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A Guide to Crisis Management for Non-Profit Organizations

As a non-profit organization serving your community every day, would you and your staff know what to do if something terrible were to happen? How would you and your staff react to an unexpected life-threatening, chaotic or emotionally charged situation?

While it is impossible to anticipate every event, you can develop a framework for responding to crisis that may increase the likelihood of a good outcome.

The purpose of this document is to provide you with the tools and critical thinking skills which you can use to help you make the best decisions when you are challenged by circumstances beyond your control.

If you already have a crisis plan in place, use this to refine or reaffirm what you have developed. If you don't have a plan, we hope that you will use this outline as a starting point. In either instance, share your plan and your crisis management information with your staff. Educate them and practice. Just don't wait for a crisis to happen before you begin figuring out what to do.

What is a crisis?

When asked to define "crisis", most people would respond by describing a cataclysmic event, like a tornado, hurricane, medical emergency or an emotionally trying situation. Because the experience of a crisis is highly individualized, what represents a crisis for one person may not be experienced as a crisis by someone else.

When a crisis has occurred, we are faced with incomprehensible uncertainty. We don't know what lies ahead. The aftermath might include serious injury, loss of life, damage to property and reputation, litigation or even the loss of your organization.

No two people will define "crisis" in the same way. It may help, however, to keep the following in mind:

- A crisis is an unstable or crucial time or state of affairs, an emotionally significant event, a radical change in the status of a person's life, or a serious endangerment to property in which a decisive change for better or worse is impending.
- In a crisis situation, it is obvious or highly likely that a third party (such as the police, medical personnel, an attorney or an insurance company) will be involved in some way.

What would you do if.....

You respond.

If you wait until a crisis occurs to figure out how to respond, you lose precious time.

Before the Crisis

Preparation is the key to effective crisis management. The best time to think about how to handle a potential situation is well before it happens. Setting aside “think time” now to outline a crisis management plan may increase the likelihood of a positive outcome and maximize “response time” after a crisis has occurred.

We urge you to put together a kit that contains these guidelines and other materials you may need in a crisis.

Call your local emergency management agency (EMA) to identify potential natural and man-made disasters that may affect your area. Once you have identified potential exposures, arrange a meeting with your EMA for additional suggestions that will help you make your crisis management response more specific to the disasters that may occur in your area.

Remember that in addition to preserving the lives and health of the people you serve, your crisis management plan should also protect your organizational structure and operations, personnel and the services you provide. Consider storing duplicate business records in a secured, offsite location. Review your plan at least once a year with your staff so it is practiced and current.

Responding to a Crisis

As you develop your crisis management plan, design your communications strategy. You may need to communicate the crisis while it is happening. You may need to notify staff that a hostile situation is occurring in your facility or on your grounds. Developing a code word or door card ahead of time and using it when a crisis occurs will let your staff know it’s time to implement the crisis plan.

Immediately following the event, the steps you take should be responsive in nature. Planned, practiced actions can help you avoid chaos and lower the risk of additional negative consequences.

During the first few minutes concentrate on gathering accurate, concise information. This information will help you respond immediately and eliminate confusion later.

Realize that things are likely to happen rapidly and often simultaneously. Stay focused but flexible when carrying out the first steps of your plan. You may need to change the order of your actions.

ACTION STEPS

Find Out

Find out and record exactly what happened; which individuals were involved; and their current location, present condition, and immediate needs. Note any actions that have been taken so far. Ascertain who was in charge or supervising when the incident occurred, and determine who is in charge now. Assess which resources you now have available, which outside resources may be called in and how such assistance will be delivered.

Document facts as you learn them. Keep a notebook and pen or pencil in your crisis response kit.

Essential facts checklist

- ✓ What happened?
- ✓ Who was involved?
- ✓ Where are they now?
- ✓ What is their present condition?
- ✓ What actions have been taken so far?
- ✓ Who was supervising?
- ✓ Who is in charge?
- ✓ What internal resources are available?
- ✓ What outside resources are needed?
- ✓ How will assistance be delivered?
- ✓ When did the incident occur?

As you get the facts about what happened or is still happening, it's important to determine if the crisis is life threatening or not. If you are faced with a bomb threat, shooter, or the encroachment of a life-threatening situation, you may need to take immediate action before you contact emergency services.

Call Emergency Services

Equipped with the facts, call 911 or the appropriate emergency services. Telephone numbers to emergency services should be prominently posted, and kept in multiple locations so that they can be accessed quickly and easily. Include directions to your facility with emergency numbers. In a crisis, it may be difficult for staff to provide precise directions to emergency personnel.

Consider adding a fully charged cell phone which telephone number clearly posted on it, to your crisis response kit. This way, if your telephone services are not working, you may still be able to communicate.

Limit your calls to:

- ✓ Emergency Medical Services
- ✓ Fire Department
- ✓ Police Department

Stabilize the Situation

With help on the way, your attention can be directed to stabilizing the situation. You can accomplish this by accounting for those involved, assessing their condition, removing everyone from further harm, and controlling the activity at the scene.

When you develop your plan, identify individuals on your staff who can act as “greeters”. Greeters help monitor the flow of traffic, keep unauthorized individuals out of the area, and direct press inquiries to a designated spokesperson. The individuals you select for this role should be diplomatic but authoritative, articulate and level-headed.

Greeters also need to be well versed on your crisis management plan. Provide them with brief, bullet points of information about how the media can contact the designated spokesperson, as well as how, when and where they will be able to obtain specific information on the individuals directly involved.

As soon as possible, disperse the greeters to strategic areas (entrances and exits) with appropriate instructions. When something terrible happens, people want to help, onlookers, media and less well-intentioned people often flock to the site.

Account for all individuals involved. In the confusion of the moment it may be difficult to remember everyone’s name. A current roster and list of staff and volunteers should be kept in your crisis response kit.

Checklist for Stabilization:

- ✓ Deal with hazards in the area
- ✓ Disperse greeters
- ✓ Account for individuals, gather in a centralized location
- ✓ Attend to the needs of the injured
- ✓ Look for additional injuries
- ✓ Attend to the needs of the non-injured
- ✓ Assign a staff person to care for the uninjured
- ✓ Preserve everything involved in the incident to the best of your ability for forensic evidence
- ✓ Restrict as much of the affected areas and objects as circumstances allow

Establish Crisis Headquarters

Once immediate pressure of the crisis has abated and the situation has been stabilized, organize crisis headquarters. Look for an area that is reasonably quiet and secluded. A calm atmosphere will allow for clear thinking and an opportunity to make phone calls without distraction. Scout these locations in advance.

Store emergency equipment and supplies in a pre-designated area so that they can be easily and rapidly moved into crisis headquarters. When headquarters is functional take some time to think about a protocol for the phone calls you will make. A telephone protocol is a statement or script that you and designated staff can use to impart information about the crisis accurately and consistently. This procedure can help reduce speculation and contain the “emotional temperature.”

Prepare your script

We strongly recommend consulting your attorney for advice in drafting or reviewing a script or statement.

Consider adding a separate telephone line that can be used specifically in emergency situations. Set up a log for incoming and outgoing telephone calls, and assign one person to monitor the telephone. It's extremely important that you maintain a record of what has been communicated, with whom you spoke and when the conversation occurred. This log should be maintained until the crisis is completely resolved. Be conservative – staff the phones and record all activity until you are comfortable that the crisis has passed.

Contact the Individuals Involved

Your first communication with those involved can be a very difficult task. At this point, take some time to think about what you want to say. Put yourself in the other person's place. How would you want someone to deliver this news to you? What would you want to know? How might you react?

Offer to make arrangements for travel to the hospital, your facility or emergency location. Consider sending staff members to accompany them. Coordinate their arrival and arrange for suitable accommodations once they have arrived.

Mobilize the Crisis Team

Your professional and business advisors, as well as community leaders and agencies, may be able to offer you assistance in responding to the aftermath of a crisis. Activate these resources now.

Once you have an understanding of the kind of care you need, begin to plan the level of intervention that the situation requires. There are three levels of intervention to consider: the facility's crisis response team; local community resources and outside resources. Each member of your team should have a clearly defined role. During implementation, coordinate the flow of information between team members.

Realize that clients, staff and volunteers may show secondary effects of involvement in or having witnessed an incident. Keep track of everyone involved in the event, even if they withdraw from your program or leave your employ. Unexpressed anger, for example, can lead to an accumulation of resentment. Follow up and find out how they are doing.

Call Emergency Resources

Contact appropriate emergency resources to help with clean up, repair and continued management of the crisis. Your crisis response kit should contain a list of these resources, contact names and their office and emergency phone numbers. This list may include numbers for national resources such as American Red Cross, the Center for Disease Control and the Federal Emergency Management Agency, Environmental Protection Agency, Center for Missing and Exploited Children, Occupational Safety and Health Administration, Poison Control Center, Department of Homeland Security. Suggested community resources should include Animal Control Agency, Hospitals, local and regional, Child Welfare Agency, Gas and Electric Company, Health Departments, local and state, Telephone Company, Water Company, Family or

Women' Shelters. Facility Specific numbers should include Alarm Companies, Electrician, Equipment Rental Services, Fire Equipment Service Company, Food Service Vendors, General Contractor, Medical Supply Company, Plumber, Transportation Services and Tree Care Specialists.

Call Support Resources

Establish relationships with advisors and community resources well in advance of a crisis so that they can be quickly mobilized if a crisis occurs. Identify people who have had specific experience in crisis response. When you solicit the assistance of these individuals, ask whether there will be a fee associated with their participation. Note this in your crisis response files, along with the day and after-hours telephone numbers for your concerns.

Familiarize support resources with your facility. Invite them to visit at their convenience so that you can acquaint them with your site, staff and program.

Suggested support resources:

- ✓ Insurance agent/company
- ✓ Attorney/law firm
- ✓ Business partners/Board of Directors
- ✓ Neighboring community centers
- ✓ Clergy
- ✓ Mental health professionals
- ✓ Physicians
- ✓ Professional associations
- ✓ Public relations advisors

Contact Others

Contact those who were not directly involved in the incident, and tell them what has occurred. You can do this by telephone or letter, depending on the level of urgency required by the situation.

Begin your message by acknowledging that an incident has occurred. Provide basic facts about the incident, but do not discuss details or identify individuals who were involved in the incident. Inform them of the level of support that was or will be provided. Emphasize that your program will continue to operate normally. Close by thanking them for their patience and understanding, and encourage them to contact you if they have any questions or concerns.

We suggest having your attorney review the notice prior to its release. Whether you communicate by phone or mail, keep a log of all calls and correspondence received in response to your message. Maintain a log until the issue has been fully resolved.

Manage the Media

Crisis seems to attract a large amount of media attention. If your program experiences a crisis, you should expect that the media will become involved. How you handle the media can have a significant impact on your facility's reputation.

Fortunately, there are steps you can take that may alleviate "bad press". Develop relationships with the media now. An open house is an excellent way of familiarizing the media with your operation. Keep a file with television, radio and print contacts and their telephone numbers, and consider meeting with them if they seek your input on various issues.

Prepare a press kit that contains details about your operation and include its history, a description of your facilities program and pertinent information about your safety record. Keep the kit up-to-date and accessible, so that if a crisis does occur, information about the incident can be added to complete the kit with a minimum of effort.

Consider notifying your media after a crisis has occurred – before they contact you. Review all of the information that you plan to provide the media with your attorney before releasing it. Consider asking your attorney to be present when you speak with media representatives.

Make arrangements to meet with the press in one place, at one time. During this meeting, try to place the incident in a historical perspective. Describe your program, your overall record and business practices. Ask the media for balance, not sensational, reporting of the incident. Provide them with the basic facts of the incident, avoid speculation and assigning blame.

Do not release the names or any personal information about the people involved. Also, keep in mind that when meeting with the media, nothing is "off the record". Review all information with your attorney before its release.

Post Incident Follow-Up

In the weeks and months following the incident, carry out status checks with those persons involved, their families, others affected by the incident and members of the facility's community. Similarly, contact members of your crisis response team. Ask them to help evaluate your response. Focus on what you could do better, and update your crisis response plan accordingly. Periodically check your crisis response supplies and kit, so that they are complete and up-to-date.

Crisis Response Kit

- ✓ Notebook, pencils, pens
- ✓ A cell phone/charged/extra battery/with number posted on phone
- ✓ Emergency services telephone numbers
- ✓ List of staff and volunteers
- ✓ List of emergency contact numbers for clients and staff
- ✓ List of emergency resources and telephone numbers
- ✓ List of support resources and telephone numbers
- ✓ List of media contacts
- ✓ Copy of crisis response plan
- ✓ Flashlight with charged batteries
- ✓ National Oceanographic & Atmospheric Administration weather radio (battery operated)
- ✓ Blankets
- ✓ First aid kit
- ✓ Batteries
- ✓ Bottled water – at least a 24 hour supply
- ✓ Snacks
- ✓ Disposable camera with flash
- ✓ Current phone book
- ✓ Whistles

Organize Files and Prepare Reports

During the course of the crisis, you will have compiled a great deal of information. Shortly afterward, you should organize the data you have collected. Make copies of your incident notes, telephone logs, prepared statements, etc. so that you can use this material in compiling reports you write or file.

Reports should be prepared and preserved in consultation with your attorney and insurance agent. These reports should be factual in content and contain a description of everything that happened and how you and others responded. Do not release reports to anyone who is not specifically authorized by your attorney or others representing your interests. If you can, arrange face-to-face meetings with investigators or confirm their identity with a third party.

Be sure to file all claims and incident reports with the appropriate authorities in a timely manner. These include medical, property, liability and workers' compensation insurance claims, reports to OSHA and other state/local regulatory agencies. Cooperate fully with any ongoing investigations conducted by the authorities.

The Importance of “Plan B”

When confronted with obstacles or “what ifs”, we’re often challenged to come up with “Plan Bs.”

In dealing with crisis, “Plan Bs” take on an additional importance. People may not be able to perform the tasks they have been assigned; services expected may not be available; the situation may have aspects that were unanticipated.

When you review your crisis response plan, take time to develop and document “Plan Bs.” Help your staff understand the multiple tasks or duties they may be asked to perform.

Take Care of Yourself

Throughout this process you have been attending to the needs of everyone. Do not neglect your own care. There are sources of support for you “inside” and “outside” your facility. Spend time with your staff and the clients in your care. Reconnect with your core beliefs.

Take time for physical exercise and relaxation. Give yourself permission to participate in and enjoy everyday routines, as well as special events. Treat yourself with kindness. Be aware of, appreciate, and generate humor. Maintain involvement in professional and community activities.

Remember, none of us is alone. Avoid isolation. Spend time with friends. Don’t hesitate to develop a relationship with a mental health professional who can help you work through this difficult experience.