



FLCITYGUARD

# Crisis Communications

Preparation is key

by Ron Sachs  
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A crisis can happen at any time, and the evening news is often quick to point out when a situation is escalating. At times like this, it's important for city leaders to embrace a sense of controlled urgency that helps their city not only survive a crisis, but continue to thrive when the situation has passed.

A carefully developed and well-rehearsed communications plan is the most effective and efficient path through the maze of challenges and obstacles that can arise in a crisis.

In other states, municipal officials recently learned this lesson the hard way. Sludge-filled water gushing out of home taps . . . lead seeping into the city water supply . . . an unexpectedly harsh storm. These are just some instances where local governments could have taken some small – but important – steps in advance to prepare for the unanticipated.

When a crisis hits (and it's really not a matter of "if," but "when"), it's vitally important that city governments communicate early, and communicate often. That means using every means possible to reach every audience possible.

Crisis communications can be one of the most challenging tasks facing officials, and this is only compounded by the fact that essential city business must still continue through a crisis. That's why the Florida League of Cities has introduced **FLCityGuard**, a comprehensive online portal paired with trainings, educational materials, and other resources to help Florida municipalities navigate the treacherous waters of a crisis.

As part of this service, which is available to all Florida League of Cities members, city officials from across North Florida convened in **Gainesville** in late February for a mock disaster workshop. The participants, who came from a broad range of professional

backgrounds, worked together to focus their message, deliver it quickly, and reach all intended audiences. The scenario created an opportunity for attendees to confront everything from public safety to environmental threats, highway snarls to tragedy – and much more. Even longtime city officials who are well versed in managing challenging situations discovered that there's always something else that must be considered when the media, city staff and the public are clamoring for information.

Officials in **Crystal City, Texas**, were recently reminded of the importance of crisis communications planning. When maintenance of an old elevated water tank caused black sediment to leak into the municipal water supply, the city had to respond to a public concerned about contaminated drinking water. Unfortunately, officials may have aggravated the crisis by failing to communicate with their constituents in a clear and timely fashion that focused on solutions.

As those officials learned, it's important to plan ahead and then stay ahead of the problem. Communicate in a timely and transparent fashion so residents feel the city is doing its best to alleviate the problem. Allowing residents and visitors to discover a problem for themselves often leaves them feeling frustrated, angry and betrayed. Counter this perception by breaking your own bad news and framing potentially negative issues in a more positive light by offering concrete solutions and explanations.

Even the most visionary and experienced municipal leaders cannot know when the next crisis will arise, but they do know it's coming. Sometimes, a crisis can put your city on the evening news – or, in one community's case, in the middle of a presidential election.

A seemingly mundane switch in the water supply for **Flint, Mich.**, became so much more when corrosive river water caused lead from aging pipes to seep into the municipal water supply. Eventually, the decision and the city's slow response to the public outcry thrust the situation into the national spotlight, as two leading presidential candidates held a debate in Flint to discuss the response.

It's possible the city could have avoided harm to its citizens and its brand by responding more urgently – or, better yet, finding a solution to the problem before it became a crisis. When dealing with an emerging crisis, it's important to take aggressive steps to protect citizens and maintain the trust of residents.

Leaders in Florida cities know first-hand that there's a potential crisis every time the weather turns away from a Sunshine State postcard. From hurricanes to tornadoes, wildfires to flooding, Floridians know the importance of having a plan.

The “get a plan” mindset became fixed in Florida's culture when the state was subjected to eight major storms in a two-year period, but not every area of the country has had that riveting experience. The **City of Milwaukee** recently found itself in a crisis after a winter storm dumped nine inches of snow. The snow was significantly deeper, heavier and wetter than expected, and many residents had to wait days for their city streets to be plowed. Angry at the slow response time, constituents criticized the city for not being prepared with enough plows to handle the storm.

In this instance, communicating clearly and emphasizing a policy of transparency could have avoided much of the criticism.

This is an example of how a crisis could have been averted through adequate preparation and following a plan.

The new FLCityGuard tool helps cities create or improve their crisis communications plans and then implement them when necessary. FLCityGuard emphasizes three overarching principles:

- >> Municipal government must communicate accurately, early, and often.
- >> Your city must move quickly to deal with the situation that has created the crisis.
- >> Your staff must always respond in a truthful and legal manner.

This approach helped facilitate the work of participants in the February crisis communications workshop, and these activities will be continued at two additional workshops around the state this year (Central Florida in May, South Florida in September).

How a city reacts to a crisis, through its elected and executive leadership, can shape its future and its image for years to come. By acting with careful consideration and strong strategies, local leaders can take control of a negative situation and use it to positively change a situation for their citizens. By preparing ahead of time and reacting properly in the moment, Florida city leaders can continue to effectively protect both their citizens and the city's brand, safeguarding both for years to come.

Ron Sachs is president & CEO of Sachs Media Group. 



In a fast-paced, media-driven world, even a minor controversy can quickly escalate into a major crisis. The Florida League of Cities has partnered with Sachs Media Group, experts in public relations and crisis communications, to provide **FLCityGuard**, a new service to help cities deal with the inevitable communications crisis. The training is free to elected officials and staff of FLC member cities.

**FLCITYGUARD.COM**

The website – **FLCityGuard.com** – is brimming with articles and video examples designed to help cities plan, prepare for, and respond to any communications crisis. Article topics range from tips for building relationships with the media before a crisis . . . to the power of social media during a crisis . . . to do's and don'ts of crisis communications.

Accessing the website requires login credentials. Use this formula:

**Username:** (enter the name of your city, ex. Port St Joe)

**Password:** (enter flc followed by your city hall zip code, ex. flc32399)

For assistance logging in, contact Jenna Tala at [Jtala@flcities.com](mailto:Jtala@flcities.com).

## Crisis Communications Workshops

At daylong training exercises, FLC members participate in a crisis simulation led by Sachs Media Group. This hands-on training prepares members to effectively communicate with the media and key audiences when bad news breaks.

**UPCOMING WORKSHOPS**

**May 27 – Lake Mary**

**September 8 – Fort Lauderdale**

## Webinars

One-hour educational webinars offer information about different crisis-related topics, such as messaging or how to effectively use social media during a crisis. These webinars provide tips for handling tough questions and tough situations.

**UPCOMING WEBINARS**

**April 15 and June 24 – The Do's and Don'ts of Managing a Crisis Online**

**July 28 and September 15 – How to Create a Crisis Plan**

 **floridaleagueofcities.com** for more information, or contact Jenna Tala at the Florida League of Cities at (850) 222-9684 or [jtala@flcities.com](mailto:jtala@flcities.com).