

Last reviewed by Kenny Weigandt on 5/13/24

Crisis Communication Overview:

This plan is intended to guide Willamalane in the event of a crisis. Separate from the district's Emergency Response Plan, this Crisis Communications Plan provides a quick reference roadmap to help the district effectively identify and monitor organizational threats, assemble a Crisis Communications Team, and quickly and confidently disseminate critical information to the media, the general public, employees and other key stakeholders.

Having an effective communications plan during a crisis can:

- Minimize reputation damage. A quick, strategic response keeps falsehoods and speculation from spreading on social media.
- Protect and enhance the district's reputation by showcasing strong, caring, and responsive leadership.
- Establish (or restore) Willamalane's credibility among media and the public by proactively delivering honest, forthright information.
- Demonstrating that the district is acting appropriately in the public interest will instill and maintain the confidence of public stakeholders and employees.

What constitutes a crisis?

This plan was designed to apply to every crisis. For this plan, a crisis is defined as any media/public interest development that could negatively affect Willamalane's reputation. This includes life-threatening situations, other emergencies, and any threat or perceived threat to the district's reputation.

A strategic response to any crisis can do more than just protect an organization; it can have a positive impact by demonstrating leadership, accountability, preparation, and integrity.

In a life-threatening situation, Crisis Communications Team members will prioritize the safety of patrons and employees and their own safety. Communications activities will begin after the safety of all guests and employees is assured.

Potential risk and event examples

This plan outlines potential crises into two categories:

Emergency response: In an emergency, employees should respond as directed in the Emergency Response Plan and follow the accompanying phone tree. In a life-threatening emergency, employees should always start by calling 9-1-1. Next, or in all other situations, employees should notify their direct supervisor or the supervisor on call as appropriate. If the



supervisor deems escalation needed, the supervisor will call the Program Manager and Community Engagement Supervisor. The Community Engagement Supervisor will convene the Crisis Communications Response Team to determine appropriate action.

Types of emergencies include:

- Accidents involving an employee or agency vehicle
- Employee or patron injury or attack
- Robbery
- Medical event
- Active shooter
- Cyber attack
- Natural disasters, including weather events
- Cougar sighting or similar

Reputation management: A “reputation management” crisis can originate anywhere, including through media reports and social media channels. It can also be an internal reputation management crisis. The Community Engagement team is responsible for monitoring Willamalane’s reputation online, but every employee should notify the team if they believe negative public sentiment could pose a credible threat to the district’s reputation.

Types of reputation emergencies include:

- Member of Willamalane Management Team or Board member has a scandal
- Employee or volunteer accused of criminal activity on or off the job
- Protest or demonstration
- Public denunciation
- Escalated patron or community complaints related to action or policy at Willamalane
- Payroll issue

Responding to a crisis

Willamalane will always strive to proactively communicate with stakeholders, employees, community members, and the media. Clear, transparent, and prompt communication builds trust, demonstrates effective leadership, and shows concern for stakeholders. The district is also likely to incur less reputational damage when proactively reporting news of a potential crisis.

General sample statements are available at the end of this document or in separate procedures if noted above.

Crisis Action Plan

Assemble the Crisis Communication Response Team

When a crisis communications response is required, the Crisis Communications Response Team may convene to gather information and prepare an official response.

The Community Engagement and Public Relations Supervisor will serve as the Crisis Communications Response Team leader and will be responsible for convening the Crisis Communication Response Team. The Community Engagement Program Manager will serve if the Community Engagement and Public Relations Supervisor is unavailable. If both are unavailable, the Superintendent will appoint these duties or serve as the Crisis Communications Response Team leader. Team members should always have their phones and be available to ensure effective two-way communication. Depending on the time and day, locations, and severity of the crisis, the method of communication should be discussed and finalized to determine if texting, emails, or phone calls are most appropriate.

The Crisis Communications Response Team will include Community Engagement and the Executive Director.

Executive Director's office

- Michael Wargo, Executive Director
 - Cell: 458.205.9929

Executive Director's role:

- Alert the Community Engagement team (in case they haven't already been alerted) and consult with them regarding action items
- Serve as the primary figurehead for media interviews and public statements. Community Engagement will usually craft these statements but will utilize the spokesperson quoted by the executive director.

Community Engagement

- Kenny Weigandt, Community Engagement Director
 - Cell: 541.968.5527
- Whitney Hoshaw, Marketing and Communications Manager
 - Cell: 503.702.0854

Community Engagement's role:

- Craft media communication and serve as the point of information for all media inquiries
- Utilize marketing channels (social media, reach screens, website, etc.) to alert patrons of the incident
- Alert the Willamalane Management Team of the issue
- Alert other internal stakeholders of the incident
- Prepare and deliver talking points for front-line staff

Connect with stakeholders

Once this Crisis Communications Response Team has convened, we will include other relevant stakeholders in frequent updates for additional counsel and to assist with response strategies. The management team will always receive communication about a crisis or potential crisis event.

Other management team members

- Jase Newton, Recreation Services Director
 - Cell: 541.270.0396
- Betty Nielsen, CFO
 - Cell: 541.520.5139
- Eric Adams, Parks, Planning, and Facilities Director
 - Cell: 541.971.2456
- Melissa Taxara, Human Resources Director
 - Cell: 541.514.3102
- Kenny Weigandt, Community Engagement Director
 - Cell: 541.968.5527

The Crisis Communications Response Team will alert, or designate others to alert, other stakeholders as needed, and these may include:

Other department leads as stakeholders for relevant events

- **Parks**
 - Alan Cline, Park Ranger
- **Pools**– WPSC, Splash!, or Willamalane Park
 - Brandon Lemke, Aquatics Program Manager
- **Facilities**
 - Tracy Kribs, Program Manager, Event & Program Operations – Adult Activity Center, Bob Keefer Center, Les Schwab Sports Park
 - Mert Mansur, Planning, and Facilities Program Manager – Any building
- **Events** – any special event or volunteer incident
 - Tracy Kribs, Program Manager, Event & Program Operations
- **Recreation** – any athletic or recreational activity
 - David Kiefer, Program Manager, Recreation
- **Technology** – technology-related
 - Betty Nielsen - CFO
- **Front line support** – as FYI, include sample responses/talking points
 - Kevin Suiter, Customer Service Program Manager

The role of other stakeholders will depend on the situation. These stakeholders should be prepared to collaborate with the Crisis Communications Response team as needed during events. Once contacted, they will remain stakeholders throughout the event.

Chain of command/roles

Depending on the situation, the Crisis Communication Response Team may need additional support or to assign stakeholders and leads to the following categories:

- Legal counsel – Management team to assist
- Gathering information – Stakeholders and Crisis Communication Response Team
- Engaging trusted advisors – Likely these are stakeholders but may include other PIOs or outside community stakeholders
- Monitoring media coverage/suspend scheduled social posts – Community Engagement
- Logging all incoming inquiries – Front desk, Community Engagement
- Draft hold statement and key messages – Crisis Communications Response Team
- Advocating for employees – Crisis Communication Response Team, stakeholders
- Assembling/assisting media on site – Crisis Communication Response Team, Community Engagement
- Speaking to the media – Crisis Communication Response Team may include others if appropriate. No one should talk to the press without consulting and redirecting them to the Crisis Communication Response Team.
 - [Review COM-04 - Media and Public Relations Policy](#)

Procedure:

Timeliness of response – the following steps should be taken within one hour.

Consider these steps and remember that not all situations will warrant each.

Phase 1: Response

1. Assemble the Crisis Communications Response Team
2. Identify stakeholders and assign critical roles
3. Notify legal counsel (and other vital advisors as needed)
4. Gather and log all relevant information to help identify and assess the crisis
5. Turn off scheduled social media posts
6. Notify staff of the issue (in an emergency or life-threatening situation they likely will have already been notified as part of the emergency response)
7. Brief public acknowledgment (likely with a hold statement)
8. Reconvene to understand the business impact
9. Monitor and evaluate the emotional health of employees (stakeholders, team leads, HR)
10. Identify a media gathering

11. Develop a hold statement – examples are provided on the following pages.
12. Deliver hold statement via appropriate channels

Phase 2: Monitoring

13. Monitor reactions
14. Brainstorm a list of potential public, media, and staff questions.
15. Prepare talking points, key messages, FAQs, etc.
16. Distribute talking points to stakeholders
17. Response to media inquiries and notify media
18. Notify stakeholders

Phase 3: Review

19. Evaluate how the crisis was handled. Did the Crisis Response Team work efficiently? Should something be changed in crisis communications in the future?
20. Determine what triggered the crisis and what should be done to avoid the same kind of crisis.

Statement examples

Willamalane will always strive to communicate proactively with stakeholders, employees, community members, and the media. Clear, transparent, and prompt communication builds trust, demonstrates effective leadership, and shows concern for stakeholders. When releasing information to the media, the statement should stick to the facts.

The district is also likely to incur less reputational damage when proactively reporting news of a potential crisis.

Remember, the public's immediate assessment of an agency in crisis is based on these four factors of earning trust and credibility:

- Empathy and caring (usually assessed within the first 30 seconds).
- Competence, expertise, and readiness.
- Honesty and openness.

- Dedication and commitment.

Note: If an employee or patron is involved in a fatal incident or accident, family members or the next of kin should be contacted before any statement is released to the media. This contact is likely to come from the emergency department called and should not be from a Willamalane representative if at all possible.

Generic hold statement:

In almost all crises, a media statement should be prepared for the spokesperson to handle media inquiries. If a response needs to be made before a formal statement is ready, the spokesperson can simply make a general statement to indicate the stage of the process, such as:

"We are in the process of gathering facts to determine precisely what has occurred. We will provide more information as it becomes available."

The statement above also is an acceptable message for staff to deliver.

Generic staff response statement:

A staff response statement may be necessary for a crisis to be visible to patrons or the public, significantly if panic or concerns are rising with patrons involved. In a case like this, staff should reference the facts, lean on the process established, and reassure the patron the concern is heard:

*"I understand that you are concerned, and I am glad you **came to/trusted** us with this situation. Willamalane has a [procedure being followed: emergency response plan, phone tree, etc.]. We are following this procedure, **and I can assure you that it places patron and staff safety above all.** When we have more information, we will share it as soon as possible. Can I take down your name and best contact phone number so I can follow up with you?"*

- Ensure that the concern for the patron and safety comes first.
- Do your best to make the patron feel heard without apologizing or acknowledging there is a confirmed problem.
- Lean on the procedure being followed to communicate that we have a plan and that you are following the steps outlined.
- Communicate that we are working together and present a united effort. Do not place blame on another Willamalane employee, department, process, or facility.

- Get information and name for further contact. Include how and when they should expect a follow-up.

More detailed initial message:

A more detailed “standby statement” can be used if some facts are available. In this type of statement, stick to the facts. Do not speculate or give opinions.

Below is a statement for a medical event in pools:

“At (time/date), a patron was observed in the water needing assistance. Lifeguards provided first aid at the scene, and the person was transported to (name of hospital) for further observation and treatment. For a status report on the patient, please contact the hospital for more information.”

Below is a statement from a volunteer who has been accused of wrongdoing:

“We consider this a serious matter and fully cooperate with all parties involved (staff, families, law enforcement, DHS, etc.) Because this matter is still under investigation, we cannot comment directly on this incident. We take this issue very seriously and will do all that is required and asked by the investigators to assist in the investigation. We aim to ensure community members feel safe while participating in our programs. Should additional information be available, we will contact you immediately. There is nothing else we can provide add at this time.”

Sample statements for specific events:

Large-scale event, generic statement DRAFT ONLY.

At (X:00 PM/AM/date), a (fire, earthquake, or other disaster) occurred at the (location of office), resulting in (any physical injuries to personnel) and damage to (equipment, data, etc.)

(XX) agency personnel (were injured//or//no injuries were reported). The injured staff members were given first aid and transported to area hospitals for further observation and treatment. A senior manager from the (X office/ X agency) accompanied the injured to the hospital, and we are awaiting more information from them.

The (disaster) (did or did not) damage (X) agency data being collected for the (name of survey/ census). We have several controls in place to ensure the security and safety of all information. (State or summarize policies or security practices.)

We will provide additional information about the injured and the extent of the damage when it becomes available.



We will meet with you at (X:00 PM/AM/date) at this location to update you on the situation.