

CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS: PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

Crises can occur at any time and in any place, and unfortunately, camps are not immune. While we hope your program never faces such a situation, the American Camp Association (ACA) has created this guide to share best practices in crisis communications.

This tool kit is offered as a helpful reference and is not a substitute for the ACA Camp Crisis Hotline, nor does it replace legal or professional counsel. It is intended to illustrate practical frameworks and best practices that camps may learn from when developing their own communication strategies.

Before a Crisis: A Preparedness Framework

1. **Establish a communications plan.** Camps that experience smoother crisis responses often have a written communications plan in place. This includes identifying spokespeople, outlining internal communication flows, and preparing message templates.
2. **Clarify roles and contacts.** Successful responses typically rely on a clear list of internal contacts, including directors, legal advisors, and medical support. Keep this list easily accessible.
3. **Know your resources.** The ACA Camp Crisis Hotline is available 24/7 at 800-573-9019 to confidentially discuss incidents and explore next steps. It's not a reporting line or a solution provider but a supportive resource.
4. **Identify audiences in advance.** In times of crisis, it's helpful to have already considered key audiences, such as staff, campers, camper families or caregivers, volunteers, and media. A communications plan often benefits from anticipating these audiences and their needs.

Recognizing a Crisis Situation

Understanding when a crisis is taking shape can guide more timely responses. Here are scenarios that have signaled crisis-level issues in the past:

- An incident occurred on camp property or involved campers/staff off-site.
- It involves allegations of abuse, serious injury, or a situation likely to draw public/media attention.
- It is immediate, time-sensitive, or ongoing.
- It is on a scale that might attract local or national media attention.

Some questions camps have found useful to ask when determining a crisis-level issue include:

- Is the situation isolated, or is it likely to grow or escalate?
- Is this best addressed with your ACA field office as support, or does it merit consultation with ACA's national office?

Responding to a Crisis: Communication Best Practices

The following are practices observed in camp communities during past crises:

- **Gather facts swiftly.** Camp leadership should speak only with the direct staff involved. Accuracy early on shapes everything that follows.
- **Designate one spokesperson.** Consistency in messaging helps avoid confusion and conflicting information. Ideally, this is the camp owner, CEO, camp director, or other person of authority and is a different person than the one managing the crisis.
- **Coordinate with professionals.** The camp's legal and PR advisors should review public statements. This is especially critical for issues involving liability or high visibility.
- **Create key message points.** These are internal talking points, not to be distributed, that help guide and coordinate all out-bound communication. If the crisis requires statements from the camp, control the flow of information. If the media calls, be courteous, take their information, and ask for a deadline to return the call.
- **Develop a factual written statement.** Working with attorneys and PR advisors, the statement should avoid speculation and should not assign any blame. This statement can be shared with camper parents/caregivers, staff/volunteers, and the media.
- **Track all outreach and inquiries.** Camps have found it helpful to log media calls and monitor all coverage for accuracy.
- **Respond respectfully and thoughtfully.** Media outreach cannot be ignored. "No comment" can often be interpreted negatively. A courteous, factual response can help reinforce credibility. If the designated spokesperson is not available by phone or cell phone at all times (during normal business hours), consider creating a voice message that directs the media to the national office — "If this is a media inquiry and you need immediate assistance or if this is an emergency, please call the American Camp Association national office at 317-342-8456 and ask for the public relations department."
- **Restrict additional contact.** If asked to provide access to campers or other staff, direct all requests to the designated spokesperson.

How to Gather Facts Swiftly

- Identify and contact the staff directly involved in the incident. Do not conduct broad staff interviews, but instead focus on direct witnesses or responsible parties.
- Record what, when, and where the incident occurred and who was involved. Be precise and avoid speculation.
- Document this information securely, and share it only with leadership and relevant professionals.

How to Designate a Spokesperson

- Identify and choose a leader (camp director, owner, or CEO) who is not managing the incident directly.
- Make an internal announcement so all staff know who will speak on behalf of the camp.
- Ensure the spokesperson is briefed regularly and receives all message points and updates.

How to Coordinate with Professionals

- Contact the camp's legal counsel and PR counsel as soon as the crisis is confirmed.
 - Share factual findings and any early drafts of statements or responses, including any statements that may have already been made.
 - Only finalize and release communications after they have been reviewed by both professionals.
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How to Craft Effective Crisis Statements and Key Messages

When a crisis occurs, it's essential to respond with clarity, compassion, and credibility. Below are guidelines for developing holding statements and key messages tailored to common types of incidents camps may face.

How to Create a Holding Statement

A holding statement is a preliminary response issued during or immediately after a crisis. Its purpose is to acknowledge the situation, express empathy, and communicate what is currently known, without speculating or assigning blame.

Components of a strong holding statement include:

1. **Empathy.** Acknowledge the emotional weight of the situation. Express condolences or concern where appropriate.
 2. **Facts (as they are known at the moment).** Briefly share what has been confirmed, and clarify what is still under investigation. Avoid speculation.
 3. **Assurance of protocols.** Reinforce any relevant safety or accreditation measures in place.
 4. **Action taken.** Note any steps already taken to address the issue.
 5. **Ongoing cooperation.** Indicate your willingness to cooperate with authorities and maintain transparency.
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How to Develop Key Messages for a Crisis

Key messages are the consistent, repeatable points you want to reinforce across all communication channels, including media inquiries, social media, internal updates, and stakeholder conversations.

Effective key messages should:

- Reinforce the values of the camp (e.g., safety, responsibility, compassion)
- Provide clarity on the camp's accreditation and adherence to best practices
- Outline relevant safety protocols or staff training measures
- Avoid speculation or unverified claims
- Express sympathy when appropriate

Message Types by Incident Category

In the case of a medical or fatal event (e.g., illness or death), effective key messages should:

- Express sincere sympathy for the affected families
- Reinforce that the health and safety of campers is a top priority
- Emphasize adherence to regulations and/or ACA standards and cooperation with the relevant health authorities
- Clarify when the camp is awaiting more information or results

In the case of an accident (e.g., vehicle, boating), effective key messages should:

- Reinforce the camp's commitment to safety, its safety procedures, and its emergency response readiness
- Describe certification where applicable and training protocols for the relevant staff
- Emphasize emergency protocols that were followed

In the case of abuse allegations, effective key messages should:

- Express very clearly a zero-tolerance policy on abuse
- State and describe the staff screening and training processes
- Highlight cooperation with officials, including law enforcement and child welfare authorities
- Stress ongoing improvement and review of protective measures

In all cases, effective key messages should:

- Avoid speculation and reiterate that the situation is under investigation (if true)
- Reaffirm the camp's accreditation, its good standing in the community, and that the camp meets or exceeds national standards
- Offer a point of contact for further updates

How to Track Outreach and Inquiries

- Assign a person to maintain a crisis log or spreadsheet where they will record every media inquiry (name, outlet, question, contact info, and deadline).
- Monitor social and news media for mentions of the camp, noting any inaccuracies.
- Share notable entries with leadership daily.