work with Emergency Management Department or Agency

Consider fostering a relationship with your jurisdiction's emergency management department or agency. Often, these offices already have in place external communication tools that your office can use in the event of a crisis.

Email Notifications

Email notifications are an excellent communication tool that can be used to reach a large audience and utilize a longer format to allow for additional information including important links to relevant websites and resources.

Email Notification: Internal – Staff and/or Election Workers

Subject: URGENT – Reports of Planned Protest at ABC Community Center

According to intelligence gathered by the Endor Police Department, a protest is planned to take place on Election Day at ABC Community Center. The Endor Police Department has spoken to the protest organizers and they are aware of the distance they must maintain from the entrance of the polling place and not to harass voters.

If the safety of our election workers and/or voters is threatened please immediately call 9-1-1 and notify the main office at 555-555-5555.

If there is no imminent threat to public safety, but protestors are harassing voters and/or breaching electioneering guidelines, contact the non-emergency law enforcement line at

555-555-5555, and notify our main office at 555-555-5555.

Please notify a manager if you have any questions.

Email Notification: External – Voters and the General Public

Subject: URGENT – Endor Elections Office Warns Voters of Unofficial Ballot Drop Boxes

There have been recent reports of groups promoting unofficial ballot drop boxes that are not affiliated with the Endor Elections Office. In some instances, they are promoting these ballot drop boxes as “official” or “secure.” The use of unauthorized, non-official ballot drop boxes is prohibited by state law and is being investigated by the District Attorney and State Attorney General.

Voters who want to return their ballot at a drop box should only use official county drop boxes. Official ballot drop boxes are clearly recognizable, designed to meet state standards for security, and bear the official elections logo and seal.

Locations of official ballot drop boxes can be found at www.endorvote.gov

Voters or organizations aware of any unofficial ballot drop boxes can be reported to 555-555-5555.

Email Notification: External – Community Partners

Subject: URGENT - Endor Elections Office to Expand Voting Hours Near Fire Zones to Assist Voters

Due to the closure of voting locations caused by recent fires, the Endor Elections Office is expanding voting hours near fire zones to assist voters. We are asking Community Partners to help spread this information to all impacted voters and any voters who would benefit from the additional availability of voting opportunities such as posting on your social media accounts, newsletters, etc.

All polling places listed below will be open between 7 a.m. and 8 p.m. from November 1 to November 4:

Tatooine Fire Department
1234 Tatooine Drive

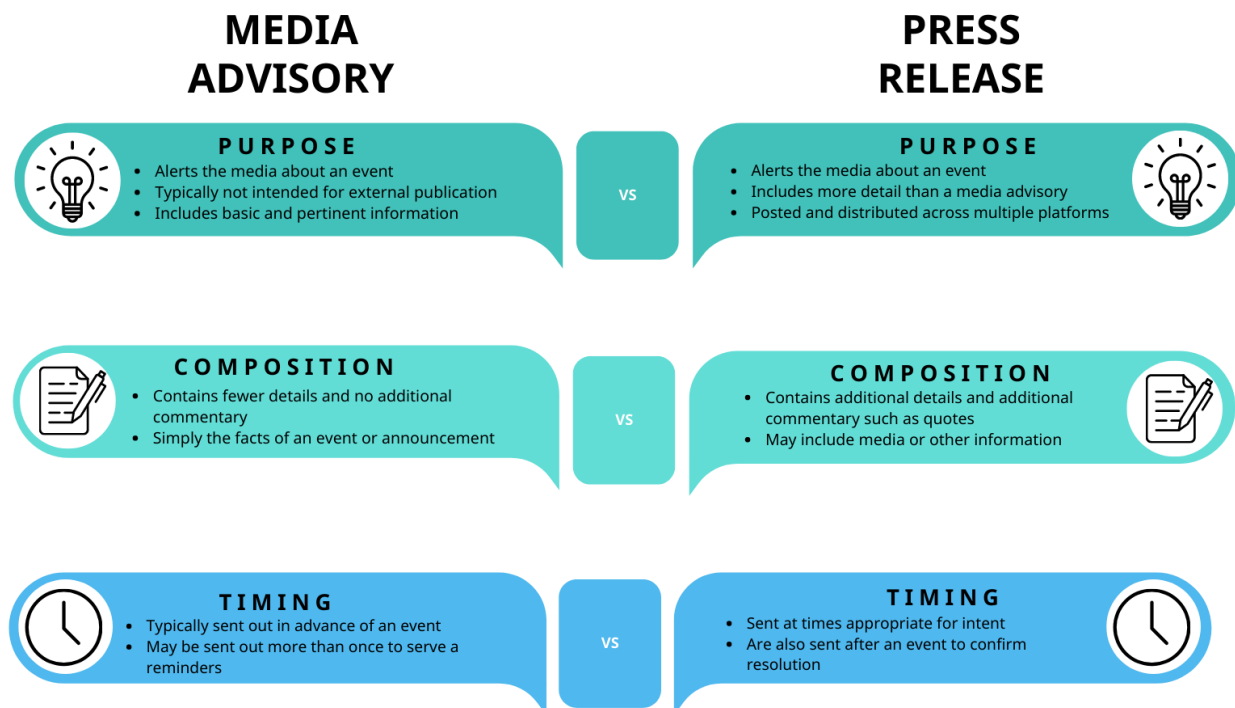
Coruscant Elementary School
5678 Coruscant Boulevard

Hoth Senior Center
8888 Hoth Highway

For more information, call 555-555-55555 or visit www.endorvote.gov

Media Advisories and Press Releases

Media advisories and press releases are news stories written by your office that are designed to give media and other readers details about your organization. The key differences between a media advisory and press release include the purpose, composition and timing. Knowing these differences will help your office build credibility and visibility.



The chart below illustrates the key differences between the two and our [How to Write a Press Release](#) from our [Communications Resource Desk](#) can help you get started crafting your own.

The key differences between a media advisory and press release include the purpose, composition, and timing. Knowing these differences will help your elections office build credibility and gaining the media’s attention in featuring the information your office would like to share with their audience.

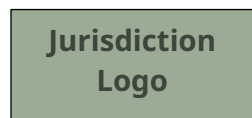
Templates and samples of both are provided below.

| Purpose | |
|---|--|
| Media Advisory | Press Release |
| A Media Advisory is used to make the media aware of an upcoming event with only the most important details. Typically, it's used to inform the media of something newsworthy, and is only released to members of the media. The Media Advisory document is typically not intended for publication to anyone outside of the media. | A Press Release is used to give media and others more details about an organization and anything newsworthy. A Press Release is sent to media but can also be posted to forums and platforms for others to see. The goal of the Press Release is to spark the interest of the media and motivate them to feature the story and provide a standard quote they can use in their reporting. |

| Composition | |
|--|---|
| Media Advisory | Press Release |
| A media advisory is a one-page document and is an abbreviated form of a press release. It will be set up using the same format like contact information, headline, dateline, introduction, etc. An advisory will contain less detail and almost no commentary – it's just the facts pertaining to the event. | A press release will contain additional details about the event or organization and includes information, and sometimes photos to support the story or event being presented to the media. This document contains more detail -- some are published to social media and other online publications directly. |

| Timing | |
|--|---|
| Media Advisory | Press Release |
| Media Advisories are sent to media contacts in advance of an announcement or event. They may also be sent to the media a second time prior to the event. The subsequent issuances serve as reminders of the event. | <p>Press releases are sent at times appropriate to intent; for crisis communications, this typically means as soon as possible. The media should be given enough details intended to pique enough interest to feature it.</p> <p>OPTIONAL: Press releases can also be sent after an event or an issue to confirm resolution. If sent after the event, include the resolution, photos and video links for publication.</p> |

Press Release Template



Contact Information
[First Name] [Last Name]
[Title]
[Email] | [Phone]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Press Release Title

Month XX, YYYY

Begin with a quick concise (usually 100 words or fewer) introduction to explain what occurred and what immediate action has been taken to address the issue:

[JURISDICTION NAME], [STATE ABBREVIATION] – On [DAY OF WEEK], [MONTH] [DAY], [YEAR] at approximately XX:XX [AM/PM], the [ELECTION OFFICE] received reports that [ISSUE THAT OCCURRED]. [What immediate action has been taken to protect the integrity of the election, ensure voting access, and/or safety of the public?].

Include a brief statement of who your office is working with, how voters can seek additional assistance, and provide any additional information:

The [ELECTION OFFICE] is working with [EXTERNAL ORGANIZATION(S)] to address the matter and is taking precautions to ensure [the safety of the public / the integrity of the election and voting process / voting access / etc.]. Voters seeking additional assistance may call [GENERAL OFFICE NUMBER]. [Is there any additional information you would like to provide to voters?]

Prepare a quote:

Quote by [ELECTION OFFICIAL NAME], [ELECTION OFFICIAL TITLE]:

“My office is dedicated to providing election services for the citizens of [JURISDICTION] to ensure equal access to the election process, protect the integrity of votes, and maintain a transparent, accurate and fair process. We look forward to [What outcome are you looking forward to?].”

For additional information, visit [WEBSITE] or call [MEDIA CONTACT PHONE NUMBER].

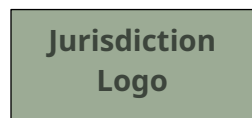
END the press release with boilerplate language and media contact information in accordance with your jurisdiction’s policy:

###

About [ELECTION OFFICE]: The [ELECTION OFFICE] is responsible for conducting elections

in [JURISDICTION] with [NUMBER] registered voters. As a local election office, the [ELECTION OFFICE] manages the processing of vote-by-mail ballots, recruitment and training of election workers, in-person voting operations, and certification of elections.

Media Advisory Template



Contact Information
[First Name] [Last Name]
[Title]
[Email] | [Phone]

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Media Advisory Title

Month XX, YYYY

[JURISDICTION NAME], [STATE ABBREVIATION]

Begin with a quick concise (usually 2-3 sentences) introduction to explain what the planned event or announcement is:

The [ELECTION OFFICE] is planning [EVENT/ANNOUNCEMENT] on [Month Day, Year]. The media is being notified in advance

Include a brief bullet points or sentences to provide high level information regarding the event/announcement:

WHO: Specify your office and any other organizations and individuals that have significant involvement.

WHAT: Illustrate what will be happening that will be of interest to the media and who will be involved.

WHERE: List where media should show up and indicate whether there are any instructions for checking in or finding reserved parking locations.

WHEN: Detail when activities of interest to the media will begin and end.

BROADCAST VISUALS: Provide a visual description of what could be captured through videography or photography.

TECHNICAL SUPPORT: Address any technical concerns media may have such as network access, parking for broadcast vehicles, access to power, etc.

For additional information, visit [WEBSITE] or call [MEDIA CONTACT PHONE NUMBER].

End the press release with boilerplate language and media contact information in

accordance with your jurisdiction's policy:

###

About [ELECTION OFFICE]: The [ELECTION OFFICE] is responsible for conducting elections in [JURISDICTION] with [NUMBER] registered voters. As a local election office, the [ELECTION OFFICE] manages the processing of vote-by-mail ballots, recruitment and training of election workers, in-person voting operations, and certification of elections.

Press Conferences

Hosting a press conference during a crisis can assist with delivering your consistent core message to multiple reporters at one event. Although crises move quickly, it is important to have a general plan for press conferences to maintain preparedness and continuity. Both media advisories and press releases can be used to support press conferences.

When planning your press conference, consider the following:

- **Scheduling** – Schedule press conferences as soon as possible. Keep in mind that scheduling earlier in the day allows more time for the news to be distributed throughout the day.
- **Location** – Select a meaningful location. Try to avoid using spaces with poor lighting and sound quality (e.g., warehouses, basements, or loud processing rooms).
- **Statements** – Have a statement prepared that aligns with established core messaging and consider having subject matter experts on hand to help with communicating technical information.
- **Clarify** – Announce a clear start and stop time, properly introduce speakers and advise if a question-and-answer session will take place
- **Closing** – Adhere to clear start and stop times. If a question-and-answer session is held, keep an eye on the time, and alert reporters of the last question. Before leaving thank everyone for their time.

| Press Conference Planning Template | | | | | |
|---|------------------------|-----------------|-----------------------------|-----------------|---------------------------|
| Crisis | Date & Time | Location | Statement? (Y/N) | Speakers | Q&A? (Y/N) |
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Social Media

Today, real-world catastrophes play out on social media in real time. Social media is an important channel for sharing urgent news and updates. Election offices can plan ahead by creating an official social media policy that documents communication strategies, so staff understand what protocol and approach to follow.

Make sure your social media policy includes the following:

- An up-to-date internal emergency contact list.
- Guidance on accessing social account credentials.
- Guidelines for identifying the scope of potential crises
- An approval process for response strategy

During a crisis, leverage social media to:

- Communicate updates to voters
- Support voters who need help or information
- Listen and learn about concerns, attitudes, and what people are saying about voting and elections
- Fact-check information and correct rumors
- Strategize for the medium-term

Social media should complement all other methods of communications. Context can shift quickly in a crisis, and scheduled posts may need to be paused or skipped altogether to avoid confusion.

It is important to remember that social media communications are generally considered public record and that an elections office should maintain the same professionalism on social media that it would in assisting a voter in any other setting.

Looking for inspiration? Check out these examples from the [Arapahoe County Clerk & Recorder](#), [Denver Elections Division](#), [Los Angeles County Registrar-Recorder](#), [Orange County Registrar](#), and [Travis County Clerk](#).

Step 4 – Publish and Market External Communication Tools

Once external communication tools are prepared, begin publishing and marketing them. This is crucial for disseminating as widely as possible.

To inform voters and the public, the elections office can take an expansive approach to reach as many as possible. By distributing communication tools to trusted messengers, the elections office can leverage their reach and have an even greater impact.

Trusted messengers may include:

- Media outlets (traditional and others)
- Language community partners
- Veterans' groups
- Disability community partners
- State and local political parties
- Advocacy groups

- Professional organizations
- Community-based organizations
- Homeowner associations and neighborhood apps like NextDoor
- Community centers
- Cities and other political jurisdictions
- Candidates
- Elected officials

Step 5 – Analyze Feedback from External Audiences

Feedback from external audiences will let an elections office know if the crisis communications strategy was successful and whether something needs to be clarified or emphasized. Feedback can come from a variety of channels, including email, social media, phone calls, political parties or from other government agencies.

Collecting feedback is important for developing future communication strategies, improving the voter experience, and overall voter satisfaction levels. Consider assigning someone on your team to track the event as it unfolds and gather quick information regarding public sentiment. Social media analytics are a good starting point to quickly see levels of engagement and public sentiment.

Proper analysis provides an elections office with a better view of what needs to happen to be responsive to voters, build trust and confidence in the voting and election process, and reduce voter support cases. Election offices can restart the 5-step plan at any time while refining and updating strategies to reflect the feedback from external audiences.

Additional Resources

- ▣ [PR News: How to Conduct a Successful Virtual Press Conference](#)
- ▣ [Ready.gov Crisis Communications Plan](#)
- ▣ [Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs Election Cyber Incident Communications Plan Template for State and Local Officials](#)