

Telecom Preparedness in Crisis Communication Planning

by Mike Mitchell

A 2007 [G.E. Security Healthcare Benchmarking Study](#) revealed that only 20% of hospital's security staff indicated the following statement described their hospital extremely well: Our hospital is prepared for an emergency situation/catastrophe. An effective crisis communication plan is one way to make sure your hospital is well prepared for an emergency.

Communicating during a crisis is crucial for the safety of the hospital staff, the patients, and occasionally the local community. There are two types of hospital crisis: internal and external. There are three key components of an effective crisis communication: Preparation, Personnel, and a Plan. Is your hospital prepared and are your systems ready to communicate during a crisis?

Jim Crumley in his article, [Crisis Communications Come of Age](#)' (published in 2008) states, "Recent incidents — in and out of the health care industry — showcase the need for timely and comprehensive communication in threatening environments."

Internal and External Crisis

Internal Crisis:

An internal crisis happens inside the hospital or on the hospital campus. This type of crisis includes cardiac arrest, fire, hazardous spill, and other situations for which there is usually a code procedure.

External Crisis:

An external crisis includes events usually outside the direct control of hospital personnel. These types of events include power outages, floods, hurricanes, plane crashes, major traffic accidents, toxic spills, or explosions. My hospital made sure we had a contingency plan for handling these events that was reviewed and updated periodically.

Preparation

Internal Crisis:

Broadcasting codes for cardiac arrest, fire alarm, and even an unruly patient using overhead public address system is the norm. Creating distribution lists for specifically assigned beepers and in-house wireless handsets are another means of communicating with staff. Test your systems, including nurse-call PC notification technology. Make sure all systems are well maintained and functioning properly. Have spare batteries for beepers and a supply of charged batteries for wireless handsets.

External Crisis:

Document the IP addresses, URLs, names and telephone numbers of vendors. Get contact information for other hospitals. Make sure your EMS radios are in good working order. Identify "cold sites" if available. Know how to re-route incoming telephone lines and data circuits. Provide for a mobile command center with voice/data/fax capabilities.

In [Crisis Communications in Social Media: Are You Ready?](#) Valeria Maltoni defines preparedness as, "Planning, organizing, training, evaluating, and improving activities that will ensure the proper coordination of efforts during a disaster."

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Personnel

Internal Crisis:

Well-trained and prepared operators and staff are crucial in handling a routine internal crisis. The best equipment serves no purpose if the staff is not trained to use it.

External Crisis:

Supply key players in your department with access codes and passwords to systems and off site resources (servers, backup discs, social media accounts, etc). Establish a chain of authority in the event you are unable to take command. Know your hospital's administrative and public relations personnel and their contact information. Have the list of city, county, and state emergency agencies and their contact information.

A Plan

Internal Crisis:

The response plan for codes or internal crisis should be part of your department SOP manual. Review this plan at least yearly. Update written procedures when new equipment is installed or a different notification process put in place. The Joint Commission inspectors always reviewed my department plans during every visit.

External Crisis:

Your plan should include how to communicate with off duty hospital and department staff. This information should be included in the hospital SOP as well as your department SOP. Make sure all references to your plan are updated in all documentation. During an external crisis, there is no room for confusion. You might test your procedures as part of an emergency drill required by The Joint Commission.

When developing your crisis communication plan, consider how you would communicate if your both voice and data systems failed. What alternatives are available? Are they economically feasible? Work with your CIO or hospital administrator to determine the level of risk they are willing to accept.

During an external crisis, your public relations staff may want to communicate information to the local community via social media like Facebook or Twitter. Set up accounts as part of your crisis communication preparation. Share the passwords with your trusted staff.

If your communication plan needs updating, review the East Jefferson General Hospital (Metairie, Louisiana) [Emergency Communication Plan](#) for ideas. This brief five-page document covers a broad range of procedures. Their policy states: "Communication systems must be readily available, reliable and properly maintained to support an emergency or disaster." That is a good policy for any hospital.