

Crisis Communication Plan

Introduction

1. Purpose

The Washington State University (WSU) Systemwide Crisis Communications Plan provides the framework for authority, roles, decision-making guidance, and organizational structures to enable the University to quickly disseminate accurate information to stakeholders using channels and formats accessible to all recipients. The Crisis Communications function operates within the Incident Command System (ICS). The Public Information Officer (PIO) reports directly to the Incident Commander (IC) and is responsible for coordinating all public messaging.

Objectives:

- Protection of life, property, and reputation
- Ensure clear communication with internal and external audiences
- Meet the requirements of the Jeanne Clery Act for emergency and timely notifications
- Provide necessary transparency to maintain public trust
- Maintenance and/or restoration of essential facilities and services
- Continuity of Operations

2. Scope and Applicability

Washington State University is committed to the welfare of our students, staff, and visitors across all WSU locations. Our WSU [Emergency operations plan \(EOP\)](#) along with the [Coordinated Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan \(C-CEMP\)](#) are designed to respect and support our commitment by applying the Federal Emergency Management Agency's strategy of protection, prevention, mitigation, response and recovery. Responsive communication within the university and our surrounding neighborhoods, the broader community, and media outlets is key to our collective success.

WSU's emergency plan is activated whenever a crisis or incident directly affects the university's staff, students, faculty, property or image. These emergencies can include but are not limited to natural disasters, workplace violence, an active threat on or near campus, cyberattack, data breach, or a PR incident.

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Crisis = Disrupts normal campus operations, threatens the safety or well-being of the campus community, damages institutional reputation or credibility, and requires immediate and coordinated communications.

3. Concept of Operations

During a crisis the WSU Crisis Communications Team goal is to accomplish the following:

- Disseminate timely and accurate information about the crisis to our internal and external stakeholders
- Provide communications alert, inform, and reassure our internal and external stakeholders
- Engage in a collaborative decision-making process. However, the WSU Chief of Police/Head of University Security and the Crisis Communication Lead/Public Information Officer (PIO) are empowered to make independent decisions if timing and circumstances are necessary.

Integration with Incident Command System (ICS)

The Crisis Communications function operates within the Incident Command System (ICS). The Public Information Officer (PIO) reports directly to the Incident Commander (IC) and coordinates all public information and messaging in alignment with Incident Command objectives.

Joint Information System (JIS) Coordination

Washington State University participates in a Joint Information System (JIS) to coordinate messaging with local, state, and federal partners. During incidents involving multiple agencies, WSU will align messaging with partner Public Information Officers (PIOs) to ensure consistency, accuracy, and timeliness of public information.

Joint Information Center (JIC) Operations

For incidents involving multiple jurisdictions or significant public interest, a Joint Information Center may be established (physical or virtual). WSU will assign a

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Public Information Officer (PIO) or designee to participate in the JIC to coordinate messaging and media relations.

Communications Priorities:

- Life safety
- Incident stabilization
- Protection of property and environment
- Preservation of institutional reputation

Information Verification and Approval

All information must be verified through appropriate operational channels prior to release. In urgent life safety situations, pre-approved messaging may be disseminated with verification to follow as soon as possible.

4. Crisis Communication Team (CCT)

Each campus may have a different CCT reporting to the systemwide Public Information Officer.

Team Structure and Roles:

- Crisis Communication Lead/Public Information Officer (PIO): Coordinates all non-immediate messaging.
- Where needed, serves as WSU's representative within the Joint Information System (JIS), coordinating messaging with external agency PIOs.
- Campus Head of Public Safety/IC: May direct messaging in the event of an imminent threat and gives situational updates when available.
- Emergency Management/MARCOM: Sends messaging via the Mass Notification and updates the campus alert website.
- Media Liaison: Handles press and social media.
- WSU Pullman Chief of Staff: Liaison to the University President and Executive Vice President of Finance and Administration.
- MARCOM Provost Office: Liaison to the Provost office and Student Affairs. Student communication needs.

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- Legal Advisor: Reviews communications for compliance and risk.

CCT contact information is kept and updated with the Crisis Communication Lead.

5. Notification and Activation Procedures

The WSU campus Head of Public Safety/Security will determine the need to implement the Crisis Communication Plan and when time permits contacts the WSU Pullman Chief of Staff, who will communicate the incident information to the University President, Crisis Communication Lead/PIO, and the Executive Vice President for Finance & Administration.

Immediate messaging will be pre-approved by the Communication Lead in the form of templates in the mass notification system. An Ad Hoc template will be utilized for incidents that don't have a template and will be developed by Emergency Management/MARCOM and the Chief of Police/Campus head of public safety/security.

If the incident involves multiple responding agencies or jurisdictions, the Crisis Communication Lead/PIO will coordinate with external partners to determine the need for Joint Information System (JIS) integration and potential Joint Information Center (JIC) activation.

6. Emergency Communication Protocol

During an emergency, various media channels may be used to disseminate information to the campus community and to internal and external stakeholders.

Types of Communication:

- **Emergency Alerts**: Immediate life safety notifications through a mass notification system.
- **Public Information**: Ongoing updates, media releases and situational awareness messaging.

Emergency Alerts:

Upon confirmation of a significant emergency or dangerous situation occurring on or near the campus that involves an immediate or potential threat to the health and safety of students, staff, faculty, and visitors, the head of WSU Public Safety/Security or their designee will immediately initiate its mass warning protocol and activate the campus emergency notification system.

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Emergency Notifications differ from a Timely Warning in that Emergency Notifications apply to any immediate or potential threat to the health and safety of students, staff, faculty, and visitors on campus. This may include but is not limited to; criminal activity in progress, serious fires, extreme weather conditions, earthquakes, gas leaks, terrorist incidents, active threats (armed intruder), bomb threats, civil unrest/rioting, explosions, or nearby chemical hazardous waste spills. These events may be on campus, near campus or have the potential to enter the WSU campus geography.

7. Procedures

1. Immediate Actions (First 1-2 hours)
 - a. Activate the CCT (In-person, Virtual)
 - b. Assess the crisis and level of threat
 - c. Notify leadership and essential personnel
 - d. Establish initial communications objectives aligned with Incident Command priorities.
 - e. Draft and issue an initial holding statement
2. Short-Term Response (First 24 hours)
 - a. Update all communication platforms
 - b. Monitor social media and news coverage for misinformation and emerging issues
 - c. Activate rumor control strategies including official website updates and coordinated messaging
 - d. Respond to media inquiries
 - e. Provide regular update
3. Ongoing Communication
 - a. Continue updates until the crisis is resolved
 - b. Actively identify, monitor and correct misinformation through coordinated messaging and official communication channels
 - c. Document all communications and decisions

8. Key Audiences and Stakeholders

Internal
Students

External
Local Community

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Internal

Parents
Faculty
Staff
Board of Regents
Alumni

External

Government Officials and Agencies
News Media
Corporate Partners
Vendors

9. Access and Functional Needs

- All messages should be able to be received and understood by people with hearing or visual impairments.
- All written messages should be delivered in formats that can be processed by screen-reading applications, allowing recipients with visual impairments to have the message read to them.
- Messages should not be delivered or posted online as PDFs due to limitations of screen-reading applications to access the information in PDF format.
- Auditory messages (i.e., phone calls sent via the Mass Notification system) should always be accompanied by an accessible written version of information, such as a text message and/or email.
- Messages should avoid unnecessary use of colors that may make reading more difficult for recipients with abnormal color vision.
- Messages should be written in plain, easily understood English, making the content accessible to people at various reading levels, and people whose first language is not English.

10. Media Protocols

- Depending on the incident, the Communication Lead/PIO will designate the appropriate and trained spokesperson.
- When a Joint Information Center (JIC) is activated, all media briefings, press releases, and public messaging will be coordinated through the JIC unless otherwise directed by the Incident Commander.
- Only those personnel authorized by the Communication Lead/PIO will speak to media
- Prepare Frequently Asked Questions' (FAQ) and talking points.

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- With the assistance of the IC Identify location(s) to stage the media
- Identify location for and hold a Press Conference only when necessary.

11. Documentation and Recordkeeping – Should align with ICS recordkeeping

- Message logs and timestamps
- Approval chains
- Media inquiries and responses
- Social media activity

12. Post Crisis Review – In a timely manner

- Conduct a debrief with the CCT.
- Analyze response effectiveness.
- Identify lessons learned.
- Update the crisis communications plan accordingly.

13. Training and Drills

- Conduct annual training for the crisis team
- Perform regular simulations and scenario planning.
- Review and revise contact list and protocols semi-annually.