



# COMMUNICATIONS PLAN IMPLEMENTATION FOR A SEVERE PANDEMIC



PREPAREDNESS



RESPONSE

## This tool will help you to:

- Plan a communications response as part of your overall municipal *response* to the pandemic
- Designate a communications coordinator who will help you spearhead this plan and organize a strategic *communications support team*

## Who will implement this tool:

- The mayor
- A member of the *municipal leadership team* or local emergency response team
- A designated *spokesperson*, such as a member of a communications support team
- A *public information officer* or communications officer

During emergencies such as disease outbreaks, local government authorities are better able to ensure the public's well-being if they have prepared ahead of time. One of the most important *preparedness* measures a municipality can take is assembling an emergency response team—one that includes a communications expert—and a plan for getting critical information out to the public once the emergency occurs.

*“Disease outbreaks are inevitable, and often unpredictable, events. The environment surrounding an outbreak is unique in all of public health. Outbreaks are frequently marked by uncertainty, confusion, and a sense of urgency. Communication, generally through the media, is another feature of the outbreak environment. Unfortunately, examples abound of communication failure which have delayed outbreak control, undermined public trust and compliance, and unnecessarily prolonged economic, social, and political turmoil. The World Health Organization (WHO) believes it is now time to acknowledge that communication expertise has become as essential to outbreak control as epidemiological training and laboratory analysis.”*

—WHO Outbreak Communication Guidelines

## Where are your country's existing disaster plans and protocols?

Most countries have national level pandemic plans in place, while very few have municipal level plans. *It is very important that municipal plans reflect national level planning and that all municipal response activities are consistent with the national strategic objectives, laws, and policies.* If you do not already have a copy of your country's National Pandemic Response Plan, contact your Ministry of Health or look for it on their website. Information is also available from the Pan American Health Organization at [www.paho.org](http://www.paho.org). Your country may also have an Emergency Communication Plan that you should follow.

National, district, and municipal level plans are likely to exist for general disaster response. Municipal level disaster committees and plans are a foundation on which you can build your pandemic response plan, and a disaster committee may well become the multisector municipal leadership team that you need for your pandemic response.

## What is the legal framework of your country and municipality?

Any response you lead to ensure the health and safety of your community must be congruent with your country's and municipality's existing laws and regulations. Laws and regulations have been enacted to prevent, protect, and control against diseases that threaten the well-being of the population. The existing laws, policies, programs, and appropriated funds must be considered as you plan and implement a municipal level response during a severe influenza pandemic. Having a keen understanding

of this legal framework is pivotal for ensuring an efficient response during a crisis. Municipal preparedness includes identifying and addressing any gaps in the legal framework for response.

SAMPLE PANDEMIC COMMUNICATIONS RESPONSE PLAN

Once your emergency response team has been convened because the influenza pandemic has begun, you will need to take the following steps, the details of which are provided in this tool.

STEP 1: Designate a communications coordinator

STEP 2: Designate a spokesperson

STEP 3: Identify communication needs

- A. Identify target audiences
- B. Identify communications goals
- C. Determine key messages
- D. Determine targeted messages per audience
- E. Identify materials needed

STEP 4: Create a communications plan

- A. Determine information dissemination channels
- B. Identify media and communications resources
- C. Prepare first announcement
- D. Establish update procedures
- E. Prepare talking points

STEP 5: Monitor information flow and public response

STEP 1: DESIGNATE A COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

The communications coordinator will play a key role in helping you convey to the public, often through different media outlets, the information they will need to protect themselves and their families, to have access to essential services, and to help keep the pandemic from spreading.

Your communications coordinator is a vital member of your emergency response team and reports directly to you, your municipal leadership team, or the highest authority in your municipality on a daily basis. He or she ensures that all messages to the public are consistent and delivered effectively, and provides leadership to your communications support team.

Your communications coordinator will also be responsible for helping to ensure that your municipal chain of command is followed. Therefore, he or she must be an integral part of every step of your municipality’s response to an influenza pandemic—whether that response involves the health sector, food security and livelihoods, or logistics and mobilization of resources. During a pandemic, every issue is a communications issue.

The communications coordinator should be:

- Confident and able to follow your municipality’s chain of command, able to manage the flow of information, and comfortable working with the media;
- An excellent communicator who is comfortable working with all of the sectors in your municipality and able to provide accurate and timely briefings; and
- Organized and able to provide leadership and guidance to your communications support team.

If your municipality has one, a public information officer is a good candidate for this important role in your pandemic response.

For more detailed information, turn to the handouts “Roles and Responsibilities of the Communications Coordinator” and “Roles and Responsibilities of the Communications Support Team” included at the end of this tool.

STEP 2: DESIGNATE A SPOKESPERSON

An effective and trustworthy communicator, such as your municipality’s public information officer or your emergency response team’s communications coordinator, can step in to serve in this key role. The spokesperson will convey to the public and the media the most important messages at every step of your pandemic response.

Keep in mind that the public and the media prefer a face and a voice with which they are familiar, someone who represents the values and unique characteristics of your community. The spokesperson will give a human face to your local response.

In sum, a lead spokesperson will communicate the fact that your municipality is responding to the crisis, but will not over-reassure the public. He or she will expect criticism, follow up on issues, tell the truth, and speak with compassion and empathy. The spokesperson will work to develop cooperative relationships with media representatives so they can work as a team to address public information needs and concerns. This individual will understand the purpose behind the key messages or recommendations made to the public, and convey confidence, credibility, and trust.

For more information on choosing a well-prepared spokesperson, see Tool 14, News Media Communication.

STEP 3: IDENTIFY COMMUNICATION NEEDS

Once you have identified your communications coordinator, assembled your communications support team, and designated a lead spokesperson, your next task will be to assess your municipality’s communication needs so that these inform your pandemic response.

A. Identify Target Audiences

First, identify your target audiences. The characteristics of each target audience should help shape the information you are trying to get across. For more information on identifying the key characteristics and facts about your target audiences turn to Tool 12, Fundamentals of Communication During Crises and Emergencies and the worksheet included at the end of that tool.



Examples of target audiences you may need to communicate different information to are:

- Healthcare providers
- School teachers and parents
- Groups of executives or business leaders
- Government workers
- Farmers
- Store owners
- Laborers

**B. Identify Communications Goals**

Clear communications goals form the foundation of an effective communications response during a pandemic. Goals should be simple, straightforward, and realistic. Is your municipality’s goal, for example, to inform the public of the problem and the specific dangers? To provide guidance to the public on appropriate hygienic measures? To keep the public calm?

Establishing your communications goals—and the key messages you will need to support these—as part of your emergency preparedness efforts will ensure an effective communications response during the crisis. Whatever your goals, make sure your response is:

- Timely
- Accurate
- Honest
- Credible
- Consistent
- Appropriate
- Regular
- Relevant

To learn more about communications goals, see Tool 12, *Fundamentals of Communication During Crises and Emergencies*.

**C. Determine Key Messages**

Effective communication with your target audience and the media depends on the development of clear and concise key messages that address everyone’s essential questions and concerns. Key messages are points that you want your audience to remember after your communication is complete.

One of the most powerful tools you can use to develop and organize clear and concise messages is a message map. (Turn to Tool 12, *Fundamentals of Communication During Crises and Emergencies* for more information about developing key messages and message maps, including worksheets you can use to develop these.)

Included at the end of this tool is a sample message map for use in an influenza pandemic. This map has been adapted from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ *Pandemic Influenza Pre-Event Message Maps*, a publication containing a full series of model message maps that you can adapt for use in your municipality.

**D. Determine Targeted Messages Per Audience**

Targeted messages are those aimed at a specific audience. Identifying the key facts about the people you are trying to reach will help you shape messages quickly and effectively. (You can turn to Tool 12, *Fundamentals of Communication During Crises and Emergencies* for more information about target audiences and worksheets you can use to help you determine their particular characteristics and concerns.)

**E. Identify Materials Needed**

Each of your municipality’s communication needs during a pandemic response will call for different types of materials. Below is a sampling of some of these. (Samples of a *press release*, *media advisory*, and *op-ed* are provided in Tool 14, *News Media Communication*.)

- Press releases
- Fact sheets
- Copies of reports or documents that would be useful background information for reporters covering the event
- Visual materials (such as maps, charts, timelines, diagrams, drawings, and photographs)
- Other materials—such as biographies of speakers and/or subject matter experts, flyers, or broadsides—as appropriate (an example of a public information flyer is provided at the end of this tool)

Determining where you will warehouse your municipality’s communication materials will also be critical in a quick and efficient response to the pandemic.

**STEP 4: CREATE A COMMUNICATIONS PLAN**

When a public health emergency is at hand, timely, accurate, clear, concise, and credible messages can have a great impact on how the public perceives and responds to the emergency.

A communications plan helps your municipality respond in a focused and strategic manner. Typically, a communications plan includes the goals listed below.

- Provide quick access to timely, accurate, clear, consistent, and credible information to the general public, the media, healthcare providers, and other interested individuals or groups.
- Quickly address rumors, misperceptions, and inaccurate information.
- Coordinate communications efforts across all sectors of a municipality.
- Respond to information requests from the media, the public, staff, and other interested or affected individuals or groups.
- Eliminate or reduce public fear or inappropriate behavior.
- Direct public action.

**A. Determine Information Dissemination Channels**

You can disseminate information to educate the public and direct public action in numerous ways. The most common method of dissemination is via mass media. However, the success of your communications will depend on the unique characteristics of your municipality and the methods of dissemination that work best there.

**WHEN MAKING A DECISION ABOUT THE RELEASE OF INFORMATION, CONSIDER THE FOLLOWING:**

- What** to release
- When** to release it
- How** to release it
- Whom** to release it to
- Why** release it



YOU CAN DISSEMINATE INFORMATION VIA:

- Flyers, brochures, and circulars
- Mobile public address systems
- Billboards
- Telephone *hotlines* and toll-free numbers
- Press releases and/or media advisories
- News briefings and *news conferences* (in person and by telephone)
- Interviews on television and radio shows, including news programs
- Interviews or paid advertisements in your local newspaper
- Email, fax, or Websites (including your municipality’s public site as well as dedicated sites for specific users or events)
- Mass *cellular text messages*

The overall aim of an effective strategy is to use whatever vehicle allows you to get vital information to the public quickly, accurately, and effectively. (The only exception to remember, in the very specific case of an influenza pandemic, is avoiding congregations of people, which allow the disease to spread more quickly.)

B. Identify Media and Communications Resources

Before the crisis, take the time to identify media resources in your municipality that can support your communications activities.

Media and public relations companies can, for example, provide news media production services to develop films, videos, *radio capsules*, and so on. And marketing and advertising agencies that buy media can help you secure public advisories like billboards.

Consider enlisting the help of such community resources as:

- University and college schools of communication
- Information technology schools
- Art and design schools
- Social work schools
- Printing and art design shops
- Radio and TV stations
- Newspapers
- Telecommunications companies
- Event promoters

C. Prepare First Announcement

The public will be listening for factual information, and many of the people in your municipality will be expecting to hear a recommendation for action, as soon as news of a potential danger breaks.

When making your first announcement to the public:

- Make sure that your facts are accurate and repeat them consistently.
- Avoid vague details early on.
- Ensure that all credible sources share the same facts.
- Ensure that all spokespersons speak with one voice.
- Be well prepared.

Your first official message to the public should contain the following six elements in the order below.

1. **An expression of empathy and concern for the welfare of community members.**
2. **Confirmed facts and action steps** (who, what, where, when, why, and how). However, it is not necessary for you to know all of the facts and action steps in order to go forward with a statement.
3. **What you *don’t* know about the situation.**
4. **What the process is.** After acknowledging that some questions cannot be answered, explain the first steps being taken to find answers. What help can people expect next? (The first statement may simply be: “We’ve activated the *Emergency Operations Center.*”)

5. **Statement of commitment.** Express that you are there for the long haul. You’ll be back to talk to them in an hour—or within a specified timeframe. (Be careful not to promise what is outside of your control.)
6. **Where people can get more information.** Provide a hotline number or a Website. Again, tell them when you will be back in touch with them.

Finally, remember that consistent messages are vital. Inconsistent messages will increase anxiety and quickly call into question the credibility of experts.

D. Establish Update Procedures

You will need to establish procedures for how your communications support team will provide updated information to the media and the public (for more information, see Tool 14, *News Media Communication*). Consider the examples included at right for providing updates. Don’t forget to include those methods for providing updates that may be unique to your municipality.

E. Prepare Talking Points

Use the key messages developed with your message map to develop specific talking points and supporting information.

STEP 5: MONITOR THE FLOW OF INFORMATION AND PUBLIC RESPONSE

As you shape your messages, be mindful of how the public perceives risk and responds when you are communicating during a crisis. Municipal-level authorities who listen to and address the concerns of the public will be more effective in getting their messages across.

Finally, consider whether you will need to expand your communications support team to ensure continuous coverage should the crisis lengthen and intensify.

General recommendations for monitoring information flow:

- Watch, read, and listen to the news daily.
- Analyze how the news is presented.
- Critique the communication skills of others; learn from their successes as well as from their mistakes.

WAYS TO PROVIDE UPDATES TO THE PUBLIC

1. Send updated announcements via your existing mass communications channels (such as electronic and print news media, as well as municipal or regional government Websites) each time you receive more information. Leave the original announcement at the bottom of the article and add new information above it, dating and/or time-stamping your updates as you go.
2. Send updates via other existing channels (public announcements through loudspeakers, local bulletins, and/or cellular text messages).
3. Keep these channels updated with the most current information. Include what has been done already.



| EMERGENCY RESPONSE TEAM CONTACT LIST   |  |  |
|--|--|--|
| Once your municipality's emergency response team has been assembled, fill out and keep handy a contact list for all team members, such as the example below. |  |  |
|  |  | Date last updated _____                    |
| Team Member  | Primary                                    | Backup                                     |
| Mayor (or Municipal Leader)  | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Emergency Response Chairperson   | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Public Safety and Security Sector Coordinator<br>(Includes Police, Fire, Emergency Medical Services)   | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Public Health and Medical Services Sector Coordinator  | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Public Works Sector Coordinator<br>(Includes Water, Power, Sanitation, Road Repair)  | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Communications and External Affairs Sector Lead Coordinator<br>(Includes Authorized Media Spokesperson)  | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Logistics and Transportation Coordinator   | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Food Sector Coordinator<br>(Food Security)   | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |

| Team Member   | Primary                                    | Backup                                     |
|---|--|--|
| Business Sector Liaison<br>(Trade, Commerce, Banking, Tourism, Labor)   | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Legal Advisor   | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Volunteer Coordinator   | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Recovery Coordinator  | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Municipal Finance<br>Sector Coordinator   | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Telecommunications and<br>IT Services   | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
| Others as Available and<br>Needed, Such as Social<br>Services, Family Welfare, Faith/<br>Religion Counselor, School<br>Coordinator, Community<br>Liaison, NGO Representatives | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |
|   | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: | Name:<br>Work:<br>Home:<br>Cell:<br>Email: |

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES  
OF THE COMMUNICATIONS COORDINATOR

Included below are the specific roles and responsibilities of your communications coordinator.

COMMAND AND CONTROL

- Assembles and provides guidance to the communications support team
- Serves as the point person for all communication during the pandemic crisis
- Coordinates across the sectors in your municipality to ensure that messages are consistent
- Manages the release of information to the public and the media
- Knows incident-specific policy, science, and situation
- Provides technical support to spokesperson(s)
- Reports on a daily basis directly to you, the municipal leadership team, or the highest authority in your municipality
- Serves as a liaison to government agencies in the production of press releases and the scheduling of news conferences and meetings
- Determines the operational hours and days, and reassesses these throughout the pandemic response
- Ensures that communications resources are available (including human, technical, and mechanical supplies)

DIRECT MEDIA

- Develops all internal and external crisis-related communications
- Manages inquiries and requests from the media and coordinates logistics for interviews and conferences with media representatives
- Oversees media monitoring systems and reports
- Reviews and approves materials for release to the media and the public

DIRECT PUBLIC INFORMATION

- Develops all internal and external crisis-related communications
- Oversees public information monitoring systems and reports
- Reviews and approves materials for release to the media and the public

COORDINATE COMMUNICATIONS ACROSS SECTORS

- Organizes and facilitates regular meetings with all sectors to receive input about public response and communication messages
- Arranges official briefings across all sectors of the municipality

DEVELOP PUBLIC HEALTH CONTENT AND MATERIAL

- Works with subject matter experts to create situation-specific fact sheets, Q&As, and updates
- Compiles information on possible public health emergency topics for release when needed
- Tests messages and materials for cultural and language requirements of special populations
- Receives input from other communications support team members regarding content and message needs
- Uses analysis from media, public, and municipal sector monitoring systems and reports in order to adapt messages
- Identifies additional content requirements and materials development needs

ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES  
OF THE COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT TEAM

*The specific roles and responsibilities of your communications support team follow.*

*Handout 4 is a worksheet that you can use to track the specific staff or volunteers who will be in charge of the communications tasks for the team.*

COMMAND AND CONTROL

- Provides updates to the communications coordinator
- Develops and maintains *media contact list* and *call logs*

DIRECT MEDIA

- Produces and distributes media advisories, press releases, and other materials for approval by the communications coordinator, mayor, or municipal leadership team
- Monitors local and national news media, as well as the public response
- Ensures that crisis communication principles to build trust and credibility are incorporated into all public messages delivered through the media

DIRECT PUBLIC INFORMATION

- Manages and responds to inquiries and requests from the public via emergency hotline and email
- Organizes and manages a pandemic response Website for the municipality and maintains links to other related Websites

TASKS AND CONTACTS  
FOR THE COMMUNICATIONS SUPPORT TEAM

| Role  | Tasks   |
|---|---|
| <b>Communications Coordinator</b><br>Name: _____<br>Phone 1: _____<br>Phone 2: _____<br>Email: _____  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• All communications command and control tasks</li><li>• Directs all media</li><li>• Directs all public information</li><li>• Coordinates communications across sectors</li><li>• Develops public health content and materials</li></ul>  |
| <b>Communications Support Team</b><br><b>Lead Member</b><br>Name: _____<br>Phone 1: _____<br>Phone 2: _____<br>Email: _____<br><br><b>Back-Up Member</b><br>Name: _____<br>Phone 1: _____<br>Phone 2: _____<br>Email: _____ | <b>Command and Control</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Provides updates to communications coordinator</li><li>• Develops and maintains media contact list and call logs</li></ul>   |
| <b>Communications Support Team</b><br><b>Lead Member</b><br>Name: _____<br>Phone 1: _____<br>Phone 2: _____<br>Email: _____<br><br><b>Back-Up Member</b><br>Name: _____<br>Phone 1: _____<br>Phone 2: _____<br>Email: _____ | <b>Direct Media</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Produces and distributes media advisories, press releases, and other materials for approval by communications coordinator; mayor; or municipal leadership team</li><li>• Monitors local and national news media, as well as public response</li><li>• Ensures that crisis communication principles to build trust and credibility are incorporated into all public messages delivered through the media</li></ul> |
| <b>Communications Support Team</b><br><b>Lead Member</b><br>Name: _____<br>Phone 1: _____<br>Phone 2: _____<br>Email: _____<br><br><b>Back-Up Member</b><br>Name: _____<br>Phone 1: _____<br>Phone 2: _____<br>Email: _____ | <b>Direct Public Information</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Manages and responds to inquiries and requests from the public via emergency hotline and email</li><li>• Organizes and manages pandemic response Website for the municipality and maintains links to other related Websites</li></ul>  |



MODEL OF INFLUENZA PANDEMIC KEY MESSAGES  
WITH SUPPORTING INFORMATION

| Message Map Template  |  |   |
|---|--|---|
| Specific Audience: <i>General Public</i>  |  |   |
| Specific Question or Concern: <i>How fast would an influenza pandemic spread?</i>                     |  |   |
| Key Message 1   | Key Message 2  | Key Message 3   |
| When an influenza pandemic begins, it is likely to spread very rapidly.                               | Efforts to prepare for an influenza pandemic are continuing.                           | Public participation and cooperation will be important to response efforts.                               |
| Supporting Information 1-A  | Supporting Information 2-A   | Supporting Information 3-A  |
| Influenza is a contagious disease of the lungs.   | Public officials are building on existing disease outbreak plans.                      | Severe influenza could produce changes in daily life, including limits on travel and public gatherings.   |
| Supporting Information 1-B  | Supporting Information 2-B   | Supporting Information 3-B  |
| Influenza usually spreads by infected people coughing and sneezing.                                   | Researchers are working to produce additional vaccine more quickly.                    | Informed public participation and cooperation will help public health efforts.                            |
| Supporting Information 1-C  | Supporting Information 2-C   | Supporting Information 3-C  |
| Most people will have little or no immunity to an influenza virus that spreads from person to person. | Countries are working together to improve detection and tracking of influenza viruses. | People should stay informed about the influenza pandemic and be prepared as they would for any emergency. |

*This map has been adapted from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Pandemic Influenza Pre-Event Message Maps, a publication you can turn to for a full series of model message maps that you can adapt for use in your municipality (see Sources on page 20).*



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