

Crisis Communication Guidelines

Produced by

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in Cooperation with

The District's Marketing and Communications Committee

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| 1: Introduction | 3 |
| 2: Guiding Principles | 3 |
| 3. Crisis Incident Definitions..... | 3 |
| 4. Incident Command System – Key Terms..... | 4 |
| 5. Members of the Crisis Communications Team | 4 |
| 6. Activation of the Crisis Communications Team | 5 |
| 7. Authorized Communications..... | 5 |
| 8. Crisis Communications Plans..... | 6 |
| 9. Crisis Communication Procedures | 6 |
| 10. Crisis Communication Support | 7 |
| 11. Urgent Communications with Targeted Audiences | 7 |
| 12. Other Communications with Targeted Audiences | 7 |
| 13. Communicating with the News Media | 8 |
| 14. Post Crisis Communications..... | 8 |
| 15. Process to Ensure Accuracy of Information | 9 |
| 16. Joint Information Center (JIC) Management | 9 |
| 17. Training | 9 |
| 18. Evaluation | 9 |
| 19. Flowchart | 10 |

Crisis Communications Guidelines

1. Introduction

The Riverside Community College District (RCCD) Crisis Communications Guidelines are aligned with the District's Disaster Preparedness / Emergency Operations Plan ([BP & AP 5805](#)) and follow the principles and procedures outlined in the Federal Emergency Management Association (FEMA) Multi-Hazard Emergency Management for Higher Education ICS 0363. These guidelines provide a framework for coordinating communications during emergencies and disasters. It guides RCCD personnel in disseminating accurate and timely information to internal and external audiences while advancing public safety and maintaining the public trust in the District and its colleges. These guidelines are designed to be flexible and scalable to address various crisis scenarios.

2. Guiding Principles

Communications processes and messaging should be conducted in harmony with the following guiding principles:

- **Clarity:** Use simple language, avoid technical jargon, and explain complex information in understandable terms.
- **Accuracy:** Provide only verified information and avoid speculation or exaggeration.
- **Consistency:** Maintain a unified message across all communication channels, with coordinated messaging from different agencies.
- **Accessibility:** Consider the needs of diverse audiences, including those with disabilities or language barriers.
- **Timeliness:** Disseminate information quickly and update the public as new details emerge. Crisis Communications should occur as quickly as possible, with initial alerts being sent upon notification by first responders and confirmation of a crisis by the IC.
- **Credibility:** Establish trust by being transparent about uncertainties and acknowledging potential limitations.
- **Empathy:** Recognize the emotional impact of an emergency and communicate with compassion and understanding.
- **Resilience:** RCCD's communication systems are designed to be resilient to disruptions.
- **Interoperability:** RCCD maintains interoperable communication with external agencies and partners.
- **Operational Coordination:** Communication efforts are aligned with the District's emergency operations plan and procedures to ensure a coordinated approach.
- **Preparation:** Build a network of support and resources to leverage during a crisis.

3. Crisis Incident Definitions

A "Crisis Incident" in the RCCD context refers to any incident that significantly disrupts operations, safety, or public image. This includes:

- **Law Enforcement-Related Critical Incidents:** Significant events or emergencies that require the immediate involvement and response of law enforcement agencies to address threats to public safety, maintain order, and protect lives and property. These types of incidents include, but are not limited to, active shooters, bomb threats, terrorist threats

and acts, violent intruders, civil disturbances or riots, serious employee/student injuries/fatalities at district properties, etc.

- **Facility-Related Critical Incidents:** Unexpected and potentially hazardous situations caused by issues with a building's physical infrastructure, systems, or services that may threaten the safety, health, and well-being of the district community and/or disrupt normal operations. Examples include power outages, structural failures, hazardous material spills, HVAC system failures, plumbing issues, gas leaks, elevator malfunctions, access control and security system failures, etc.
- **Other Critical Incidents:** Situations that may affect the safety of students, personnel, and the public. Examples include natural disasters (earthquakes, floods, wildfires, storms, and other weather-related incidents), epidemics and pandemics, and other incidents that require prevention, protection, mitigation, response, and recovery measures that are necessary to save lives, stabilize the incident, and protect property and the environment.

4. Incident Command System – Key Terms

<https://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/icsresource/assets/ics%20organizational%20structure%20and%20elements.pdf>

RCCD follows the District's Emergency Operations Plan which utilizes FEMA's Incident Command System (ICS) to manage crisis response, ensuring structured and coordinated actions that can also be coordinated with partnering agencies and other institutions. Key terms from the ICS that are referenced in these Crisis Communications Guidelines include:

- **Incident Commander (IC):** Responsible for overall management of the incident (usually the chancellor, a college president, or the chief of police, or their designated substitute during their absence).
- **Emergency Operations Center (EOC):** The EOC may be convened virtually by the IC to coordinate the operations, planning, logistics, and administration efforts in response to a specific crisis. The EOC is activated with a RAVE Alert sent by the IC or their designee (i.e.: District personnel trained in utilizing the RAVE Alert system) to the members of the EOC during a Crisis Incident.
- **Public Information Officer (PIO):** The PIO (the Executive Director of External Relations and Strategic Communications, or as backup, the Vice Chancellor of Institutional Advancement and Economic Development, or when they are unavailable, one of the Public Affairs Officers) serves as a staff member of the EOC and communications advisor to the IC during a Crisis Incident.
- **Crisis Communications Team (CCT):** The CCT is the District's ER&SC public relations team that is responsible for composing, dispersing, and monitoring communications during a crisis. The CCT is activated by the PIO when an EOC is convened or when a public relations crisis is identified to provide communications support.
- **Joint Information Center (JIC):** When multiple agencies are involved in responding to a Crisis Incident, a JIC may be set up to facilitate communications from the EOC that utilizes the District's CCT working with the PIOs of partnering agencies.

5. Members of the Crisis Communications Team

The CCT is composed of key personnel who compose, disperse, and monitor internal and external communications during crises, including:

- **Vice Chancellor, Institutional Advancement & Economic Development (VC IA&ED):** A member of the EOC. Works with the PIO to manage communications during Crisis Incidents. In the absence of the PIO, the VC IA&ED is the acting PIO.
- **Executive Director, External Relations & Strategic Communications (PIO):** A staff member of the EOC and communications advisor to the IC during Crisis Incidents. The PIO is responsible for managing the CCT and the following activities during a Crisis Incident:
 - Gathering, verifying, coordinating, and disseminating accurate, accessible, and timely information
 - Handling inquiries from the media, public and elected officials
 - Providing emergency public information and warnings
 - Conducting rumor monitoring and response
- **Public Affairs Officers (PAO):** A member of the CCT. In the absence of the PIO, a PAO may serve as communications staff of the IC and participate on the EOC during Crisis Incidents until the PIO is available. Each PAO is assigned to conduct and/or monitor communications with specific audiences and stakeholders.
- **Director, Government Relations:** A member of the CCT who serves as the government liaison responsible for communications with elected officials during Crisis Incidents.
- **Information Architect:** A member of the CCT responsible for technical and creative support, and coordination of communications on websites and social media.
- **Additional Personnel:** May be engaged as needed based on the nature of the crisis and CCT needs.

6. Activation of the Crisis Communications Team

In the event of a Crisis Incident when an EOC is formed, the PIO alerts the members of the CCT with a text message or email and convenes the CCT in-person (in the RCC Tech B Conference Room), or virtually on Zoom (when Zoom is not available CCT communications may be conducted via phone, email, or text messaging).

Zoom CCT Virtual Conference Room Invite Link – (insert link here)

7. Authorized Communications

The Chancellor or College President or Chief of Police or their designated substitute will act as the IC. The IC:

- Oversees the crisis response and the EOC.
- Coordinates crisis response with other departments and agencies.

The IC should direct communications to internal and external audiences through the District's PIO. The PIO directs the members of the CCT to compose and distribute messages to internal and external audiences, including students, District and college personnel, the public, news media, social media, government officials, and other stakeholders.

When multiple departments or agencies are responding to a Crisis Incident, The PIO may organize an in-person or virtual JIC to facilitate communications with PIOs from partnering agencies, and to provide joint communications to the media.

8. Crisis Communications Plans

During a Crisis Incident, the IC and PIO working with the members of the EOC develop or refine and then implement a crisis specific communications plan. The PIO directs the members of the CCT to execute elements of the crisis specific communications plan consistent with these Crisis Communications Guidelines to inform internal and external audiences about the status of the crisis. The principal communications tool during a crisis is the RAVE Alert system. Other communications tools may be utilized to augment or backup the RAVE Alerts. RAVE Alerts and other messaging will be sent to all RCCD personnel, and the community, campus or segments of the campus that are at risk.

The District or college is required to notify the campus community upon confirmation of a significant emergency or dangerous situation involving an imminent or immediate threat to the health or safety of students or employees occurring on or near the college campuses.

- **Messaging Timelines:** The timing or frequency of communications during a Crisis Incident is relevant to the severity of the crisis and may change as the severity or type of incident evolves. The initial RAVE Alert should be sent as soon as a crisis is identified and confirmed by the IC. The initial RAVE Alert is sent by the IC or their designee (i.e.: District personnel trained in utilizing the RAVE Alert system). The initial alert is followed by the first update message within 20 to 30 minutes of the initial alert by the PIO, PAOs, or CCT. Depending on the severity of the crisis, subsequent updates will follow as needed. In extreme situations updates may be sent every 20 minutes or sooner. In most situations updates are sent at least once per hour until the ALL-CLEAR message is delivered.
- **Messaging Templates:** The Manager of District Safety and members of the CCT create and maintain a set of initial RAVE Alert templates that can be sent during the beginning stages of a crisis. A library of typical subsequent update messages is also created, updated, and maintained by the members of the CCT for use by the CCT during crises.

9. Crisis Communication Procedures

The following Crisis Communications Procedures have been developed to aid the CCT to implement elements of the crisis specific communications plans developed in the EOC.

- i. **Gather Information:** The CCT will quickly gather information from the IC and EOC to prepare communications appropriate to the situation. The CCT should also gather additional information from various sources, such as first responders, law enforcement, news media, and other relevant organizations.
- ii. **Initiate Execution:** Following the direction given by the IC and EOC, and utilizing the information gathered, the CCT will initiate execution of the crisis specific communications plan developed in the EOC. This plan should outline the messaging and media releases appropriate to inform internal and external audiences about the status of the crisis and any directions needed to safeguard the campus community.
- iii. **Communicate with Stakeholders:** The CCT will use the RAVE Alert system, and other media tools as appropriate to the situation to communicate with internal and external audiences. The messages should be clear, concise, and consistent, and should provide accurate and up-to-date information about the crisis.
- iv. **Monitor the Situation:** The CCT will monitor the situation closely to ensure that stakeholders have access to the latest information and updates. This includes

providing regular updates via the RAVE Alert system and other communication channels.

- v. **Coordinate with Other Departments:** The CCT will work closely with the IC and EOC to ensure that messaging is consistent and aligned. When a JIC is organized, the CCT will participate in the JIC and provide communications support.

10. Crisis Communication Support

The modular organization of the ICS allows the IC (usually the chancellor, a college president, or the chief of police) some flexibility to select an appropriate level of communications support during a crisis. Options include:

- **PIO Support:** The IC contacts the District's PIO to assist with composing alerts or messages and delivering them to specific audiences (internal and external) through media channels appropriate to reaching those audiences. If the PIO is unavailable, or by assignment, a PAO may be designated to assist with messaging until the PIO is available.
- **CCT Support:** When the IC convenes an EOC, the PIO activates the CCT, and the team collaborates on creating the appropriate alerts or messaging which is then distributed by the CCT to selected media channels available during a Crisis Incident.
- **JIC Support:** When the IC determines that interagency support is needed to provide a coordinated response to a Crisis Incident, the CCT may utilize a JIC to coordinate communications with the PIOs of partnering agencies to provide unified messaging and coordinated delivery through selected media channels.

11. Urgent Communications with Targeted Audiences

The principal method of distributing urgent communications during a crisis is RAVE Alerts. The initial RAVE Alert during a Crisis Incident is sent out by the IC or their designee (i.e.: District personnel trained in utilizing the RAVE Alert system). Subsequent RAVE Alerts during the Crisis Incident are sent out by the CCT as directed by the IC and EOC leadership. The frequency of these RAVE Alerts varies by the type and duration of the Crisis Incident. Alerts sent during Law Enforcement-Related Critical Incidents when a campus is in a lockdown situation would be sent more frequently (up to 3 alerts per hour) than updates during a power outage (typically 1 per hour). These RAVE Alerts may include a combination of the following media channels:

- Text message (via cell phones)
- Voice message (via phones)
- Email
- RSS feeds (District and college websites)
- Social Media – Twitter and Facebook
- Desktop text messaging on computers
- CAP (digital signage)
- Guardian App

12. Other Communications with Targeted Audiences

In addition to the RAVE Alerts, The CCT can use other methods of communications as backups to the RAVE Alerts system, or for non-urgent communications, but they are not generally distributed as fast as those sent through the RAVE Alerts system. Some examples of these communication methods are listed below:

- Social Media (includes Twitter and Facebook, plus Instagram and LinkedIn)

- Canvas network
- WebAdvisor
- Public Address Systems (loudspeakers, blue phones, etc.)
- Media Releases
- Press conferences
- Personal and RCCD email messages
- RCCD Listservs

13. Communicating with the News Media

The designated spokesperson who has been trained in media relations is the Public Information Officer (PIO). During crises, all employees should direct media inquiries to the PIO. If the PIO is unavailable, then media inquiries should go to the PAO of the college affected by the crisis. The PIO (or a designated PAO):

- **Primary Point of Contact:** Serves as the primary point of contact for media inquiries. The PIO may include the Chancellor, Vice Chancellors, College Presidents, Vice Presidents, the Chief of Police, and other personnel, to provide updates or comments when they are available to interact with the news media.
- **Informed and Up to Date:** Interacts directly with the IC, EOC, and CCT to ensure consistent messaging.
- **Strategic and On Message:** Implements communication strategies that are effective and efficient in reaching the targeted audiences. Key messages are to be clear, concise, and consistent, and should be tailored to the specific needs of the press and the public. Avoids discussing details that are not yet known or that could cause unnecessary alarm.
- **Provide Regular Updates:** During a crisis, it is important to provide regular updates to the press and the public. This can help keep everyone informed about the situation and can help prevent rumors or misinformation from spreading.
- **Maintains Transparency:** It is important to be transparent and honest with the press during a crisis. This means providing accurate and timely information, even if the news is bad. Being transparent and honest can help build trust and credibility with the press and the public.
- **Respect Confidentiality:** During a crisis, it may be necessary to protect the confidentiality of certain information, such as personal information about individuals involved in an emergency. It is important to respect confidentiality while also providing as much information as possible to the press and the public.
- **Monitors News and Social Media:** RCCD related news and opinions posted in public media and addresses misinformation or rumors.
- **Provides Feedback and External Information:** timely and accurate information to the IC and other members of the EOC regarding public concerns, issues, and expectations.
- **Available:** During a crisis, the press may need to reach out to the organization at any time of day or night. It is important to be available to the press and to respond to their inquiries in a timely manner.

14. Post Crisis Communications

After the emergency has been resolved and the ALL-CLEAR message has been sent, the IC may direct the PIO to have the CCT compose and distribute follow up messages with information about support and resources that are made available to specific audiences. Notifications about

debriefing session to evaluate the response and identify areas for improvement may also be distributed. Information from this debriefing session can be used to update the crisis communications procedures to ensure that the CCT is better prepared for future emergencies.

15. Process to Ensure Accuracy of Information

When members of the CCT or JIC compose media releases or messages that include information secured from outside sources, they should follow this process to ensure the accuracy of the information before public distribution.

- **Collect information from multiple sources:** It is important to gather information from multiple sources, such as official news outlets, emergency services, and eyewitnesses, to get a complete picture of what's happening.
- **Assess the reliability of the sources:** Not all sources of information are equally reliable. It's important to assess the credibility and trustworthiness of each source before accepting the information as true. Official news outlets and emergency services are generally more reliable than rumors or social media posts.
- **Cross-check information:** Compare the information you've gathered from different sources to identify any discrepancies or inconsistencies. If multiple sources are reporting the same information, it's more likely to be accurate.
- **Verify information with authorities:** If possible, try to verify the information you've gathered with emergency services or other authorities.
- **Use caution with unverified information:** If you come across information that you're unable to verify, it's best to treat it with caution and avoid spreading it until you can confirm its accuracy.
- **Stay informed:** Keep up to date with the latest news and information as the situation develops. Information can change rapidly in emergency situations, stay vigilant and adapt actions accordingly.

16. Joint Information Center Management

The JIC facilitates information sharing and coordination among multiple agencies, consistent with ICS and NECP. The JIC serves as the primary point of contact for external agencies and coordinates joint press releases and briefings. The JIC management team includes CCT representatives, external agency PIOs and/or liaisons, and may include other RCCD leaders.

17. Training

Crisis Communications Guidelines: The PIO will provide policy reviews and training for the members of the CCT twice a year, running through different scenarios to practice.

RAVE Alerts System: The Manager of District Safety conducts RAVE training to all CCT members (and the leadership of the District and its colleges, and key administrative assistants and safety personnel) at least twice per year.

18. Evaluation

The CCT will review, evaluate, and update the Crisis Communications Guidelines every two years.

RCCD Crisis Communications Flowchart

