



## **Crisis Communication Plan**

USG Policy 4a (5.10) | Approved April 2009, Amended April 2024

### **I. Purpose and Applicability**

This Crisis Communication Plan establishes a framework and creates procedures for The Universities at Shady Grove to distribute information in a timely, accurate, responsible, and sensitive way to students, faculty, staff, stakeholders and the general public during a crisis situation.

This crisis communication plan provides an outline for coordination of communication within the Universities at Shady Grove, between outside entities, and between USG and the media and local or state officials in the event of a critical incident. Crises can happen anywhere, at any time, and often occur when they are least expected and with little notice. When a crisis does occur, events usually unfold rapidly, leaving little time for advanced planning. That is why advance preparation is essential.

The goal of this plan is to establish guidelines and procedures for addressing a variety of situations, and to ensure campus officials and communicators are familiar with those procedures. This plan can be activated by the Executive Director, the Chief Operating Officer, or the Director of Marketing and Communications.

### **II. Preparing for a Crisis**

- A. It is important to set up the framework of the crisis communication plan in advance. It is always best to anticipate a crisis in advance (severe weather system, planned protest, etc.); however, the USG campus team must be prepared for unanticipated events as well.
- B. The Emergency Preparedness and Incident Response Team (EPIRT), as outlined in the [Crisis Management Plan](#), will meet in the event of a crisis, at the direction of the Executive Director and activation by the Public Safety Manager.
- C. Emergency contact information for EPIRT members, as well as other key officials, will be stored securely online and will be accessible to all team members.
- D. USG will have a standby statement or template that can be drafted and approved in advance. Details tailored to the immediate crisis can then be inserted, saving time during an actual crisis.
- E. USG shall communicate this plan in advance before a crisis strikes. If the media and the university's stakeholders know it exists, and how/where to access it, they will know what to expect from the university when a crisis occurs.

### **III. Responding to a Crisis**

- A. During a crisis response and under the direction of the Executive Director or their designee, the EPIRT will undertake some or all of the following tasks:
- i. **Take Immediate Action:** If the safety of the USG community is at risk, immediate action should be taken. This action should be the first decision by the EPIRT. The activation of appropriate campus safety plans should also help ensure the safety of the USG community.
  - ii. **Identify Stakeholders:** The key stakeholders in the crisis should be identified and notified. It is imperative that administrators, faculty, students, and parents be provided communication and information about the crisis and what actions the university is implementing in response to said crisis. Effective communication can help quell rumors and ensure the university can effectively operate.
  - iii. **Identify a Spokesperson:** A single spokesperson should handle all official communication coming from USG. This role will normally be the responsibility of the Director of Marketing and Communications. Staging areas should be identified for the media and a press conference location, if needed. These activities should be coordinated closely with public safety agencies who are supporting the campus through the crisis.
  - iv. **Gather the Facts:** An initial situation summary should be drafted by the EPIRT. This summary should contain all known facts about the crisis and actions taken by university personnel or the EPIRT. A timeline format should be used. The fact sheet is for internal use and should only be shared publicly after consultation with General Counsel.
  - v. **Establish an Emergency Operation Center:** The magnitude of the crisis will determine the need to establish an Emergency Operations Center or EOC for the duration of the incident. The EOC must be large enough to support the activities of the EPIRT and handle communication needs such as landline phones, fax machines, computer and WIFI access, etc. The primary EOC will be in room 3156 of Building III. The secondary or back-up EOC will be in room 5115 of Building IV.
  - vi. **Meet with University, County, State Officials, if Necessary:** If the crisis is beyond the capability of USG resources, the appropriate university campus, Montgomery County agency, or state agency should be called upon. The appropriate agency will vary depending on the nature of the crisis.

#### IV. Communication

- A. Effective and efficient communication during a crisis is key to the successful handling of a critical incident. This encompasses both internal and external communication of facts and directions. During a crisis, people demand information and direction. It is imperative that the institution is prepared to provide this information.
- B. **Identify Key Audiences:** Determine which of USG's stakeholders need to be informed of the situation and in what order. Stakeholders are listed below:

- students, faculty, and staff;
- home campuses;
- university system and board of regents;
- public officials;
- media; and
- general public.

- C. **Provide Guidance to the Public:** If the crisis involves a health risk, USG officials should coordinate with health officials to research the risk and offer guidance to the public. If the crisis involves a possible evacuation, the university should inform the public about areas to be evacuated and activate the [Fire Emergency and Building Evacuation Procedure](#). USG should also direct the public where to go for more information-radio, web site, social media, TV, etc.
- D. **Designate a Crisis Hotline Number:** If the crisis is anticipated to last for a significant period of time, USG should designate a phone number as an information hotline.
- E. **Communicate the Message and the Facts:** The facts of the crisis, an official statement, and the key message should be developed and communicated to the key stakeholders, as determined by item B above. For internal audiences use email, voicemail, text alert, social media, and the USG website. For external audiences, use the media by holding press briefings or issuing official statements. As a general rule, the first press briefing should occur within four hours of the event or crisis.
- F. **Media:** The media – and social media outlets of USG – can provide avenues for USG to share its message with the public. The media will also shape public opinion about how USG is responding to the crisis. Therefore, it is important to cooperate with the media, to be sensitive to media deadlines, and to provide all reporters with the same information - no exclusive stories. The designated spokesperson should keep a list of local media contacts.
- G. **Dispel the Rumors:** During times of crisis, rumors can run rampant. If false rumors become prevalent, the spokesperson will need to dispel them quickly and publicly. The spokesperson should never release the names of anyone who is injured or killed until their next of kin has been notified.

## V. Evaluate

- A. **Experience is the Best Teacher:** After the crisis is over, it is beneficial to evaluate how the campus handled the crisis. Knowing what was done well and what could have been done better will only help refine the crisis communication plan and make it more effective in the future.
- B. **View/Read Media Coverage and Social Media Postings:** The best way to evaluate the campus's dealings with the media is to watch and read the media coverage of the crisis.
- C. **After-Action Review:** The purpose of an after-action review (AAR) is to allow participants an opportunity to examine the strengths and areas for improvement of an emergency response. After a crisis is over, the EPIRT will conduct an after-action review

to evaluate how the institution handled the crisis. It is important to learn from successes and mistakes.

- D. **Review the Plan:** To ensure that the communication plan works and is kept up-to-date, it should be reviewed at least annually, as well as after each crisis occurrence.

**VI. Related Documents**

- A. [Crisis Management Plan](#)
- B. [Fire Emergency and Building Evacuation Procedure](#)

**VII. Revision History**

Date	Description	Revised by
04/2009	Initial Plan Creation	P. Dillon
04/2011	General formatting revisions	P. Dillon
04/2024	Updated links and general formatting revisions	M. Wahl