

Crisis Response Guidance

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Overview

As nonprofits continue to navigate an evolving and challenging landscape, it is critical that organizations are prepared to respond - if and as needed – to a variety of scenarios (e.g. pushback on social media, politically motivated investigations or allegations of fraud/illicit activity) that may cause reputational harm.

The following document provides guidance and messaging for nonprofits to navigate these scenarios including general crisis communications counsel, key elements of a crisis communications plan, evergreen talking points, and messaging guidance.

General Crisis Communications Counsel

Below, please find generalized crisis communications guidance in the event of a potential risk to the reputation of the organization.

Actions to Take Before a Crisis Hits

1. **Anticipate issue areas with a thorough review process.** Review and vet all decisions, actions, and documents through a political lens to identify what, if anything, could be taken out of context.
2. **Decide who's in charge—before you need them.** Name a small crisis team and a single decision-maker. No ambiguity. If something breaks in the news or elsewhere, everyone should know who has the final call and who speaks publicly. Confusion here costs hours you won't have.
3. **Lock your spokespeople and prep them.** Pick 1–2 voices. Train them. Give them draft talking points and holding statements now, so they're not inventing language under pressure. Reinforce that no one else engages externally—period.
4. **Build your “first response” kit.** Write it before you need it: a holding statement, a short org description, and answers to the hardest questions you might face (funding, salaries, politics). You're not guessing later—you're refining.

How to Respond When a Crisis Occurs

1. **Get the facts.** Rapidly collect and verify all available information to establish a clear, accurate understanding of the situation.
2. **Gather the team.** Convene your crisis team to manage response efforts and decision-making.
3. **Activate your crisis plan.** This includes:
 - a. Setting up media and social media monitoring systems.
 - b. Ensuring board members and other key stakeholders are aware of the potential for heightened media and activist attention.
 - c. Leveraging your “first response kit” and providing messaging support to board members, key stakeholders, and staff.
 - d. Properly vetting incoming media requests and inquiries. Depending on the request, opportunity, and outlet, consider offering, when and where appropriate, background and on-the-record interviews. These conversations will provide key context and ensure organizational narratives are included.
4. **Monitor and update.** Continuously track developments and public sentiment, adjusting strategy and communications as needed.
5. **Debrief.** Evaluate the response to capture lessons learned and strengthen future crisis preparedness.

An important note on responding to media inquiries. There is no standardized approach to handling crisis press inquiries, but carefully assessing the outlet, reporter, and nature of the request is critical to mitigating potential risk. It’s important to evaluate whether the inquiry is being made in good faith or driven by a preconceived narrative. Developing situationally appropriate holding statements can be an effective way to manage uncertain or sensitive requests, and in some cases, choosing not to engage may be the most strategic response.

Key Elements of a Crisis Communications Plan

When developing a crisis communications plan, it is essential to integrate the following:

- **Your Guiding Principles.** No matter the issue, these rules should guide our communications approach and response. This includes:
 - Acknowledging effectively to mitigate issues.
 - Speaking with one voice.
 - As needed, provide updates.

- **A Response Command Structure.** With guiding principles in place, it's important to have a structure in place to flag, elevate, and approve responses.
- **An Internal Communications Ecosystem.** Maintaining consistent and clear communication across this working group is essential. To do so, establishing a war room, Slack channel, and text chain is critical.
- **Scenario Plans Addressing Key Issues.** This should include:
 - Potential scenario description
 - Approach (how the organization will respond)
 - Key decisionmakers
 - Key questions to ask
 - Scenario specific actions
 - Draft statements for media and social
 - After scenario actions

Pivot to Your Evergreen Talking Points

If asked by a reporter or community member for your reaction to the current state of affairs, it will be important to integrate and pivot to core points about what makes nonprofits essential for all Americans:

- **Nonprofits show up every day**, doing the invisible work no one else does in both rural communities and urban neighborhoods across America.
- **They show up in tough times**—providing disaster relief, crisis support, and safety from danger. And they show up for the everyday needs, too—from childcare and elder care to job training and essential food and shelter.
- **Nonprofits do all this through mostly very small, very well-managed organizations** that know how to make every dollar count. They have local leaders who understand local needs, and they work hard to make their neighbors' lives better.
- **Whenever possible, include an anecdote** about how your organization strengthens your community.

How do you pivot? An example can be found here:

Reporter Question: *How do you react to reports that XYZ organization has siphoned off funds from a government program?*

Proposed Response: “Any allegations of fraud should be taken seriously and investigated. When wrongdoing occurs, individuals must be held accountable. Period.”

It's important to remember that Nonprofits operate under strict standards because their work depends on public trust. That means oversight from boards, audits, and regulators, all designed to ensure transparency and accountability across a sector that touches communities nationwide.

Nonprofits are one of the most accountable, mission-driven parts of American life. They show up for communities every day in the most challenging times to deliver meaningful impact across the country.”

Note: State associations and local organizations – based on the scenario and issues area – should develop their own approved succinct talking points and holding statements.

Message Guidance

- **Stay calm, nonpartisan, and mission oriented.**
- **Keep responses fact-based and counter false claims** with evidence and clarity; avoid exaggeration or speculative language. Avoid repeating the negative.
- **Use trusted validators like faith leaders, local friends, and neighbors.** Whenever possible, consider these messengers as third-party validators. NCN polling found that 51% of Republicans trust church or faith leaders to provide them with information about nonprofits. Your message is more powerful coming from someone your audience already trusts.
- **Stress humility and service.** Most Americans see nonprofits as quietly serving communities—with 73% of Republicans agreeing that nonprofits “go about their work quietly, focused on supporting the most vulnerable and responding in times of crisis.” Lean into that trusted reputation.
- **Stay forward-looking;** highlight solutions, unity, and the essential role nonprofits play in strengthening democracy and communities.
- **Always bring it back to communities and impact.** Use local examples and tell stories of neighbors helping neighbors. Every attack on nonprofits is an attack on the meals, shelter beds, clinic visits, and community programs people depend on.