

### *Purpose*

Ohio University's crisis communications plan outlines the roles, responsibilities and protocols that will guide the University in promptly sharing information with all of OHIO's audiences during an emergency or crisis. For the purposes of this plan, a crisis is defined as an event that prompts significant, often sustained, news coverage and public scrutiny and has the potential to damage the institution's reputation, image or financial stability. A crisis could be precipitated by an emergency or a controversy. In this plan, an emergency is a fire, hurricane, crime or other incident that presents a threat to human safety or normal business operations typically involving response from police, fire or emergency medical personnel. A controversy better describes events such as a major student protest or a case of employee misconduct. In the case of any emergency, our initial emphasis is to disseminate accurate and clear communications to protect health and safety.

It is important to note that the following plan outlines crisis communications under the purview of University Marketing and Communication. It is a general overview of the support that we provide to the University community in the event of an emergency or crisis and is not a comprehensive reporting of every situation considered to be a crisis.

It is also worth noting that the Ohio University Police Department issues notifications for any emergency that poses an imminent threat to safety.

### *Scope*

The audiences for this plan are broad and include undergraduates, graduate and professional school current and prospective students, faculty, staff, alumni, parents, trustees, neighbors, city leaders, media, our University community, state and federal officials, and other stakeholders that may not be identified.

### *Objectives*

Our guiding principles are to communicate facts as quickly as possible, update information regularly as circumstances change, ensure the safety of the OHIO community and to continue the operation of essential services. Our efforts to be simultaneously accurate and quick may mean that some communications are incomplete. We accept this, knowing that how we communicate in a crisis will affect public perceptions of the University. Honesty and speed are the most effective means to avoid lasting damage to the institution and widespread second-guessing by the public, which expects immediate access to accurate information. A good offense is the best defense. At the same time, we realize that in a crisis, people will likely expect us to have more information than we may actually have. That makes it imperative to speak with accuracy about what we know and not to speculate about details we do not know.

We will use multiple mediums to reach as many people as possible with accurate, timely information. This is especially important in the first hours of an emergency or a crisis. Our goal

is to be open, accountable and accessible to all audiences, while also being mindful of legal and privacy concerns.

In the event of an incident that disrupts University operations or poses a threat to the life and/or safety of individuals on any of our campuses, the Critical Incident Response Team (CIRT) will convene.

CIRT will convene at the decision of CIRT Chair, the senior associate vice president of technologies & administrative services; OUPD Chief; and/or the University emergency programs manager. If they decide CIRT is needed, they notify team members by text message. Team members then report to a designated location to help coordinate the University's response. Throughout a critical incident, the team will frequently review changing facts, assess whether key messages are reaching audiences, and determine whether strategies need to change.

### *Response*

In any emergency, our goal is to issue our first communication to key university audiences within 30 minutes of notification of the event, with regular updates as needed. Some situations may require even faster initial communications.

CIRT will post regularly updated information on the [OHIO Alert page](#) and the @OhioU Twitter Account as primary sources of information about the incident, linking from there to other pages with additional details.

The team will ensure that you can find information through any or all of the following sources, depending on the situation:

- Ohio University's Homepage
- The Ohio University Alert Page: [www.ohio.edu/alert](http://www.ohio.edu/alert)
- Your campus e-mail (@ohio.edu accounts)
- Text message
- Ohio University's [Facebook](#) and [Twitter](#) accounts
- Campus televisions connected to [CATvision](#)
- Outdoor emergency notification system
- 740.597.1800 for a recorded message (on Athens campus, 7-1800)
- Non-tech methods (on-the-ground teams, bullhorns, posted alerts, etc.)

### *Information Approvals*

Typically, we use a collegial approach of multiple approvals before we distribute communications pieces, including emails and news releases. That system will not work in a crisis. Seconds matter in a crisis, and we will be judged by how quickly we share information with key audiences. As a matter of policy, OHIO is committed to trying to meet these expectations. It recognizes the need for unusually crisp decision-making during a crisis to

enable rapid, accurate communication in coordination with the institution's broader process. Final approval for all communications rests with CIRT.

### *Staffing*

When an emergency has been declared, employees of University Communications and Marketing will be relieved of their typical job responsibilities to help implement this plan. We will:

**Assign communicators**, as needed, to handle phone calls, using a script developed from the key messages and facts CIRT has developed. These staffers should reach out to other units that handle multiple calls during a crisis, including our general number, Student Affairs, admissions and the communicators' list. These employees will also monitor and update the recorded message on university hotline(s), 740.597.1800. As part of this effort, a separate log will be maintained to record all calls and interview requests from members of the media. These staffers will be responsible for ensuring that all calls are returned. **WHY?** Our policy is always to be as responsive as possible to news media. During a crisis, it is important to maintain an organized log of interview requests so that calls are returned promptly. It is a missed opportunity if members of the media don't know our key messages and the facts, as we understand them.

### *Communications Strategy*

**Develop and communicate a schedule for delivering updates** to the University community and for external stakeholders, and stick to the schedule whether or not there is a significant update to share. This will help ensure that the University is the first and only source for accurate information about the incident.

**Develop communications from the president**, as appropriate. It may be necessary for the president to communicate to the OHIO community about the emergency. CIRT will be responsible for generating and reviewing presidential communications.

**Determine whether a press conference(s) should be held.** It is OHIO's normal practice to permit news reporters and photographers to conduct interviews after they check in with University Marketing and Communications. However, during crisis situations the chief marketing officer or his/her designee will determine if access needs to be restricted to ensure the safety of the campus and its residents, or to avoid disruption to essential services and programs. If that determination has been made, then news reporters and photographers will first be directed to a staging area to be determined. The chief marketing officer or his/her designee will coordinate press conferences (including arranging needed equipment, such as microphones, mult box, etc.), and related media advisories, as needed.

**Assign a staffer to monitor media and online coverage** to anticipate any problems in the way information is flowing to the news media and on the Internet. UCM already has a system for

daily monitoring of print coverage, broadcast media and blogs, and that system will be put to use for this effort. Summaries of relevant coverage will be provided CIRT on at least a daily basis, or more frequently as needed. **WHY?** It will be critical to be aware of how the university is being portrayed in early and ongoing coverage to adjust the communications response as needed to limit rumors, correct errors and maintain confidence in the university.

**Determine how to report on the situation for internal audiences.** For instance, are there town meetings, protests or vigils? The chief marketing officer or his/her designee will be responsible for coordinating print, video and audio coverage.

**Evaluate how to help the community recover,** return to normal and, if needed, regain faith in the University after the trigger event of the crisis is over, in coordination with the senior leadership. CIRT will determine when an emergency has ended, operations are restored, and when routine communications processes can resume. Tactics at this stage may include the need for follow up messages to the University community, communication from the president expressing reassurance or sympathy, detailed plans to prevent another such crisis, etc.

### *After the Crisis*

The decision to declare the emergency over will trigger a review of how the crisis was handled and how communications can improve.

**Within 10 days of the end of the event, assess how this plan functioned,** address any needed updates and recognize the work of partners whose help was invaluable. (i.e., assistance from communicators from other units or outside the University.)

### *Systems Testing*

University Communications and Marketing will take the lead in educating the University community about how and when members would get messages from OHIO in an emergency. The procedures may be similar to those used to educate the community about the University's severe weather policy. The University conducts at least one test per semester of the OHIO Alert communication tools, which include the siren/public address system, email, text messaging, website, and phone line.