



Crisis Communications Planning

Planning Requirements:

CAPR 190-1 Paragraph 7a(3) requires that:

“In consultation with unit commanders, PAOs at all levels shall develop a crisis public affairs plan to ensure a rapid and effective response during crisis situations that may damage an organization’s reputation if mishandled. Unit crisis public affairs plans should reflect guidance outlined in the CAP National Headquarters Crisis Public Affairs Policy, listed at www.cap.gov/pa. All crisis communication plans will be approved by the wing commander or designated representative.”

NCR Policy:

NCR requires that the Wing Crisis Communication Plans be approved by the Director of Public Affairs and once approved the Wing Crisis Plan will be posted to E-services via the CCP Utility.

Tools:

An approved template for a unit and wing Crisis Communications Plans that incorporates the National PA Crisis Policy is available for download at <http://www.ncrpao.org/planning.htm>

CAP National HQ PA Crisis Policy Link:

http://members.gocivilairpatrol.com/cap_national_hq/public_affairs/public_affairs_crisis_policy/

In addition to the template the NCR PAO’s website provides training materials (Planning handout and powerpoint) on CAP Crisis Communications.

If you have any questions please do not hesitate to contact the NCR’s Director of Public Affairs at pao@ncr.cap.gov



Communicating in a Crisis

In the course of carrying out Civil Air Patrol's (CAP) missions there will be situations that will require leaders to manage a crisis, especially when the media gets involved.

This training package (text, presentation and sample crisis plan) will help you prepare by outlining key ideas and helping you prepare a plan of action in a series of simple steps and strategies to protect our members, the organization and the Air Force.

What to Expect:

Definition of a Communications Crisis:

A crisis situation is defined as any situation deemed by wing or region leadership as having a major impact on the wing, CAP as an organization and the public.

Examples of a crisis situation may include:

- Incidents at CAP activities involving serious injury and or loss of life
- Terrorism
- A member death
- Natural disasters
- Major crimes or major disruptions of operations
- Abuse of Cadet Members
- Pornography
- Aircraft Accidents
- Poor Handling of an Actual SAR Mission
- Leadership Issues
- Release of Incorrect or False Information
- Insufficient Training or Response

Crisis situations may also include police investigations or other situations that require a public response.

Crisis Communications Ground Rules

Ground Rule # 1

“The public will formulate their opinions of an organization quickly -- as much on how it responds to a crisis as on the cause itself.”

People will form an opinion of a person or a group based on how it responds in a crisis. They will vaguely remember that the organization had a bad time but will mostly remember how they reacted to it and how that reaction was portrayed in the media.

Ground Rule # 2

“Reporters are like alligators... You don’t have to love them and you don’t necessarily have to like them. But you do have to feed them.”

If you don’t talk to the media they will dig and dig until they hit pay dirt or find a disgruntled member who will portray the organization badly. It is better to tell the media what is going on truthfully and openly.

Ground Rule # 3

“Each crisis or emergency will require a unique public information response. The extent of the response will depend on the nature of the crisis.”

Key Assumptions

The Public Gets Their Information from the Media

Often the only information the public receives about an emergency is through the media; therefore, media relations is an essential component of any crisis plan. Timing is critical and a response must be issued as soon as possible with follow-up bulletins, as required.

The World is wired

With the advent of Internet technology, rumors can spread quickly via email, blogs and online forums. Therefore, it is critical that responses be issued as quickly as possible via various channels of online communication, both formal (such as the wing website and e-mail lists) and of course informally.

Good Work in a Crisis Pays off Later

A crisis situation could be big news (locally and nation-wide) and is likely to result in more public exposure for CAP than dozens of “good news” stories would generate.

A great example is the Steve Fawcett search in 2007. Civil Air Patrol received a lot of publicity in national media because of our actions during this mission.

Before the Crisis

Leaders at all levels of the organization need to be prepared to communicate our message effectively in a crisis. To do this our leaders need to have a plan of action and do some basic preparation before the crisis happens.

CAP Regulation 190-1 requires all units (including Wings and Regions) to have a Public Affairs Plan and a Crisis Communications Plan. North Central Region has developed a template that units can use as a plan and a training tool. This template is available on the "Planning" page at the NCR's Public Affairs Resources website <http://www.ncrpao.org/planning.htm>

The Plan

The plan is designed to be used in non Emergency Services Crisis Situations.

Emergency Services operations (Actual Missions) by their nature are wing level responses. Incident Commanders and Information Officers are trained to deal with these situations. They do not fall under the purview of local commanders and their planning requirements.

This plan when executed properly and promptly

- Ensures the flow of accurate and timely information to the Wing/Region leadership, their Public Affairs staffs, our members, the media and the public during a crisis.
- Provides the media with a reasonable level of access per CAP regulations and policy.
- Makes it possible for Public Affairs Staff to develop unified messages.
- Minimizes unnecessary damage to the integrity and reputation of the unit and CAP.
- Helps to counteract inaccurate criticism by providing accurate and honest information.

The Plan

- Does not change the way emergencies or incidents are initially reported. All applicable CAP regulations will be followed in these initial and subsequent reports. This also applies to incidents that are reportable under safety regulations.
- Establish guidelines for dealing with a variety of situations.
- Ensures that leaders and communicators are familiar with those procedures and their roles in the event of a crisis.
- Is to be used in conjunction with the normal decision-making hierarchy of the unit and wing. It does not supplant that decision-making process.

The template is designed to be completed by the commander and the PAO of the unit. They take time to customize the template to meet the needs of the unit and address any unique local circumstances.

Organizing for a Crisis

To succeed a unit must have a team of leaders, communicators and subject matter experts to guide the commander and the unit thru the crisis. We refer to this as the Crisis Communications Team or CCT.

The crisis team consists of key personnel in the unit. Membership of the crisis team may vary slightly, depending on the details of the crisis and the needs of the commander. It will typically consist of the following members:

- Echelon Commander
- Deputy/Vice Commander of the unit as the Team Leader
- Public Affairs Officer as the spokesman for the unit and communications expert
- Legal Officer
- Other staff with experience in working a crisis, or with positions relevant to the details of the crisis such as Operations, Emergency Services or Cadet Program Personnel
- Other expert resources as needed

The crisis team members should be listed on a roster that is part of the Crisis Communications Plan. The template has a sample of the Roster.

The crisis team roster should be updated twice a year on the 1st of January and 30th of June. Make sure that a copy of the roster gets to every team member and you send a copy to your Wing and Region Public Affairs Offices as appropriate.

It is the Region Commander's expectation that crisis situations be resolved and worked at the local and Wing Levels when possible. The Region's crisis team and its members are available as consultants to Wing crisis team as needed and appropriate.

If the scope of the crisis/incident reaches beyond the borders or capabilities of a unit or wing, the Region crisis team will assume control of the situation as directed by the Region Commander.

If your team can't handle a particular crisis or situation it's not a failure to ask for support from higher headquarters. We encourage you to use all the resources available to you including your higher headquarters. That is what they are there for.

National Headquarters will be immediately made aware of the Region crisis team activation thru normal channels and or the National Operations Center. This notification will be made by the commander or Public Affairs Officer concerned.

The bottom line is that the crisis team exists to advise the commander and craft the message during a crisis.

The Commander always makes final decisions after advice from the crisis team.

Crisis Centers

It is expected that crisis teams will work virtually through e-mail, phones and conference calls. This is the way most of us do our CAP work anyway. Many times especially at the wing and region level team members will be spread out over many sometimes hundreds of miles. It may not be practical to set up at a central location.

If the need exists to set up a crisis center, commanders are expected to use their best judgment as to location, size and scope of activities. Keep in mind issues such as connectivity to the internet and access to other communications as key considerations.

The Region PAO will be consulted prior to standing up a crisis center.

Crisis Materials:

The PAO is assigned the task of maintaining materials to assist in the management of a crisis. As a minimum PA Staff will maintain the following materials

- This Plan and the plan of your higher headquarters
- Roster of the team
- Contact information for all Wing Commanders, relevant region/wing staff members, CAP National HQ and CAP-USAF. This can be obtained from your wing and E-services
- A list of Key Media. This can be obtained from online sources and your own lists
- CAP Fact sheets to include locally produced fact sheets on each wing and the region.
- Positive statistics about CAP Most of this data can be obtained from, CAPWatch or E-services, and national headquarters.

Most of these materials can be obtained from www.capnhq.gov, www.cap.gov or your local sources.

It is suggested that the PAO Maintain these on a disk or a flash drive for immediate use. Samples will be available and updated on the "Planning" page at the NCR's Public Affairs Resources website <http://www.ncrpa.org/planning.htm>

Spokesperson:

The Commander and PAO are the spokespeople for the unit and will be expected to work with the media. Remember that the commander and PAO must speak with one voice and say the same message.

Other CAP members will give information about the crisis to the media only when authorized and appropriately briefed by the commander or PAO.

Otherwise, members should respectfully refer media representatives to the crisis center or designated spokesperson.

When the crisis primarily affects a subordinate unit, higher level commanders and their PAO's are available to assist units and can serve as a local spokesperson as needed.

Electronic Resources:

Email and Web messages can be very important to the way CAP tells its stories during crises.

External information provided to the media should be placed on the wing/region website (and appropriate subordinate unit websites) concurrently with their release to the media. This allows a ready reference to important information for the media and our members as well as the general public. If you have released any pictures or video these should be included along with links to media stories.

The PAO will provide internal information to members about the crisis using email and other channels as appropriate to communicate with CAP members and the public.

These electronic communications will be approved by the commander before being disseminated.

Don't forget that many of our CAP lists are open to the public and the media sometimes uses these lists for information. Operational security considerations apply when using these tools.

That's a lot of information for you to absorb. Fortunately most of this information is in the Region's Crisis Communication plan found at www.ncrpao.org and in the CAP Public Affairs Crisis Policy as published on the National CAP Website.

Phases of Response

Immediate:

The Commander and the CCT will determine if an official statement should be prepared and released. If warranted, they will develop answers to specific questions that may be asked by the media and the media statement (release).

This process is the same as the local crisis team would use and the Regional crisis team will be actively working with and supporting the local crisis team.

In some cases, it may be appropriate for CAP to make an initial announcement of an accident or incident.

In others, it may be better to wait and "see if the media notices."

However, if representatives of the media inquire, CAP should make a prompt response and never answer "no comment." No Comment is never an acceptable answer to a question.

As part of this phase, talking points should be developed. These are short simple messages that tell our story, emphasizing positive points. They should be agreed to by the crisis team and delivered to all members authorized to speak to the media.

In a major crisis, the media may contact CAP staff at the local, wing and region levels.

Is it very effective for CAP if multiple authorized spokespersons all talk with the media using the same talking points, as opposed to a single member being the ONLY person to grant interviews.

As a result, in a major crisis generating broad media attention, there should be authorized spokespersons at the local, wing and region levels. These should be commanders, public affairs officers or others personally designated by the commander.

It's understandable that members may be nervous about working with the media. We have all heard the various stories of media manipulation of stories, media bias and the like.

- The truth is most media simply want to cover the story and present the facts. The media is a business and their product is information.
- Their job is to get information and spread it while making a profit for their company.
- Our task is to supply them appropriate information and to protect and enhance the organization.
- Many times the local media covering the crisis will be the same media that will cover your unit in good times.
- CAP is not afraid to tell the truth. Tell it in a way that best reflects on CAP and move on.
- You will build a better long term relationship with the media and the community if you are candid in bad or rough times.

The PAO will obtain basic information (type of crisis/emergency; time of emergency; actions taken; areas and number of people involved; injuries or fatalities; extent of damage) and prepare an official news release.

The PAO will brief staff and other area commanders who may have to answer questions from local media. Don't forget to include the talking points and give them written copies of them.

The PAO has several key tasks in the immediate phase of the response. These are:

- The PA staff will verify all sources of information.
- The PAO will clear news releases with the Commander as quickly as possible before releasing to the media. Don't release without the commander's ok.
- The PAO will log and document all media inquiries.

Ongoing Period:

In an ongoing crisis, the PAO (with the help of the crisis team) as appropriate will:

- Provide, via the news media and on the web, the public and constituents with basic information about the crisis.
- Provide, via electronic mail or other means such as radio, the membership with basic information about the crisis. Insure that copies of all updates sent to higher headquarters as you are releasing them to the media.
- Keep the public, media and constituents informed of the situation and provide advice on what they should or should not do to prevent further damage or loss of life, panic or interference with emergency response efforts. Information will be provided via the wing website and via news releases to the area media.
- Log all media inquiries and responses.

- Instruct the public on how to obtain further advice or information.

Recovery Period:

The PAO will issue media updates for as long as necessary, then scale back activities as warranted. Such updates will be posted online.

Upon termination of the crisis situation, the PAO will schedule a meeting of all key players to review all actions taken and lessons learned.

These will be included in an after-action report to be forwarded to the Commander and other appropriate leaders and/or departments and to higher headquarters Public Affairs staffs at wing and region.

Updates:

Each year the Crisis Communications and Public Affairs Plans must be reviewed. It is suggested that this review happen in January. In CAP we tend to do a lot of reviews and year end reporting as well as planning and goal setting in January.

As part of the review of the Crisis Plan, crisis team members and unit leadership will be required to view this "Crisis Communication Presentation," during the month of January.

The crisis team should interact periodically to discuss the plan and any updates. The Commander will convene these meetings.

Results of the meetings and revisions of the plan and the viewing of this presentation (sign in register) are to be documented and filed with the plan. There is a section on the plan to indicate when this review happened. Copies of this plan should be addressed to all members listed in the plan and any other personnel who might play a role in the event of a crisis. Don't forget to copy your higher headquarters on your plans.

Good leadership and good crisis communications practices can help you prevent or lessen damage to the Civil Air Patrol because of a crisis. It can actually help improve relationships between units and the media resulting in increased positive exposure of the Civil Air Patrol to the public.

It's a win-win situation for everyone.

This material was designed to share some ideas and the process for using the Crisis Communication Plan template found at www.ncrpao.org Reviewing this material will not make you an expert but it will give you some basic tools and concepts.

Thank you for taking the time to learn about Crisis Communications and for your leadership in the Civil Air Patrol.