CERC

CRISIS + EMERGENCY RISK COMMUNICATION

Community Engagement

2018 Update

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

CERC: Community Engagement

This chapter will introduce:

Engaging the Community with Credibility, found on the CERC website, is a quick guide to the essentials in planning and executing community engagement. It can help officials navigate a discussion with people in the community before and during those times when community-level emergency actions must be taken.

Communities in the Context of an Emergency

Communities are composed of built, natural, social, and economic environments that influence one another in complex ways.[1] Community engagement in a public health emergency brings together the network of affected communities. Engaged communities participate in recovery by contributing their distinct skills, capacities, knowledge, and perceptions.

In the field of emergency response, the term "community" is often used to describe people living in the geographic area affected by the response (for example, "Red Cross is taking donations to provide shelter and water for the community."). **However, in this chapter, the term "community" refers to any group of people associated by a common tie or interest**, such as, healthcare communities, elderly communities, Hispanic communities, geographic (local) communities, and responder communities. In an emergency, communities have common concerns, perspectives, and resources or strengths to offer the response.

Whether you represent a health department, faith-based organization, school, or hospital, emergencies affect more than just the community you directly serve, and many communities will be responding or looking for ways to participate in a response. Successful communication uses a network of communities to navigate a response and make key decisions. In the CERC Rhythm, community engagement is carried out in every phase.

In CERC, "community" is defined as a group of people associated by a common tie or interest.

Communities include:

- People directly affected by a crisis
- Family members of those directly
- affected by a crisis
- First responders
- Local government entities
- Healthcare providers
- Community organizations

- Advocacy groups
- Colleges and universities
- Cultural organizations
- Local businesses
- Media

Types of Community Relationships

Communities you regularly serve or partner with will be interested in every public health emergency in which you are involved and will expect to receive information from you. Depending on the type of emergency, you will engage other specialized communities with varying concerns and roles. For instance, in a terror incident, public health officials work closely with the police and FBI (law enforcement communities); in an infectious disease outbreak, hospitals and schools may become more involved in the response; and in a natural disaster, you may work more closely with the Red Cross and the fire department.

Identify the different communities you may engage, and include them in crisis communication planning. Assess the population you serve from an all-hazards perspective and think of who you would need to share messages and work with in different emergencies. Take the time to understand the interests of the community you serve directly by anticipating and viewing an emergency from their perspective.

Partners are community organizations with an official role in the emergency response.

Partners will collaborate or coordinate with your organization through a strategic process. The tips for communicating with communities in this chapter also serve your partner communications. It's important for partners to share updates and maintain message consistency.

There is more information on the official roles and communication partnerships of national, state, local, and international agencies in Understanding Roles of Federal, State, and Local Community Health Partners.

Advocates, Adversaries, and Ambivalents

Your engagement with different communities in an emergency should be based on their attitudes, perceptions, and interactions with your organization before, during, and after a crisis. Different communities fall into one of three categories: advocates, ambivalents, or adversaries. Whether a community is an advocate, ambivalent, or adversary depends on many factors, including it's level of dependency on your organization; past interactions; and perceptions of goals, interests, and values. Recognizing the category of each community you engage can help you interact effectively by focusing on the appropriate communication objectives.

Type of stakeholder	Characteristics	Communication Objective
Advocates	Loyal to and supportive of your organization; trust your guidance.	▪ Maintain and enhance loyalty and support. ▪ Engage advocates to spread your organization's prevention messages and take action, when appropriate.
Ambivalents	Do not strongly support or oppose your organization.	▪ Identify specific needs and interests of ambivalents to engage them and encourage positive actions. ▪ Work with spokespersons or organizations that ambivalents trust to convey key messages.
Adversaries	Do not support your organization; distrust or compete with your goals.	▪ Determine whether potential adversarial activities could cause harm or prevent the successful adoption of your health messages to a wider population. ▪ Address any predictable challenges by acknowledging and addressing adversaries' concerns. ▪ When possible, work with spokespersons or other organizations that adversaries trust to convey key messages.

The overall goal of community engagement is always the same: to provide the most people with the information and options they need to make decisions and take actions that save lives and lead to recovery. Credibility, respect, and honesty are nonnegotiable in all your communications, however, there may still be a group that has a bitter attitude toward or is holding a grudge against your organization. Trying to win them over would be a waste of time and resources in an emergency. Aim to prevent harmful rumors or misperceptions from having a negative impact on your messaging to larger populations.

Crisis Coordination *vs.* Crisis Collaboration

Crisis coordination and crisis collaboration are different. Understanding the distinction between the two is important, because when different organizations use these terms differently, it can cause confusion.

Crisis coordination: Synchronization and information sharing between response organizations without joint activities or interdependent plans.[2]

Crisis collaboration: Response organizations value each other's interdependence, and participants give equal input in shared decision making.[3] Collaboration is based on shared goals of effective crisis response and mitigation, shared values, and usually a longer history of interaction.

Community Engagement in Each Phase of a Crisis

The CERC Rhythm graphic below shows the four phases of a crisis. Accessible explanation of figure in Appendix, page 12.

The CERC Rhythm

Engage Community • Empower Decision-Making • Evaluate

Preparation
- Draft and test messages
- Develop partnerships
- Create plans
- Determine approval process

Initial
- Express empathy
- Explain risks
- Promote action
- Describe response efforts

Maintenance
- Explain ongoing risks
- Segment audiences
- Provide background information
- Address rumors

Resolution
- Motivate vigilance
- Discuss lessons learned
- Revise plan

Community Engagement during the Preparation Phase

Build positive relationships with communities before an event occurs. A strong base of collaboration, trust, and respect will make your job much easier in an emergency and will increase the positive impact of your messaging. It is too late to get to know a community when you are in crisis response mode.

Some ways to engage communities before an emergency include

- Meet face-to-face or by phone.
- Include communities in response plan development and review.
- Determine how members of each community prefer to receive information and communicate during an emergency.
- Test messages with communities representing different demographics, perspectives, and priorities.
- Identify points of contact for direct access in an emergency.
- Provide regular updates through emails or newsletters during non-emergency times.
- Use social media to directly reach community members and to cross-promote activities.
- Determine who are advocates, ambivalents, and adversaries.

Although you can plan ahead on how you engage many of your community stakeholders, the list of communities and the level of engagement needed will depend on the situation.

For example, during the outbreak of the Zika virus, key stakeholders included

- Healthcare providers
- Obstetricians
- Pregnant women and their sexual partners
- Men and women thinking about becoming pregnant
- Travelers
- Airlines
- Vector control specialists
- Park services and environmental agencies
- Spanish-speaking and Latino community groups in the U.S.

Community Engagement during the Initial and Maintenance Phases

At the onset of an emergency, identify and characterize communities by their relationship to the emergency, and identify the common concerns in each group. See Messages and Audiences for more information on how to adapt messages for different cultural groups and audience segments. Use the connections made in the preparation phase to reach out to communities, and practice active listening by listening to, considering, and respecting their concerns, beliefs, and questions.

Levels of Community Engagement

Engaging communities means more than just pushing messages out. It means listening and reacting to community concerns and needs, ensuring reach to isolated or hard-to-access community segments, including communities in key decisions, and giving them active roles in the response.

During a crisis, when time and resources are limited, communicators need to prioritize the most impacted communities and determine the most effective ways to engage. When determining the methods, frequency, and timing of engagement, consider the level of impact the crisis has on each community and any challenges or limitations to reaching them.

There are several ways an organization can engage during a crisis. Methods can be described as ranging from low to high levels of engagement. Low level engagement methods can be more generalized and simpler to enact. High level methods require more planning and resources, are more tailored to a specific group or situation, and involve direct interaction.

When determining which methods to use to engage each community, consider the following questions:

- Will the intended community receive and understand the information?
- Is this a respectful way to deliver this information?
- Will there be follow-up questions that need to be answered?
- Is this a major update or announcement?
- Will this information need regular updating?
- Will the community need to make decisions based on this information?

Effective community engagement can reduce risks and save lives.

Low Engagement	Medium Engagement	High Engagement
▪ Website updates	▪ Newsletters	▪ Advisory groups
▪ Microsite for web syndication	▪ Email blasts	▪ Community forums
▪ Social media updates	▪ Teleconferences	▪ Hotlines
▪ Press releases	▪ Webinars	▪ Press conferences and telebriefings
	▪ Scheduled social media chats	
	▪ Radio PSAs	
	▪ Fact sheets and billboards	

To learn more about how to carry out these engagement methods, the pros and cons of each, and how to measure success, refer to CERC Engaging the Community with Credibility.

High Level Engagement Activities

Advisory Groups

Advisory groups, made up of representatives of different communities, are an effective way to include communities in key decisions. Asking representatives to provide their input can help you acknowledge the different ways response activities can impact specific segments of the population. If you create an advisory group, you are obligated to take members' suggestions and input seriously.

To effectively convene advisory groups

- Define the mission and scope for the advisory group.
- Identify key roles within the group.
- Establish decision-making criteria and prioritize alternative solutions.

Community Forums

Community forums, also called town hall meetings or public meetings, offer a place for individuals to be heard. People who attend a community forum usually have a question, concern, or recommendation that they feel response leadership and their fellow community members need to hear. Instead of going into a community forum aiming to present your facts and persuade vocal adversaries, set this objective: people will leave feeling that they were listened to.

Forums may be open to the public and media or limited to invited participants. Consider reserving space for different community leaders. These forums give your organization direct access to some of the people you want to reach and allow community members with particular experiences or insights to share their knowledge and perspectives. Community forums can help you

- Share information.
- Seek input.
- Demonstrate openness.
- Build consensus.

The chapter on the Spokesperson offers some strategies for spokespersons managing outrage at community forums. Spokespersons from different communities can help provide the wealth of knowledge and insights to cover a wider range of concerns and can demonstrate collaboration. Do not spend more than 5 minutes presenting at a community meeting and open with a statement of empathy. If your participants see that you are viewing them as fellow human beings who may feel threatened, anxious, concerned, or angry, then they will feel more connected and willing to listen to and communicate with you. Consider having a professional neutral facilitator to keep the conversations on track and ensure that no one dominates the meeting.

In some cases, an online forum may be used. This system allows for discussions in real time or over an extended period and can include offsite participants. This technique also generates a transcript of the conversation for your records.

There are many options for how to facilitate a community forum, but the outcome should be the same. Community members can provide your organization with information to improve your public health messages and provide the background and input needed to make plans that people are more willing to and capable of following.

Hotlines

Hotlines are set up in an emergency to offer individuals access to speak directly and privately to someone who represents your organization. Ensure hotlines are staffed by trained professionals with scripted information approved by your organization and in coordination with the messaging approved by response partners. They should be trained on what to do when they receive a question they are unable to answer and when they receive phone calls that are purely out of anger and do not have an intended end point. Staff hotlines to be able to receive and answer calls in the most common languages in your community. Ensure that all staff are trained in CERC principles and maintain the highest levels of respect, credibility, accuracy, and empathy.

Press Conferences and Telebriefings

Press conferences and telebriefings should follow all of the guidance found in Working with the Media. Conduct press conferences when you have new information to get out and can rely on the media to share your information and to represent the public in their questioning. Remember to allow for equal access to news outlets, not to overlook your local media, and to anticipate some of the common questions you will be asked.

Tips for Community Engagement

Emergencies are stressful and may raise emotions and impassioned responses. Proactive community engagement can help prevent conflicts, and when tensions rise, different engagement methods can mitigate anger and confusion, and maintain credibility.

Understand Anger in the Context of an Emergency

Communication experts and psychologists point out that anger is a defensive response to pain or the threat of pain.[4,5] Three basic circumstances can give rise to anger:

1. When people have been hurt.

2. When people feel threatened by risks not of their own making.

3. When people sense their fundamental beliefs are being challenged.

Different situations and ways we engage can increase the intensity of anger. When people feel powerless, manipulated, ignored, lied to, or treated unfairly, their anger builds.

Avoid defining anger as either rational or irrational. Your opinion or judgment about others' anger can lead you to dismiss or belittle their genuine concerns. This will only increase discord and injure your credibility.

Practice Active Listening

Active listening, paying close attention to what someone is telling you and asking questions to ensure deeper comprehension, helps you understand communities' needs. Asking questions can demonstrate a commitment to serving the community and prompt people to give you useful feedback. To engage in active listening

- Manage the flow of conversation carefully by calling on people one at a time.

- Listen for both intent (feeling) and content (facts).

- Ask questions to make sure you understand and indicate your interest in what is being said.

- Pay attention to who is speaking:
  - » What are his or her qualifications on this subject?
  - » What are his or her incentives for talking about this?
  - » Is this person speaking as a representative of other groups, such as a community leader or member of an advocacy group?

Involve Neutral Third Parties

Conflicting views should not be discussed through the media. Instead, engage a neutral third party to speak with the diverse groups involved in emergencies to help resolve issues. Neutral parties can

- Facilitate face-to-face meetings.
- Identify consistent and inconsistent points of view in an effort to find and build consensus among groups.
- Coordinate community forums, create task forces, or organize advisory groups—and lead them with effective listening.
- Speak to the media on behalf of all involved.

De-escalate Conflict

Conflict is natural and to be expected during a crisis or emergency.[6] An organization can de-escalate conflict using these approaches:

- Begin de-escalation by trying to agree on issues that may not be key to the conflict. Do not start with the issue that is most seriously debated.
- Establish guidelines for interaction and make an effort to humanize all sides for the others.
- Look for common interests to start a common dialogue.
- Be open to reason and consider that some perspectives might be better for the situation than others.
- Strive for fairness in the de-escalation process, especially when a real or perceived lack of fairness or injustice has occurred.
- Work to get input from all stakeholders.
- Try to agree on actions that will be taken, however small, such as setting a follow-up meeting.
- Openly share information with communities and actively involve them in decision-making.

Try to get as many "yes" responses as you can. If someone says, "Your proposal is totally unrealistic," try this response: "Are you saying that you don't see how this proposal can respect citizens' rights and stop the spread of disease?" When a person says "yes," this transforms the relationship. Each question you pose that prompts a "yes" response can further reduce tension.

Empower Communities to Make Decisions

A crisis creates an imperfect environment for making decisions. Often, information is unavailable or incomplete. Decisions about important issues must be made in minutes, not months. The consequences of these decisions can have serious and long-term consequences.

When science can't provide definite answers, decision makers must make choices based on what they know. Occasionally, these choices may impose some risk on individuals or suspend some civil liberties to protect the larger community; examples include quarantine and travel restrictions. In these cases, sharing knowledge that balances risks and benefits can empower community members to make positive public health decisions.

Allow the Community to Participate in Finding Solutions.

Lectures are generally not an effective way to communicate about a risk. A lecture—a one-way form of communication—does not engage an audience. Telling is easy; asking and listening is harder. Asking questions is a deliberate action. It forces the process to slow down and forces everyone to stop and think before replying.

Instead of attempting to persuade individuals or communities to take an action, allow them to persuade themselves through a self-discovery process. The key is to give information that helps people discover a solution they can own.

- Ask questions that help people persuade themselves.
- Receive feedback.
- Offer the right information.

Using community feedback to inform your discussions, ask people questions that will steer them toward awareness about the situation. The right questions can help people make necessary connections, and this can empower them to make difficult choices. When people come up with their own answers, while speaking with their own voices, they will often take ownership of those ideas.

Help People Persuade Themselves

To help people find solutions through self-persuasion, start with general, open-ended questions like the following:

- What challenges have you (or your community) faced that required teamwork to solve the problem?
- How did it go?
- What did you learn from those experiences?
- Were there difficult choices to make?

Don't Say "But." Say, "Yes, and"

Typically, people express their differences by prefacing their responses with "but." The other group will be more receptive if you first acknowledge their views with a "yes," and then preface your view with an "and." For example, you might say, "Yes, we want to protect people's rights and we want to keep them alive to enjoy those rights."

Receive Feedback

Feedback from the audience is critical to get information and to demonstrate openness. Ask questions to discover the explicit wants, needs, and desires of your stakeholders. For example, you can ask leaders the following questions and probes:

What is most important to your community when faced with a problem?

- Is it working together?
- Is it prioritizing what is best for the community as a whole?
- Is it avoiding conflict?
- Is it fair and equal distribution of solutions and resources?
- Is it ensuring everyone has a voice?
- Is it fully exploring all reasonable alternatives?

What are the specific risks associated with the alternative solutions?

- What are the risks and benefits to your community when faced with this current problem?
- What consequences are you hoping to avoid?
- What do you see as the worst outcome for you (or your community)?
- What courses of action do you believe could lead to this outcome?
- What are the risks and benefits to your community for each of the alternative solutions available?

What are the specific benefits associated with the alternative solutions?

- What benefits would you (or your community) expect if we chose this solution or policy?

Expressing the benefits makes it easier to understand how a strategy can solve the problem. Strategies may be refined once benefits are understood.

Ask questions about the benefits while looking for the right solution.

- From what I understand, you are looking for a way to protect yourself (or your family or community) from this crisis. If I can explain how a proposed solution will meet those needs, are you open to trying it?

- If you think this solution would work in this effort, how do you see this solution being explained to the entire community?

Allowing people to persuade themselves is not an easy process. Done poorly, it can seem condescending or manipulative. It takes practice and empathy, but it's worth the effort. It is the most effective way to gain people's acceptance in thought and behavior.

Avoid Common Mistakes

When communicating with communities, try to avoid these common mistakes:

1. **Inadequate accessibility:** There is a tendency during a crisis to engage in internal decision-making. This may make your organization seem inaccessible. Provide information openly and maintain avenues for communities to ask questions.

2. **Lack of plain language:** Officials often use jargon in high-stress situations. Unfortunately, this may make messages more difficult to understand and cause frustration.

3. **Lack of empathy in the response:** Communities need to know that response officials understand at a very human level what they are experiencing.

4. **Problems with timeliness:** Time is always critical in a response, and you won't always be able to wait to get all the facts before releasing information.

5. **Paternalistic attitudes:** Acting paternalistic means behaving as if you and your organization know what is best for others. This attitude may seem arrogant to stakeholders who already feel powerless.

6. **Lack of opportunity for input in decisions:** Those who have been most affected by a crisis want to participate in key decisions. The opportunity to provide input can help offset feelings of being powerless. Make communities part of the response process and decision-making.

Conclusion

Emergency communications and response efforts depend on community engagement for effective reach, resource coordination, sustainability, and the adoption of protective behaviors. Often, this means careful coordination and collaboration as well as ongoing, two-way interaction, even in circumstances where communities are upset and angry.

Specific communication strategies may help manage some of the anger and concern that are natural in these circumstances. They will create strong, long-term relationships among your organization and communities involved in an emergency.

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Appendix: Accessible Explanation of Figures

The CERC Rhythm (page 4): Crisis communication needs and activities evolve through four phases in every emergency. The first phase is preparation. During preparation communicators should draft and test messages, develop partnerships, create communication plans, and determine the approval process for sending out information in an emergency. The second phase is the initial phase. During the initial phase of a crisis communicators should express empathy, explain risks, promote action, and describe response efforts. During the third phase, maintenance, communicators need to explain ongoing risks and will have more time to segment audiences, providing background information, and addressing rumors. The final phase, resolution, requires communicators to motivate the public to stay vigilant and communicators should discuss lessons learned and revise communication plans for future emergencies. Throughout all phases, CERC encourages communicators to engage communities, empower community members to make decisions that impact their health, and evaluate communication efforts.