AMERICAN RED CROSS:
San Diego/Imperial Counties Chapter

Crisis Communications – COM 620

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Course Group Project

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Introduction

Natural disasters, transportation accidents, wildfires, contractible disease outbreaks, terrorism, mass murders, explosions, and war are but a few tragic events that take place each year somewhere in the world. These crises are often unexpected, pose a serious threat to people and/or the environment, and require a short response time in order to remedy the problem and/or minimize damages. First responders such as emergency medical personnel, explosives and hazardous materials experts, fire departments, law enforcement, and search and rescue organizations are the people we depend on most when a crisis occurs. Added to the list of first responders is the nation’s premier emergency response organization, the American Red Cross (ARC). The American Red Cross is a non-governmental agency, and relies on individual, community, foundation, and government contributions of time and money to do its work. The ARC offers compassionate services in five areas:

1. community services that help the needy;
2. support and comfort for military members and their families;
3. the collection, processing, and distribution of lifesaving blood and blood products;
4. educational programs that promote health and safety; and
5. international relief and development programs.

The more than one million volunteers and 35,000 employees of the 800 ARC offices worldwide provide emergency assistance in communities all over the world. This includes helping thousands of military members stay connected to their families while serving. In addition, the ARC provides training to more than 15 million people to gain the skills necessary to
prepare for and respond to any emergency in their homes and communities everywhere in the world.

This paper will discuss the crisis communications plan prepared for the San Diego/Imperial Counties Chapter of the American Red Cross. Founded in 1898, this Chapter responds to an emergency nearly every 24 hours and is guided by seven fundamental principles: humanity, impartiality, neutrality, independence, voluntary service, unity, and universality. In 2009-10, the San Diego/Imperial Counties Chapter offered the following services:

- Community education - provided training for 99,000 people in health and safety classes including disaster preparedness, First Aid, CPR, and aquatics;
- Disaster response and relief - responded to 243 disasters: fires, floods, storms & hazardous materials;
- Services to the Armed Forces (SAF) - assisted over 30,000 military families and helped provide over $210,000 in emergency financial support; and
- Women, Infants, and Children Program (WIC) (state contract) - nutrition counseling for pregnant and breastfeeding women, infants, and children under the age of five; 37,000 clients per month.

This ARC chapter serves more than 3.5 million people in San Diego County, covering 4,255 square miles, as well as 160,000 people in Imperial County, covering 4,597 square miles. In addition to providing services throughout the San Diego and Imperial Counties, it assists other chapters with disaster relief throughout the country. Some of the most recent events of 2011 that this chapter’s volunteers have provided support and assistance to include:
• Joplin, Missouri tornados – provided shelter at Missouri Southern State University, food, water and much needed emotional support;

• Clinton, Mississippi catastrophic flooding - provided prolonged shelter and feeding operation for people living along the Mississippi, sending in disaster workers and pre-positioning thousands of cots, blankets and other relief supplies;

• Alabama, Mississippi, North Carolina and Texas to help people devastated by the recent deadly tornadoes and floods - provided assistance in the following roles:
  o Facilities Supervisor
  o Community Response Programs Manager
  o Spiritual Care Services
  o Disaster Assessment Manager
  o Health Services
  o Local Volunteer Supervisor; and

• Escondido apartment fire - shelter at Mission Hills High School, food and clothing, emotional support and health services.

(American Red Cross, 2011).

Organizational Background and History

The American Red Cross was founded in 1881 by its leader Clara Barton. After hearing about the Swiss-inspired international Red Cross network during a visit to Europe following the Civil War, Barton campaigned for an American Red Cross society and for ratification of the Geneva Conventions, comprised of four treaties and three additional protocols that set the standards in international law for humanitarian treatment of the victims of war and protecting the war-injured military personnel (Wikipedia, para. 1). The Red Cross received its first
congressional charter in 1900 and in 1905. Following the war, the Red Cross focused on service
to veterans and enhanced its programs in safety training, accident prevention, home care for the
sick, and nutrition education. In addition, the Red Cross provided relief for victims of such major
disasters as the Mississippi River floods in 1927 and severe drought and the Depression during
the 1930s.

After World War II, the Red Cross introduced the first nationwide civilian blood
program, and today, the Red Cross supplies nearly 50% of the blood and blood products in the
U.S. During the 90s, the organization expanded its role in biomedical research and entered the
new field of human tissue banking and distribution. The Red Cross also expanded services into
such fields as civil defense, CPR/AED training, HIV/AIDS education, and the provision of
emotional care and support to disaster victims and their survivors. It helped the federal
government form the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), serving as the principal
supplier of mass care in federally-declared disasters.

The American Red Cross is where people mobilize to help their neighbors—across the
street, across the country, and across the world—in emergencies. Each year, in communities
large and small, victims of some 70,000 disasters turn to neighbors familiar and new—the more
than half a million volunteers and 35,000 employees of the Red Cross. Through nearly 700
locally supported chapters, more than 15 million people gain the skills they need to prepare for
and respond to emergencies in their homes, communities, and world. Some four million people
give blood—the gift of life—through the Red Cross, making it the largest supplier of blood and
blood products in the United States (American Red Cross, 2011).
Stakeholder Analysis

The following list presents the ARC’s most important stakeholders, of which there are both internal and external groups.

**Internal stakeholders**

- Leadership and Employees: These individuals are the public face of the Red Cross. They are the ones most directly involved in crisis communications. They provide the day-to-day governance of the Red Cross at the local, national, and international level. They are important because they assure that the activities of the Red Cross are focused on its mission and vision, and that funds are not wasted or misused.

- Publicity: These individuals are involved in ensuring that the general public is fully aware of the activities of the Red Cross. They produce the messages that the leadership wants communicated to the general public and other external stakeholders. During a disaster, they are critical to sharing the message that the need for contributions and volunteer support is understood by stakeholders.

- Fundraisers: It takes a lot of money to provide care for people during a disaster. These individuals are involved in the generation of funds, primarily from voluntary contributions on a daily basis and following a disaster, as well as developing grant funding. Without their efforts, individuals might not know how and what to contribute that will be of aid in a disaster.

- Board of Governors: These are prominent individuals who provide assistance and oversight for the activities of the leadership. These are individuals who have years of experience in dealing with disasters and are a valuable source of information for the
leadership. They are important in making sure that the Red Cross gets the necessary support needed to allow it to effectively provide assistance during a disaster.

- Volunteers: These are individuals who are willing to lend their expertise and/or time to the Red Cross as needed on a daily basis and following a disaster.

External stakeholders

- Clients: These are people who are assisted by the Red Cross who are injured, have medical problems, are in need of assistance, or are displaced during a disaster. They may need short-term and/or long-term assistance.
- Contributors: These are the individuals, as well as foundations, businesses, and government funders, large and small, who provide the bulk of the funding that supports the activities of the Red Cross on a daily basis or following a disaster.
- Communities: These are local communities that offer assistance during disasters to the Red Cross in its efforts to provide help such as search and rescue, food and water, shelter and sanitation, and medical care and recovery.
- Federal and State Governments: Federal and state governments have emergency management agencies such as FEMA and local/state fire departments and emergency medical providers that work closely with the Red Cross during a disaster.
- Non-governmental Organizations: These are non-profit organizations that work with the Red Cross to provide assistance to victims of a disaster.
- The American public: The general public has a significant, ongoing interest in the work of the Red Cross, even if they personally never have to make use of its services.
**Risk and Issues Assessment**

The following list presents six major areas where risk and issues can occur that would significantly impact the management and well-being of the American Red Cross and its stakeholders.

1. Tainted blood bank that exposes clients/public or employees/volunteers to an illness or disease;
2. Employee/volunteer actions that cause injury or death to clients/public while providing crisis or non-crisis services;
3. Employee/volunteer death that occurs during the response to or management of a crisis;
4. Employees'/volunteers’ that mishandle funds or other criminal misconduct;
5. Spokesperson (CEO/ED) that gives fraudulent information to stakeholders; and
6. Loss of resources or organization failure that occurs in response to a poor economy, lack of donations, and/or embezzlement.

The American Red Cross provides financial assistance to individuals and families following natural disasters such as fires, tornadoes, floods, hurricane, earthquakes, and toxic chemical spills. They also distribute blood donations to help victims in need. Additionally, the ARC provides a safety checklist on their website for stakeholders to use to protect themselves from the further effects of a risk, along with providing information that assists them with the rebuilding process if their property has been damaged or destroyed.

The ARC’s Board of Directors and Crisis Communicator handle risk reporting. The first step in eliminating or managing risk is the process of risk identification. The best way to identify a risk is to find out what natural, technological, and managerial issues can happen to the
organization and its stakeholders. Some risks can be predicted but many others cannot. These named risks can occur in any location at any given time. Providing stakeholders in the wake of an internal or external crisis with information and instructions can limit loss and shorten recovery.

**Risk analysis**

- Earthquake: Earthquakes are an unpredictable sudden, rapid shaking of the earth caused by the breaking and shifting of rock beneath the earth’s surface that can occur at anytime. The occurrence for earthquakes in Southern California ranks moderate to very high in risk. Earthquakes, when reaching high intensity can be deadly, destroying structures and taking lives. Small 2.0 earthquakes are very common in San Diego County. Large impacting earthquakes are low to medium in probability in the region, with the last major earthquake occurring in 1999.

- Wildfires: Wildfires begin unnoticed but spread quickly igniting brush, trees, and homes. They rank moderate to high in risk in the region. The 2003 wildfires in San Diego caused 300,000 people to flee their homes as the fires consumed 369,600 acres of land. Consequently, 2,400 homes and 100 commercial businesses were destroyed and 16 people were killed. When fires burn throughout Southern California, emergency response teams, such as fire personnel and the ARC, use GIS applications to map fire areas and threatened communities, identify critical facilities, assign resources and equipment, and locate landscape features to monitor the actual fire behavior (GIS, 2003).

- Social economics: Low income inner-city communities are often managed by local government differently than more affluent communities due to their socio-economic
status, specifically the high minority populations. They are not subject to the same opportunities for access to health care and education about disaster awareness. Consequently, they are more susceptible to individual and community crisis. Benefits to these communities are needed and provided through the help of organizations such as the American Red Cross. Today the American Red Cross is dedicated to making social change in San Diego and Imperial Counties by helping to educate the public about how to prevent home and community crisis, and how to respond to and remain safe during a disaster (Education Project, n.d.). The probability and levels of socio-economically-based risks are low to moderate.

- Tainted blood: The FDA has current procedures in place that it enforces to avoid the past failures of the Red Cross to protect blood supplies that occurred due to cut backs and inexperienced workers. This potential high risk has created definite uncertainty for the public since a lack of proper handling of blood products can result in severe illness or even death. The probability for an occurrence of tainted is moderate to high. In past crisis involving tainted blood, the ARC had repeatedly failed to investigate the results of its mistakes and lack of following the new guidelines. Therefore, the issue was never resolved. Safety and exposure remain serious risks.

- Recession: Over the past few years, the seasonal surge of house fires and the poor economy has depleted the financial resources of many ARC chapters who struggled to meet the demands of declining donations. Additionally, donors and funders have had their resources reduced, resulting in less funding dollars for the ARC. The San Diego ARC laid off staff members as a result and their donations have been down by 15-20 percent (Recession, n.d.). Office hours have even been cut back, salaries trimmed, and
training programs scrapped. This lack of donations into the ARC means less assistance for victims suffering from disasters. This is a moderate to high risk to the organization.

- Embezzlement: When a disaster occurs the Red Cross provides food, shelter, relief supplies, emotional support, and health related services to address basic human needs (ARC, n.d). Shortly after the 9/11 attacks, the American Red Cross had received large amounts of donations pouring into more than 1,000 local chapters. An issue arose when several of these chapters were identified by the National Red Cross headquarters as having poor accounting procedures, inaccurate financial reports, and for keeping contributions that should have been sent to the headquarters in Washington. Those chapters involved were located in San Diego, Iowa, Southwest Florida, and the Gateway area. The San Diego Chapter, who had been unable to account for a year’s worth of fire donations, was already under investigation by County Supervisor Diane Jacobs. This is a high risk for this organization.

Media Analysis

The San Diego/Imperial Counties chapter of the American Red Cross organization is well situated in a large metropolitan city, as well as in the Southern California region. This placement provides multiple media outlets and opportunities for strategic crisis communications implementation. In the event that an internal crisis happens that is big enough, of interest to the public, and considered news worthy by the media, not only will a crisis communications plan be in place, but also the relevant media relationships will have been established prior to the crisis. This will make the information dissemination flow more accurately and smoothly to all of the stakeholders. It will also provide a means for stakeholder questions and feedback to flow back to
the organization, especially through the use of social media communications. This section looks specifically at the various major media outlets within the ARC’s local that are available for messaging and information dissemination and that will deliver the greatest impact and information flow to stakeholders during a crisis. These are the media relationships that are the most important resources and partnerships to the organization. Consequently, the objective of this media analysis is provide a comprehensive list of the San Diego-based media outlets where relationships need to be established and developed prior to an organizational crisis event.

**Traditional broadcast media outlets**

Major Television Stations:

- KBNT-TV, Ch. 19 is a Spanish language station
- KFMB-TV, Ch. 8 is a CBS affiliate
- KGTV-TV, Ch. 10 is an ABC affiliate
- KNSD-TV, Ch. 7/39 is a NBC affiliate
- KPBS-TV is a public television affiliate
- KSWB-TV, Ch. 5/69 is a Fox affiliate

Major Radio Stations:

- KFMB AM 760 News/Talk & FM 100.7 Pop Rock
- KOGO AM 600 News
- KPBS FM 89.5 Public Radio
- KSDO AM 1130 News/Talk

**Traditional print media outlets**

Major Newspapers:

- North County Times
• San Diego Business Journal
• San Diego Daily Transcript/ San Diego Source
• San Diego Union-Tribune
• Star-News

Other Print Media:
• La Prensa San Diego (Spanish\English Newspaper)
• San Diego Family Magazine
• San Diego Magazine

**Internet and social media outlets**

• American Red Cross (ARC) Web site, San Diego/Imperial Chapter Web site
• ARC Organization’s FaceBook and LinkedIn pages
• ARC Organization’s Twitter account
• ARC Organization’s YouTube account

(Nonprofit, 2010).

**Value of relationships with media outlets**

These media outlets are the ones that are deemed the most important to and effective for the ARC’s pre-crisis relationship development and post-crisis communications planning and implementation. Meetings with the various lead news producers, editors, bloggers, and/or publishers should be held prior to any crisis to discuss the objectives, strategy, and protocol for an open, honest, and informative organization-media partnership-based relationship in the event of an actual crisis. In proactively doing this, questions and concerns from all stakeholders and the organization can be addressed and resolved prior to an event. The general media platforms – traditional broadcast, traditional print, Internet-based channels, and social media – are a broad
enough communications coalition to reach all the various stakeholder demographics, whether through press conferences, Web site updates, or social media interactive posts and video uploads. The value of taking the time to do preplanning and including the media as a partner, not excluding them as an enemy, is a well-informed, and hopefully, supportive public.

**Crisis Communication Plan Overview and Summary (CCP)**

In a time of crisis, stakes are raised and decisions need to be made quickly and with sound judgment and strategy. Having a Crisis Communication Plan in place allows leaders and communicators to follow direction and reduce uncertainty in the steps the organization should follow. The Crisis Communication Plan includes the selection of a crisis management team, identification of internal and external stakeholders, and preparation of the team on the best strategy to use, as well as which communication channels and messages to send to stakeholders. By creating a crisis management team and using resources, such as the local media, the ARC will honestly, openly, and compassionately address stakeholders in the aftermath of a crisis. Additionally, the Crisis Communication Plan outlines the time frame for the ARC to respond.

Consequently, the Crisis Communication Plan needs to be a well-researched and well-planned guideline for the organization to follow; however, it cannot prepare the organization for every detail of a crisis. It is the duty of the crisis management team, along with any specialists they consult with, to use the guide to make those quick, sound decisions. The value in effectively communicating through the appropriate channels after a crisis is that it can save an organization from a possible permanent, negative image and create a new, positive image for the organization in a reflection of the crisis response and management.
Conclusion

Since its founding in 1881, the American Red Cross has offered assistance with community services that help the needy and the military by providing blood donations and educational programs to promote health and safety, as well as ongoing disaster relief on domestic and international levels. Internal and external risks such as hurricanes, wildfires, floods, loss of financial funding for resources, employee embezzlement, transportation disasters, and tainted blood are always an unknown possibility. Because no disaster or issue is exactly the same, it is important for an organization’s leaders to create a crisis communication plan for such events. Yet, even the most well-thought-out crisis response plan is inadequate if it doesn’t include effective means of communication with first responders, the community, stakeholders, and emergency operation centers (Page, n.d.). It is important to understand that no plan is without error and that unplanned events that pose potential threats and disruption will continue to confront businesses and communities alike.

Moreover, even organizations that respond to crises as their primary mission need a crisis communication plan in place for themselves. The American Red Cross is involved in many facets of relief efforts after a crisis, and their response to these situations can sometimes involve risks for themselves. These risks include the death of a volunteer/employee or a mishandled treatment, which caused harm to a victim rather than support. There are also risks the American Red Cross endures that don’t directly involve crisis relief. Leaders of the organization can mishandle funds or steal from the organization. Donor blood supplies can become tainted or the CEO can give misleading information to stakeholders. All of these are risks that the ARC manages and their Crisis Communication Plan can prepare them to handle and, if needed, deal with event consequences.
The purpose of this crisis communication plan is to ensure proactive and complete dissemination of information before, during, and after a crisis, and that the San Diego/Imperial Counties ARC Chapter using it is prepared to handle any type of risks they come into contact with in the future. No matter the industry, business endurance demands that organizations inform and create crisis response teams, provide guidance and instructions to employees, and communicate with the proper stakeholders in the event of a crisis. Effectively communicating to the appropriate channels after a crisis can save an organization from a possible permanent, negative image and create a new, positive image for the organization.
References

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http://www.continuitycentral.com/feature0339.htm


Appendix A

Crisis Communication Plan

The Crisis Communication Team

In the event of a crisis, the Crisis Communication Team (CCT) will immediately convene and discuss the actions and steps that the San Diego Chapter will follow. The Crisis Communication Team will consist of the following individuals:

- All six Managing Directors
- Director of Communications
- Chairman of Board of Directors
- Vice-Chair

It is suggested the team meet in-person in the office of the CEO following a crisis. However, if members of the Crisis Communication Team are unable to meet at the location, a conference call will suffice.

It is the duty of the team to guide and lead the organization in communication efforts before, during, and after a crisis.

Communicating during a crisis

During a crisis, the CCT will appoint a spokesperson and a media coordinator. These two individuals may vary depending on the crisis at hand but will serve the titles for the duration of
the crisis and its aftermath. The CCT will analyze the situation, study the facts and discuss the best communication tactics for the organization to follow.

Within three hours of convening, the CCT will make a public statement through the media, internal channels, and any social media the organization has accessible. The message will be given or addressed from the appointed spokesperson and all the messages will be clear, concise, and deliver the same point. A print copy of the releases will also be made available and delivered upon request.

- Role of Spokesperson
  - Disseminate messages through the media and other channels decided upon by the CCT
  - Will serve as the only spokesperson to the media and internal stakeholders
  - Will answer all public and media inquiries with the help of the CCT

- Role of Media Coordinator
  - Contact media and notify of impending comments or press conferences
  - Monitor media coverage and flag influential media covering the crisis and report back to the CCT
    - This includes traditional mass media and social media
  - Be the intermediary between the media and the spokesperson

- Internal Stakeholders
The CCT will identify all internal stakeholders and determine the best channel to reach these groups and individuals within the first three hours of the crisis.

- Internal stakeholders may require a different channel to be contacted.
- Internal stakeholders may include:
  - Leadership
  - Board of Governors
  - Fundraisers
  - Volunteers
- Possible channels:
  - Staff email
  - Enews letter
  - Email address provided by stakeholders
  - Organization Web site
  - Personal phone calls

- External Stakeholders
- The CCT will meet and determine the external stakeholders and the best channel to contact these groups and individuals within the first three hours of the crisis.
  - External stakeholders may include:
• People assisted by the American Red Cross

• Contributors

• Communities

• Federal & State Governments

• Non-Governmental Organizations

• The American Public

  • Possible channels

    • Social media sites i.e. Facebook, Twitter, etc.

    • Press conference

    • Organization Web site

    • Press release

    • Automated telephone call

Spokesperson Rules and Guidelines

The spokesperson will serve as the voice for the American Red Cross, so it is imperative the spokesperson act with the utmost professionalism when dealing with the media. It is also important to appear in control and honest. The following are guidelines for the spokesperson to follow when communicating with the media:

• Never speak “off the record”
• Do not overreassure the stakeholders

• Avoid using the phrase “No Comment”

• Do not publicly place blame

• Do not try and ‘spin’ the situation

• Do not argue with media

• If the spokesperson does not know an answer to a question, it is OK for that person to say they will find the answer and get back to the media

• Do not offer conflicting messages

• Stick to the message points provided and agreed upon by the CCT

The CCT will determine how often the spokesperson will give statements and publicly speak but no more than one day should pass without releasing an update or statement through the chosen channels decided upon in the first three hours of the crisis.

**Meetings of Crisis Communication Team**

The CCT will meet the first Tuesday morning of every month in the conference room of the main American Red Cross building.

• Meetings will run from 10 am-12 pm

• Team members will discuss possible future risks and assess current situations

• The CCP will be updated as needed
• Each meeting will have a simulated crisis situation and media training