

# Crisis Communication Plan

**for the N.C. Cooperative Extension Service**  
 (adapted from Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service)

## Purpose

This plan outlines procedures for collecting and conveying information to the public during or immediately following an emergency or crisis. How communication is handled in the first few hours and days during a crisis is critically important in terms of maintaining credibility and confidence with the public.

## Crisis

A crisis is defined as a significant event—natural, accidental or intended—that prompts significant, often sustained, news coverage and public scrutiny and potentially could cause harm to Cooperative Extension’s image or reputation—or both. A crisis could be precipitated by an emergency (see below) or some other event of a catastrophic or controversial nature. Examples of the latter are civil disturbances, political controversies or employee misconduct, and potential partners may include: emergency management team, health department, commodity or grower groups, schools, research stations or others involved in dealing with the emergency locally.

## Emergency

An emergency is defined as fire, explosion, tornado, criminal act resulting in injury or severe property damage, or other events where police, fire, emergency medical, animal health or homeland security personnel are involved. When an emergency occurs, Extension personnel are urged to contact 911 and ensure the safety of anyone who has been harmed.

**Note:** *An emergency could, but will not always, lead to crisis.*

## Controversial Issue

A controversial issue is an issue on which people hold conflicting views. Often, Cooperative Extension professionals in counties and on campus are called on by news media to comment on such issues, and they are also called upon to comment on crises in other states and locations. In these cases, the Issues Management Plan (and not this Crisis Communication plan) applies.

## Assumptions

During a crisis, much of what the public learns about the event is through news media. Negative news coverage can potentially damage an organization’s reputation; however, a crisis also offers an opportunity to demonstrate excellence in response and accountability and to communicate desired messages.

## Crisis Communication Team

At the onset of a crisis, the State Extension Director will appoint a Crisis Communication Team (CCT) that includes at least one member from Communication Services, one from Extension Information Technology and one from the county or department experiencing the crisis. The CCT will evaluate the crisis and, if appropriate, immediately activate a crisis Web page and crisis hotline for media inquiries. All media inquiries will receive a response and be logged.

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*(CommServ member)*

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*(Extension IT member)*

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*(County/Dept. representative)*

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## **Crisis Prevention**

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Program Leaders, Department Heads, Department Extension Leaders, District Extension Directors and County Extension Directors will maintain regular contact with the Director and also with Communication Services to advise them of developing issues within Cooperative Extension that potentially could escalate and lead to a crisis. The Director or designee will determine when it is appropriate to notify the Dean of the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences or higher level university officials. Communication Services will determine when it is appropriate to notify University News Services.

## **Maintain Emergency Contacts**

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The crisis communications plan for county centers and departments should be kept in a notebook where employees can access it if the need arises. A staff member in each unit should be responsible for updating employees' personal contact information annually and including it in the notebook. In addition, someone should be responsible for compiling office and after-hours contact information for potential local partners in the event of a crisis. Someone at the state level will provide counties with personal contact information for key state administrators and update the information annually. Personal contact information should be considered privileged information and used only in the event of a crisis (Note: Contact sheet provided).

## **Public Comments Policy**

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Part of this plan's purpose is to ensure that the appropriate person or persons represent and speak on behalf of the Cooperative Extension Service during a crisis. Extension employees are discouraged from speaking to the media during a crisis without clearing it with the Director or the Head of Communication Services.

## **Expansion of Concepts**

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### *Temporary Spokesperson*

The temporary spokesperson, typically an Extension administrator, makes initial comments to the news media. This person may or may not be designated the permanent spokesperson.

### *Permanent Spokesperson*

The permanent spokesperson will be approved by the Director or designee in consultation with Communication Services. This person ideally will have good communication skills, high familiarity with facts related to the crisis, strong professional credentials and the ability to remain calm under pressure.

### *Web site*

The crisis Web site will be prepared generically in advance of any crisis and will be activated by the CCT in consultation with the Director's office. Extension Information Technology will coordinate with the CCT to produce content and maintain the Web site in a timely manner.

### *Logging media inquiries*

An existing phone number for Cooperative Extension will be designated for incoming media calls. A secondary number may also be established for incoming calls from the public. All calls will be responded to and will be logged with name of caller, caller's organization or business, date and time of call, nature of request (questions, request for interview, etc.). The date, time and nature of Extension's response also will be logged (Note: log sheets provided).

## **Internal Communications**

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The Crisis Communication Team (CCT) will regularly brief the Director and other appropriate administrators during the crisis. To reduce rumors, negative speculations and unwarranted concerns, the CCT will place a high priority on communicating to internal audiences. In consultation with the Director, decisions will be made on how best to communicate information about the crisis to college employees on campus and in other Extension offices throughout the state.

## **Procedures Following the Crisis**

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Communication Services will document news coverage surrounding the crisis, with help from field faculty when the crisis takes place away from Raleigh. When the crisis is over, documentation will be given to the CCT in order to evaluate the overall success of the crisis management effort. The CCT will then prepare and submit a crisis evaluation report to the Director.

## **Crisis Response**

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1. Employee first encountering an emergency should immediately call 911 and, if safe and reasonable, provide comfort to the injured but not move them. On campus, University Police should be notified immediately.
2. Employee encountering an event should contact a supervisor immediately. Calling should not stop until a supervisor is successfully reached. After-hours numbers for key county Extension staff and departmental employees and for key state administrators will be included in the crisis communication plan and updated annually. This contact information also will be shared with important county partners.
3. Employee should also contact a Communication Services specialist. Calling should continue until a CommServ person is reached. Contact information is included in this plan.
4. Employee is asked to refer news media questions to Extension administration or communications officials.
5. Contacted supervisor should immediately call the Director of Cooperative Extension or a Program Leader if the Director not available.
6. For non-emergency events (disturbances, misconduct, controversies), supervisors should notify the Director or Program Leader promptly.
7. Director or Program Leader will notify the Dean, University Chancellor or Provost or other appropriate university official. At this time the situation will be evaluated to determine if a crisis response is warranted. If warranted, the Director will designate a temporary spokesperson. (*Note: Permanent spokesperson will be designated by the Director in consultation with Communication Services*).
8. If a crisis response is warranted, the Director will immediately appoint a Crisis Communication Team (CCT) including at least one member from Communication Services, one from Extension Information Technology and one from the county or department experiencing the crisis.
9. **Crisis Communication Team (CCT)** will evaluate crisis and, if appropriate, immediately activate a crisis Web page and crisis hotline for media inquiries. All media inquiries will receive a response and be logged.
10. In consultation with the Director or designee and Communication Services officials, the CCT may consider organizing a news conference within 24 hours of the start of the crisis and offer follow-up briefings, as needed.

