

Coronavirus (COVID-19) Crisis Communication Best Practices for Nonprofits

Introduction

An outbreak of the coronavirus acute respiratory disease (Novel Coronavirus 2019-nCoV/ COVID-19) was first detected in mid-December, 2019 and is spreading rapidly throughout the world.

The disease has the potential to significantly impact nonprofit organizations of all types. It is critical for organization to establish clear lines of communications with their employees, volunteers, program participants and communities. The following checklist is provided to help organizations identify key communications best practices and actions surrounding coronavirus.

We're here to help

Contact Prosper Strategies for support in developing your crisis response and in organizing, preparing and implementing your crisis communication plan. Prosper's communication consultants are prepared to help you develop and implement your plan.

Assess Your Risks

How you respond to and communicate about the coronavirus will depend on your nonprofit's level and type of risk. Do you work directly with at-risk populations like the elderly or those with pre-existing conditions? If so, your response should first focus on mitigating their risk of exposure and negative outcomes. Even if your organization doesn't work with at-risk populations, you'll need to think through risks of exposure to employees, volunteers and program participants should someone become exposed, fall ill or test positive for the virus, and the risk that upcoming events or large gatherings might pose. Outline all the potential scenarios your nonprofit could face, from basic fear or confusion among stakeholders, to an outbreak among your staff or program participants.

Prepare Communications Strategies

Once you've assessed your risks, waste no time moving on to developing a communications strategy for each potential scenario:

- **Create an internal communication plan** – a process for reaching employees, volunteers, board members and others through combinations of emails, intranet postings, fliers, posters, leadership talking points, FAQs, video calls and more. The plan should identify simple key messages, a reliable process and the vehicles for providing continual updates and collecting feedback from internal stakeholders.
- **Create an external communication plan** – a process for reaching external stakeholders such as program participants, local community members and the media via similar channels to the ones you used in your internal plan.

Send a Clear Message to Stakeholders

The longer you wait to communicate with your stakeholders, the more likely confusion and panic are to set in. Even as you're still assessing your risks and preparing your communication strategy, don't delay in getting an initial message out to your staff and community. Then, continue to touch base often. As you do, keep the following best practices in mind:

- **State the facts:** Connect your stakeholders to timely, accurate information from CDC, WHO, your State and County Health Departments, and your [state nonprofit association](#). Provide clear instructions about what an employee, volunteer, program participant or other stakeholder should do if they suspect they have been exposed to COVID-19.
- **Outline the steps the organization is taking on behalf of its stakeholders:** Communicate the facts from authoritative resources on how coronavirus is spread and how to avoid infection. Clearly articulate and communicate decisive preventive actions your organization is taking to avert or contain transmission of the disease as soon as decisions have been made.
- **Promote steps that employees and volunteers can take at work:** Use posters, memos, emails, intranet postings, supervisor talking points, FAQs, etc. to promote preventive actions employees can take (hygiene and avoidance) –see WHO and CDC recommendations.
- **Describe the impact on the organization:** Describe the potential impact of an outbreak on your operations, services, travel, program participants, community members, revenues, etc., so stakeholders can plan (and know how to support you) accordingly.
- **Summarize your organization's policies/positions for employees:** To avoid confusion and rumor proliferation among employees, clearly describe health plan coverage options (preventive and treatment), and policies around attendance, paid time off, work-from-home/telecommuting, payroll continuation, travel, and group meetings.
- **If services will be disrupted, explain why and offer alternatives:** If you have to close a location or change your method for delivering services, explain why (again using authoritative sources) and aim to offer alternative methods for people to access the care or resources they need.
- **Make your event plans clear:** If you have an upcoming conference, event, or major gathering, you may need to consider canceling or postponing it due to the coronavirus outbreak. Even if you haven't made a decision yet, make your stakeholders aware that you are carefully considering your options and will share more information as soon as it is available.