TEXAS CASA
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN

Crisis Communications & Risk Management for CASA Programs

Texas CASA Mission

The mission of Texas CASA is to support local CASA volunteer advocacy programs and to advocate for effective public policy for children and families in the child protection system.

Thank you to those who contributed to the creation of this guide:

Writer and Graphic Designer:Callie Langford, Eller Group

Vicki Spriggs, Texas CASA CEO

Abe Louise Young, Texas CASA Communications

Deedra Baker, Texas CASA Network Services

Caitlyn Perdue, Texas CASA Communications

Emma Ledford, Texas CASA Communications

Steve Raich, Texas CASA Administration

Tamea Byrd, Texas CASA Grants

Sample Crisis Communications & Management Plan used with permission from CASA of Travis County

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STRENGTHENING THE VOICES OF CASA STATEWIDE

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Goals of this Guidebook

This guidebook is focused on three main goals for your CASA program to achieve in advance of a crisis:

1. Assess for weak spots in your organization and work to fix them, with the goal of protecting the children and community you serve and hopefully preventing many of the potential crises a CASA program can face.
2. Put a highly effective crisis team and written plan in place so that when a crisis occurs, you feel prepared and can respond to the situation in a calm, rational way with strong decision-making.
3. Build a durable, transparent reputation within your community that will help you to weather almost any storm.

This guidebook is *not* a crisis communications plan. Your plan needs to be concise and tactical, something you and others can follow even under stress. We recommend that before you read the guidebook in full, you read the Sample Crisis Communications Plan on page 27. The plan is provided as an example you may base your own plan on, should you wish to.

If you achieve these three goals and have a strong, clear plan, you will be able to weather the inevitable crisis that occurs for your program very well.

How to Identify & Plan for a Crisis

First of all, what is a crisis?

A crisis has been defined as "an intense, unexpected and unstable state that disrupts normal operations and risks highly undesirable outcomes that require extraordinary measures in order to restore stability."

This is a strong definition, and it describes what we all want to avoid. Additionally, there may be countless smaller crisis moments in a nonprofit organization like CASA that works with vulnerable children and large volunteer populations, two groups of people with high rates of unpredictability.

As you will see in the sample crisis communications plan on page 27, your fellow program, CASA of Travis County, defines a crisis as "any occurrence that threatens the public reputation or immediate financial integrity of CASA… or that may create a situation of legal liability to the organization or its directors or officers." In this definition, the normal state of operations doesn't have to be disrupted to be still considered a crisis. The steps we take to recover may be less-than-extraordinary measures, but they will still be vital.

Incidents happen all the time in the child welfare world, and not every incident merits a crisis response. Identifying an incident as a crisis comes down to:

- The level of severity
- Public knowledge of and interest in the incident
- A unique set of scenarios—distinct to a specific location, time, current world circumstance, or simply what's trending on social media—that may take an incident to a higher level of critical awareness
- A gut instinct from your leadership that an incident may have greater repercussions

Keep in mind that it doesn't require a reporter to reveal an organization in crisis. Social media and the ability for individuals to produce and disseminate content (factual or not) means that more incidents have the potential to become full-blown public crises now. Social media crises may need to be responded to in as serious a manner as you would to a news publication.

So, how do we plan for a crisis?

Planning for a crisis is all about assuming the worst-case scenario will occur and prepping to respond to all versions of that. It's also accomplishing that with a calm, rational demeanor, without panic or reactivity that could lead to poor decision-making.

Having a crisis management team and a written, well-organized plan in place will allow your organization to respond quickly and appropriately, no matter how surprising the crisis incident may be. With the depth and breadth of crises that can occur in the CASA world, one of them is bound to surprise you.

Issues, Scenario Planning & Risk Assessment

It would be impossible to plan for or prevent every crisis that could someday occur. However, there are a handful of likely scenarios that a CASA program could encounter. Bolstering your organization to protect against these scenarios is the best way to avoid having to use your crisis communications plan to its fullest extent. And while we cannot protect against every issue below, we can be prepared to handle them, versus allowing shock or surprise to derail an appropriate response.

Volunteer/Staff Screening & Supervision to Prevent Abuse

The worst nightmare for a CASA program is, of course, a volunteer or staff member harming a child (mentally, physically or sexually). The single greatest thing CASA programs can do to protect against this is to have a rigorous set of screening processes and supervision policies that work to weed out potential predators or anyone who may not have a child's best interest at heart.

Screening processes and background checks are fallible though, so if you do end up in a situation where someone has slipped in through the cracks and harmed a child, you (and the public) will want to know that you did absolutely everything you could to prevent that. Being under scrutiny without strong policies and processes to stand on will be hugely detrimental to your organization.

Assessment

- How often do you update your screening process and background check policies?
    - When was the last time you researched/implemented new components of this process to make sure it's fully modernized, taking advantage of all tools and information sources available to you, and in compliance with CASA standards and state law?
- How thorough is your interview process?
    - Do you include behavioral questions meant to highlight red flags in your interviews?
        - How well trained are your interviewers in what red flags might look like?
    - Do you have at least two interviewers in each screening appointment?
    - How many people does someone have to interact with before being approved to join the team as a volunteer/staff member?
- How thorough are your reference checks in terms of who you talk to and what questions you ask?
    - Are you talking to both personal and professional contacts? How many?
    - Are reference checks well documented and kept on file?
- How intensive is your supervision process once a volunteer is on a case?
- How often do volunteers have the chance to be alone with youth (e.g., on a visit, in the office, in a car, at an event, on a playground, etc.)?
- What open-door communication policies do you have in place that would easily allow someone to notify you if a volunteer acted in a concerning way?

- Do you clearly communicate, through policies and people, that illegal activity and/or harming a child will be immediately reported to authorities?
  - Is zero tolerance for abusing a child specifically stated in your policy?
  - Have you ever not acted on that when you should have?
- Overall, where are there gaps in your screening and supervision system that could allow a bad actor the access they need to harm a child?
  - Have you taken full advantage of Texas CASA's offerings around Praesidium Inc. training to help close these gaps?

This entire section can apply to volunteers or paid employees working on your team.

Volunteer Gone Rogue

This section covers a wide range of potential issues, from a volunteer crossing small boundaries to fully breaking with the CASA program's policies. Some of these are red flags for future behavioral issues, while others could have public repercussions immediately or in the long term.

Potential examples include:

- Volunteer bringing a child on their case to their house
- Volunteer deciding to adopt or serve as placement for a child on their case
- Volunteer dating a parent on a case
- Volunteer ignoring appropriate boundaries to spy/gather information on a family member
- Volunteer providing liquor to an underage youth
- Volunteer introducing the child to their friends or family members
- Volunteer insisting on attending the child's therapy sessions

Assessment

- How thorough are your policies for how volunteers are supposed to engage with and act on a case?
  - Is there any negative scenario you can hypothesize that hasn't been covered within the rules/policies?
- How clear are those policies, especially when it comes to what will mean immediate termination as a volunteer or potentially being reported to authorities (if severe)?
- How often do you update these policies?
  - How do you communicate policy updates to your volunteers/staff?
- How often do you require volunteers to review and sign off on/agree to these policies, especially after their initial training?
- How well-versed are your staff members on your policies so that they can be strong monitors as they supervise cases?
  - What systems do you have in place to document smaller, red flag activities that could indicate future, more problematic issues?
  - What systems are in place to ensure multiple team members review incidents?
  - What systems are in place for follow-up and action steps regarding incidents?
- Outside of written policies, how else do you communicate CASA's rules to your volunteers?

External Stakeholder Activities

This deals with a completely non-CASA-related activity coming to light in a negative way that could reflect poorly on your CASA program, such as someone connected to you committing a crime unrelated to your organization's work.

This could include any major stakeholder of the CASA community (board, staff, volunteer, major donor):

- Committing a crime that becomes publicly known
- Harming a child (not connected through a CASA program)
- Being accused of sexual assault/harassment
- Being accused of racist/discriminatory activities
- Being accused of financial mismanagement in a different organization

These scenarios are hard to predict and even harder to prevent. What's important here is to understand that something supposedly outside of the CASA world may reflect poorly upon your organization, depending upon the level of connection and influence this person has with your CASA program. If a situation like this occurs, it will be worthwhile to plan for the worst-case scenario by taking steps like the Situational Assessment from your crisis plan and developing response messaging in case your program becomes connected to the story or is asked for comment.

Youth Behavior

Unfortunately, due to severe mental health needs, high exposure to traumatic events, and often less-than-ideal mental health support, youth who spend time in the child welfare system may on occasion end up committing a severe criminal offense. Again, this is a situation you cannot prevent, but you will want to consider the possibility to be prepared in your response.

This situation becomes extra complicated by the fact that the youth we serve have our confidentiality, and we cannot identify a youth served by a CASA program. At the same time, if a youth in the child welfare system has committed a crime that reaches media attention, it's possible that the local CASA program may be called by media for comment, whether or not they think the youth might have been served by a CASA volunteer.

Data, Security & Breach of Confidentiality

Hacks, data breaches and ransomware attacks are regular headlines these days, and small nonprofits often have far less sophisticated security systems than many of the large companies who are often targeted. This has happened to organizations in our CASA network in Texas. CASA programs' access to extremely sensitive information about children and families, as well as volunteers and donors, means that we must take data integrity and security seriously.

Inaccurate data can threaten the public reputation of your CASA program as well as impact the formula upon which funding for your program is determined. Knowingly reporting false information/data that results in financial gain is fraud.

Starting Assessment

- Are those responsible for data input well trained on data management?
- How well do your policies address data management practices and accountability?
- What systems are in place to verify the accuracy of data?
- What systems are in place to correct data errors?

- Is there a staff member whose responsibilities include information and cybersecurity?
- Has any person involved with IT been appropriately screened and confidentiality assured?
- What are the strengths/weaknesses of your IT staff or external team?
- Do you feel they are aware of and concerned about data security?
- How often does your IT team suggest security updates or discuss latest security issues/trends with you?
- How well do the databases you use—for casework and/or donor management—keep up with compliance and security updates?
- What kind of access do third-party vendors working with your organization have to your system?
- How well do you educate your staff on cybersecurity and potential risks, especially with regards to how they handle suspicious emails?
- How do you manage remote access to your network?
- What are your staff/volunteer policies around secure passwords, multi-step authentication, etc.?
- What are your staff policies around physical document disposal?

The world of data security is incredibly complex, and these questions only skim the surface. It's recommended that you work with an information security specialist to do an in-depth risk assessment and ensure that your practices protect your organization and your stakeholders' private information to the fullest extent possible.

Financial Issues

Financial issues tend to be one of the more common types of crisis we hear about nonprofits experiencing. Situations include:

- Embezzlement of funds by a staff or board member
- Being called out for misuse of funds (perceived or actual), including executive salary
- Major funding loss threatening the nonprofit's existence

Assessment

- How much oversight does your Board have with regards to financials?
    - Do you have Treasurer oversight and reports in place?
    - Does your Board review financials on a monthly or quarterly basis?
- Do you perform monthly bank reconciliations for all bank accounts?
- Do you conduct an annual audit using independent auditors?
    - If the audit had findings, were these findings thoroughly addressed?
- Do you periodically change your independent auditor?
- Do you have a clean and clear chart of accounts to organize bookkeeping?
- How transparent are your grant program reports on how money is being spent to achieve program goals?
- Do you have dual-signature requirements on checks above certain amounts?
- How do you limit and monitor credit/debit card usage?
- Do you have clear policies for receipt documentation?
- How do you handle gift card donations and usage?
- Are there any public salaries, expenses or activities that are likely to draw criticism?
- How much do you have in reserves in case of financial emergency?
- How diversified is your funding?
    - How dependent are you on a single funding source or lone major donor?
- What are your policies for suspected or confirmed theft?
    - Who in leadership would be notified if embezzlement is suspected?
    - How will any suspicion of financial mismanagement will be investigated?
    - How will the suspected employee be barred from the program's documents and systems

during investigation?
  - When do you notify Texas CASA?
  - Will the organization press charges if embezzlement is confirmed?

Controversial Funding

One unique financial challenge that deserves extra attention deals with funding from controversial sources. This could be existing funding from someone (individual, corporation, foundation, etc.) who becomes recognized as controversial. An example of this would be the Sackler family and the numerous museums that cut ties with their funding in 2019 once their connection to the opioid crisis became apparent.

This could also be a new donor who wants to support your organization who is controversial and/or whose values don't align with your organization. Planned Parenthood turned down $500,000 from Tucker Max in 2012 due to his crude writing about women, which is a good example of this.

There may be times when deciding to say no to money will be crucial to avoid reputational harm, and your team may need to have these tough conversations.

Workplace & Event Safety

From active shooter events in the workplace to inclement weather challenges at an outdoor fundraising event to an unexpected pandemic shutting down in-person operations, there are numerous physical safety needs to take into consideration when trying to avoid crisis moments wherever groups of people are gathered.

This is especially crucial knowing that CASA programs work within a system where people often experience the greatest stressors of their lives, potentially with trauma histories that erode coping capabilities. On rare occasions, people personally involved in this system may react in threatening ways, and CASA programs should be prepared to support team members, volunteers and children to keep them safe.

Assessment

This list is not comprehensive and having your workplace and event safety protocols assessed by a safety expert is recommended.

- How accessible is your office to the public?
  - Can someone simply walk in or do they have to be allowed entry after speaking to a front desk team member?
  - Are visitors clearly visible to the front desk team member or do they have to let them in purely based on their spoken response?
- Do you have an active shooter plan for your office?
  - Are your staff members well-informed and/or practiced in the plan?
- What policies do you have in place to protect a staff member or volunteer who's threatened by a party on a case?
- Do you create specific safety plans and implementation teams for each event that you host in the community, complete with active shooter and inclement weather responses?
- Do you abide by all city/county health rules at events when it comes to food/drink service?
  - Do you follow all TABC guidelines for serving alcohol?
  - Do you work with reputable, licensed and insured caterers and bartenders?
- Have you used your experiences with the COVID-19 pandemic to develop or evolve policies around illness outbreaks?

Racism or Other Discriminatory Actions

CASA programs nationwide work within a child welfare world with a deep history of systemic racism. This means that diversity, equity and inclusion work are vital and highly pertinent to CASA as an evolving organization.

Being called out for racist or discriminatory actions doesn't require media attention to create a crisis. Social media attention alone can deeply harm your organization's reputation. Sometimes lack of action can be equally problematic. For example, numerous corporations and nonprofits were called out online for *not* saying anything during the summer 2020 protests after George Floyd's death.

Assessment

- What diversity, equity and inclusion plans do you have in place for your organization?
- Do you offer annual training for your staff and volunteers to recognize and work against biases in themselves and in the child welfare system?
- Do your staff, volunteers and board members represent the demographics of your community's population as well as the children and families served by your CASA program?
  - Does your leadership reflect the demographics of the community you serve?
  - Is that something you're actively working to improve upon?
- What equal opportunity policies do you have in place around hiring and volunteer recruitment?
- What are your policies around addressing current events via your social media?
- How equipped and/or educated is your leadership and communications staff on anti-racism issues and how to discuss them in meaningful, respectful ways?
- Do your policies address how to investigate allegations of inappropriate or racist statements made by a staff member or volunteer?

None of these items will necessarily keep you from facing this potential issue, but being an organization that's already actively improving in these areas will support the community you serve, and offer a better place from which to start the conversation.

Court Relationships

Relationships with the court system and judges can make or break a CASA program's ability to affect change in children's lives. These relationships can also affect your organization's ability to grow and flourish.

Assessment

- What kind of relationship do you have with your current judges?
  - How well/often do you communicate with them?
  - Do you biannually review a Memorandum of Understanding with your court(s)?
  - Do you recognize your judge(s) for their service to children and families?

    - Do you involve the court in pre-service training and/or swearing in of new advocates?
    - Are they invited to CASA events?
- Are you cultivating relationships with potential future judges?
    - Are you in the conversation and aware of who might be moving into judicial roles in the future?
- Do you ever survey your judges and/or other child welfare stakeholders for feedback?
    - Do you regularly seek input in other ways?
- How do you incorporate their feedback into your program's operations and practices?

In addition to judges, your relationships with local Child Protective Services leadership and caseworkers, attorneys, and other child welfare stakeholders will play a role in how your organization is viewed. You will want to cultivate respectful, communicative relationships that can withstand the test of disagreements on individual case outcomes.

Disgruntled Employee

The issue of a disgruntled employee will most likely become public via social media or review websites like Glassdoor (if the situation is serious enough to warrant media attention, you'll most likely want to bring in outside public relations support). Sometimes a crisis could be an immediate flurry of posts you have to respond to, or it could be a long-term buildup of bad reviews that make hiring difficult. Termination of an employee could create backlash from stakeholders within the child welfare system.

There will always be people unhappy with their workplace, but if you have fair, respectful practices in place, you will be less likely to face public scrutiny (and more ready to respond to it).

Assessment

- Do you have a dedicated Human Resources staff member working on employment issues, or a capable person tasked with these job duties?
- How often do you survey your employees around workplace satisfaction?
- Do you have open lines of communication in your office allowing feedback to flow "from the ground up" to your leadership?
- When is the last time you refreshed your:
    - Hiring practices?
    - Anti-discrimination policies?
    - Performance improvement and termination procedures?
    - Social media policies?
- What depth of documentation do you put in place when an employee has to be let go?
- What's your process for removing access to data, systems, and social media channels when an employee no longer works with you?
- Do you complete exit interviews with employees?
- Are you monitoring your profile on employee review sites like Glassdoor?
    - What's your response policy when bad reviews are left?
    - What's your response policy to social media posts?

The Complete Surprise Crisis!

You can prepare for every crisis scenario referenced above and still, something out of the blue is likely to surprise you. Something completely unexpected might be the exact issue that becomes a full-on public crisis.

Your team will first respond with incredulous statements such as:

- "Why on earth would they think that was a good idea?"
- "Did they not listen at all during training?
- "I never would have believed something like this could happen!"

And after your team has moved past the ranting stage, get to work using your crisis plan and find the best way to respond to this incident. Texas CASA is here to support you, so don't hesitate to reach out.

Preparing to Deal with a Crisis

Essential Rules to Live by During a Crisis

- Be conscientious about how you communicate
  - Never write something in an email that you'd be unhappy about if it were forwarded to a reporter
- Move with urgency but never carelessness
- Be sensitive to the severity of the incident and take things seriously
- Create a mindset and process to learn and change practices as a result of each incident
- Just because an attorney says you can't talk about it, doesn't mean you shouldn't address it
  - It's important to balance the potential for reputational damage with recommendations from your attorney
- Document everything to stay organized during the event and for historical learning

Having a Plan in Place

It is a requirement of National CASA and Texas CASA Standards that all local programs have a written crisis communications plan in place.

The plan will detail the best possible way to prepare for a real-life crisis scenario.

It's recommended that this plan be:

- A living document that gets updated any time you have gone through a crisis situation (include what was missing that would have helped) or gain new knowledge or tactics
  - Save a new, dated copy each time you update your plan
- A functional, clear document that's easy for any crisis team member to follow and execute
- Backed up by updated information and resources
  - If the crisis plan requires the Development Director to keep a list of grantors' contact information for notification, that list needs to be refreshed regularly as well
- Accessible to key team members even if power/Internet is out or the office cannot be accessed (this means having updated, printed copies at all team members' homes)

The sample Crisis Communications & Management Plan from CASA of Travis County on page 27 can be modeled from to build or update your local crisis plan.

Determining Your Crisis Team

Your crisis management team* should be a small but powerful group of people who can make informed decisions around how your organization should respond to a crisis situation. If this group is too small, you may not have enough perspective and input to consider all outcomes. If too big, you may experience information leaks and/or the situation of having "too many cooks in the kitchen" preventing you from making decisions and moving forward.

Most likely your crisis team will consist of:

- Executive Director/CEO
- Program Director
- Staff member or board member, whoever handles communications/media in your organization

You will want to identify at least two members of this team to serve as potential spokespeople if this crisis hits the media or reaches public awareness in some way. You will learn more about how to prepare these team members for the media in the "Practice Your Media Skills" section on page 12.

Depending upon the size of your CASA organization, you may want your Board Chair/President (or a board member with pertinent skills) to serve on this team. For example, if you don't have a dedicated communications/development/outreach team member, it could be worth bringing in a board member with relevant experience/knowledge to support your Executive Director and Program Director in the efforts needed around crisis management.

In case of a crisis team member being involved in creating the crisis (e.g., Executive Director embezzled funds), you might select backup crisis team members to step into the role. Crisis team members could be employees, board members, a pro-bono attorney, or even a respected community member ("friend of CASA") with appropriate screening, training and confidentiality agreements.

**Knowing that certain roles serve on this team may be something you factor into your hiring processes or board recruitment since you will want calm, capable, and quick-acting team members who can think through problems from all angles, scenario plan, assess potential repercussions, etc.*

Knowing When to Expand Your Team

Not every scenario should be handled entirely by your internal crisis team. There will be times when bringing in an outside crisis communications specialist is vital to your organization.

A clear instance of this would be if a volunteer or staff member has been accused of harming a child in any way. When you're dealing with the multiple reputational and legal ramifications of an incident this serious, having outside, professional guidance and perspective could help tremendously.

In other situations, ask yourself the following questions:

- Would having someone with an external, unbiased perspective be useful in developing our response?
- Are other organizational needs making it difficult for our internal team to fully focus on handling this crisis in the rational manner it deserves?
- Do we need greater knowledge of the local media market than we currently have?
- Do we feel confident in prepping to communicate with the media and public about this situation?

In the circumstance of a grievous crisis, Texas CASA may be able to support you in hiring and/or paying for external crisis communications support.

Handling the Media

No Comment is Not Okay

"No comment" is an admission of guilt in the media world. You have to be willing to respond in some way, though initial responses might be:

- We're preparing a statement on this issue now and will have it to you very soon.
- We don't have an answer to that at this moment, but we will reach out as soon as we do.
- We are unable to speak on that issue at this time due to the ongoing legal case.
- We are unable to speak on that issue due to confidentiality requirements.

Practice Your Media Skills

A crisis is not the first time you want your Executive Director or Board President to step in front of a camera. Ideally, the team members identified as potential spokespeople will have experience communicating with reporters already. Whether or not they do, find ways to practice well before a crisis happens.

Try to get your spokespeople doing regular media opportunities throughout the year, so that they'll have confidence and a strong rapport with your local reporters before a crisis situation occurs.

Seek out and attend media trainings where on-camera interviews are practiced, especially trainings devoted to crisis communications. If your spokespeople have the chance to practice high-pressure, "gotcha" interviews, they will be better equipped to stay focused on key messages and avoid saying the wrong thing during an actual crisis.

Prepare some scripted responses in advance that can be practiced by team members.

Assign Support for Media Scheduling & Preparation

Ideally, you do not want your spokesperson dealing with the stress of taking media calls, fending off questions over the phone, and/or scheduling logistics with reporters during a crisis. If you have the capacity, try to have a non-spokesperson in charge of media coordination and scheduling (meaning they *in no way* speak about the crisis situation with the reporters and keep all conversations in a neutral tone).

Preferably, this person would be someone who has media experience and more availability to manage calls and logistics—versus a member of your program team who may be actively dealing with the crisis. Your entire office should be directed to send all media inquiries to this designated support person and not speak to the media themselves.

In addition to scheduling, they should ask key questions of the reporter to establish expectations around the interview and take detailed notes to prepare the spokesperson:

1. What have they heard so far (i.e., where are they starting from, what info do they already have)?
2. Who else have they spoken to?

3. What kind of information are they looking for?
4. Are they asking for an over-the-phone, Zoom, in-person, on-camera, or in-studio interview?
5. How long do they expect the interview to be?
6. Do they plan to capture any footage other than the interview itself?
7. What are their deadlines?
8. When are they planning to publish the story? (This is crucial to know to help you prepare your response.)
9. Will the program be able to review the story prior to publishing?

Control the Situation, Control the Message

Keep in mind that the media do not control the situation. It's your job to control the situation and message as much as possible and that may mean restricting access somewhat (while avoiding coming off as secretive):

> *"Our Executive Director is available to speak to you about this issue, but they're only able to schedule for 30 minutes today and it would need to take place at our office or over the phone. Does that work for you?"*

You don't have to speak to a reporter who's waiting outside your office to approach you. You can tell them you're happy to speak to them if they will please contact (Designated support person's Name/Phone Number) to schedule an interview for the following day.

During the Interview

Any and everything you say during an interview can be used at the prerogative of the reporter/editor. Unless it's airing live, the phrases you use may be handpicked for final footage in a way that takes them out of the context you intended. You will want to be concise and thoughtful about each and every word that comes out of your mouth.

Focus Your Message

Focus on the Post-It Note messages you've crafted (learn more about this in the Develop Your Response section on page 19). Anytime you can redirect an answer back to one of these key bullet points, you're reinforcing the main items you want the public to know and giving the reporter fewer editing options.

Be absolutely clear on what you can and cannot share about the current crisis so that you won't be led into oversharing accidentally and giving away more information than is needed.

Do not feel you have to have an answer to every question.

Keep it Short

The more you talk, the more information you're likely giving away outside of your focused, Post-It Note messages.

Use Bridge Statements

Your Post-It Note messages won't be an adequate answer for every question, but you can use a bridging technique to help redirect a difficult question towards the conversation you want to have. You start by acknowledging the question, and then bridging back to one of those Post-It Note messages.

- I don't know the answer to that, but what I do know is…
- Due to our confidentiality policies, I cannot speak more about that, but what I can tell you is…
- That is an important point, and that's why we're so focused on…
- I appreciate you bringing that up, and what I'd like people to know is…
- That is a concern, but what's more important is that…
- *Google "bridging phrases" for tons of additional options!*

Your goal is to never come off as defensive or as if you're hiding something. You cannot use a bridge for every response, but you'll have them in your back pocket for the moments when you really need them.

Avoid Speculation

If a reporter tries to get you to speculate on an issue, do not follow them down that path. Only speak to what you know. It's fine to have a brief, neutral, "I don't know," or "I'm not sure but can look into that more" statement versus getting caught in what might be a mistruth.

Don't Be Afraid of Silence

You already know that you want to give short, concise statements that don't leave room for picking and choosing phrases. Don't be afraid to wrap up your statement and wait for the reporter's next question. They may try to use silence to get you to speak more, and if you get uncomfortable and start talking to fill the silence, you're likely to get flustered and off your guard. You can use the silence too! Finish your statement and enjoy the brief reprieve from talking while you wait patiently for their next question.

Check Your Presence & Body Language

Your goal on camera is to help the public see that you're capable and you have this issue under control.

- Try to keep a neutral, attentive resting face
  - Slight pleasant smile but not giddy
  - Avoid frowning or rolling your eyes
- Crossed arms may make you look closed off or defensive
- A subtle lean forward will show you're engaged in the discussion and that you care about the issue
- Nodding a lot or being overly affirmative may come off as you agreeing with everything the reporter is saying
- Too much hand movement may make you look nervous or twitchy

Off-the-Record Doesn't Exist

Consider this phrase a relic of the past. There's no legal requirement for anyone to respect a request for off-the-record conversation, so don't try it. In any phone call, email or conversation with a reporter, only say what you are comfortable with them repeating to the world.

Press Conferences

This is a last resort option if you're fielding too many requests for interviews to handle. The good news about a press conference is that you control when and where it happens, but once you get started, there will likely be a barrage of reporter questions that will be intimidating and very difficult to control. Press conferences should only be used in extreme situations and when you have a very confident and well-practiced spokesperson.

Timeline/Steps to Take During a Crisis

Convene Your Crisis Team

As soon as any kind of crisis (big or small) has been identified, you will want to assemble your pre-identified crisis team for an intensive meeting. Your first meeting should have:

- Access to crucial information sources (including people, case files, WiFi, etc.)
- Minimal distractions
- Plenty of time to move through early assessments and planning (give yourself at least 1.5–2 hours)
- Sustenance! Can someone bring in coffee or order a healthy lunch?
- A secure, private location where no one will overhear something they shouldn't

Assess the Situation

During your first team meeting, assess the situation in a thorough, methodical way. You will want to determine the facts of the situation (and double check those facts), how much your organization is involved, how far-reaching the issue is, who could be affected, etc. This will allow you to begin planning internal and external communications.

Having a standardized list of questions and discussion points to will help you do that. This should be an evolving list that grows over time driven by new experiences. You will find a sample Situational Assessment on page 29 in the Crisis Management & Communications Plan from CASA of Travis County.

Documentation

An assigned note taker should document this conversation in depth for the purposes of relying on this as a history of the situation later on. Also, potential response messaging may come up naturally throughout the discussion that you will want to have in writing later on. Recording the conversation or a Zoom meeting could become subject to the Public Information Act.

Complete the Assessment

Review every question you have. If a question leads to a pertinent tangent, explore that. Keeping an open mind and a sense of "brainstorming" during this assessment will help your team to make higher-level connections, consider unforeseen repercussions, etc. This is a good time to consider the possible worst-case and best-case scenarios for how this incident will play out.

Further Investigation/Next Steps

After the initial situational assessment is complete, make sure that any further investigation needed is assigned to a member of the team and that you have a clear deadline for regrouping with new information secured.

Information Gathering from Youth

If it's necessary to talk with a current or former youth involved in the program to gain further information, consider who all you may need to involve in the conversation (attorneys, family), and how you can take a trauma-informed approach to having this conversation. Make sure that your Program Director and team members who worked with the youth are involved in planning any communication with them. Think through what questions you will want to ask in advance, and contemplate any potential emotional triggers based on your history of working with this youth. It's worth planning the following:

- How will you reach out (phone/email/etc.)?
  - If you leave a voicemail, what will you say and who should they be asked to call back?
- What questions are the team comfortable asking and what do they feel will be too invasive?
- How can you ask questions in a neutral, open-ended way that won't accidentally sway the youth's answers?

Communicate Up

Board of Directors

While you do not immediately need to tell your entire Board of Directors about a crisis, you will want to alert your Chair/President, and potentially your Executive Committee. Involve them in the decision making, as risk management is a function of your nonprofit board. You may also have identified board members with special skills, perspectives or knowledge who may be useful to have in your inner circle during times of crisis.

Texas CASA

As soon as a crisis scenario has emerged, please reach out to the Communications Team at Texas CASA. They are here to support you and can help you determine if extra assistance may be needed and/or if National CASA should be notified as well, depending on the severity of the situation.

Set Up Online Monitoring

As part of your documentation process, you'll want to use online monitoring tools to gather coverage and/or comments and reactions to the story.

- Enable Google Alerts (https://www.google.com/alerts) on all names/topics involved to deliver a message to your email anytime those words show up in a new online source.
  - You must have a Google account to do this, but your work email can be turned into a Google account by selecting the "Use my current email address instead" option when creating an account at https://accounts.google.com/signup
  - Use your location to help focus in the search
  - Use "quotation marks" to clarify (e.g., "volunteer name" "San Antonio")
  - You have may have a large number of alerts to set up based on situation

- Click "Show Options" and use the following settings for each alert:

How often	As-it-happens
Sources	Automatic
Language	English
Region	United States
How many	All results
Deliver to	

- If you use any other media or social media monitoring tools, be sure to set up the same alerts and names as you did in Google.
- Check local news sites regularly for any acknowledgment of the situation.
- Discuss who on the Crisis Team regularly watches or can record local news segments.
- **Recommendation:** During a known crisis situation, find local news sources' Facebook pages and click Follow. Then adjust Follow Settings to get notified about new posts as often as you possibly can.

Decide How to Speak to the Media

Unless confidentiality* prohibits it, you can almost never just "say nothing" during a crisis you are directly involved in, but you can make the decision to speak to the media versus delivering a written statement. How do you decide which to do?

- Can you talk about the situation or does confidentiality prohibit you from discussing anything with the media?*
- How severe is the issue? How badly could it damage the organization's reputation?
- Do you have more that should be said outside of a 3-4 sentence statement?
- Will agreeing to an interview make the situation into something bigger than it actually needs to be?
- Are you able to do the interview quickly enough for it to matter? If not, will you accidentally be drawing the issue out longer than it's likely to matter?
- Do you need the interview opportunity to demonstrate values and rebuild community trust?

**In case of a scenario in which you cannot speak about any details due to confidentiality, it's handy to have a basic statement you can use over phone or email to deflect any media attention, such as: "Due to confidentiality policies required by law, we're unable to discuss any individual cases in the child welfare system."*

Social Media

If the crisis is entirely online and social media driven, you'll need to decide if you're communicating only via your own channels, or if you're responding directly to the conversations about your organization on other pages (i.e., commenting directly on a negative post). This will depend on the nature of the original conversation and if you feel direct response will fan or quench the flames of the issue.

Develop Your Response Messaging

Any messaging you deliver (in writing or via interview) should focus on the following 3 goals:

- **Promote** – How does your messaging promote the good work your organization does outside of this particular crisis?
- **Protect** – How does your messaging insulate your organization from further reputational damage?
- **Evolve** – How does your messaging show the community that you are open to learning and actively improving to prevent future incidents like this?

Approach your messaging development from a creative brainstorming point at first. Start big and think of everything you may possibly want to say to support the Promote, Protect and Evolve goals above. Consider every question you can possibly contemplate a reporter, family member, or future volunteer/supporter asking you about this situation.

Let your crisis team talk while one person takes detailed notes. Capture all variations of responses and wording, in addition to any immediate feedback team members have on those messages. Allow brief tangents to happen and capture those moments as well; you never know when wandering down a certain rabbit hole may bring to life some crucial piece of information that you need to consider!

You will then use these notes as you begin to hone in on what you will actually share, the messaging components that we'll discuss in the next section.

Do Overthink This

As you're prepping your messaging, do not be afraid to be critical of every word you're writing or saying. Consider all angles as to how what you say may be responded to by the public. Ponder any potential for double entendres or innuendo that could be damaging. Think about how social media works today and contemplate if anything you're saying could become an embarrassing meme.

To Apologize or Not

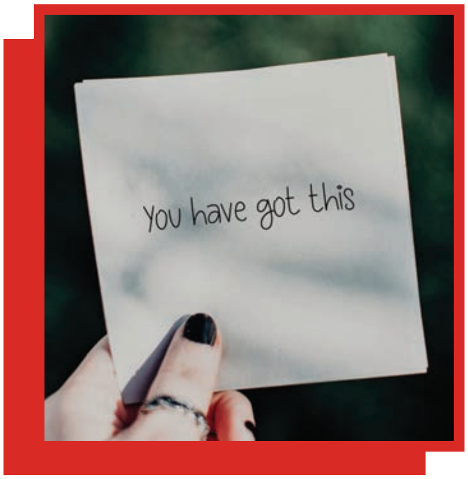
As you're developing messaging, it's vital to express an appropriate amount of concern and care based on the severity of the situation and who is affected. This does not necessarily mean that you apologize or acknowledge full responsibility. Depending on legal advice, you may explicitly want to avoid that; or you may want to do it for full accountability and public trust. When it comes to the "Protect" goal of your messaging, you need to strike the right balance of taking the situation seriously, owning up to what you can/should, and displaying humility—but not opening yourself up to further damage.

Messaging Components Needed

Now that you've done the larger brainstorming exercise, letting ideas and constructive criticism flow while taking pages of notes, it's time to pare down to the specific messaging components that you will use during interviews and in your proactive communications about the issue:

- Post-It Note Messages (the main themes you return to constantly)
- FAQs (organizing the rest of the information you're willing/able to talk about)
- Written Statement (similar to Post-It, but crafted to send in writing)

Post-It Note Messages



In our "Handling the Media" section on page 12, we referenced using bridge statements that will always bring you back to your Post-It Note messages. These are the 3-4 bullet points and main themes of your message that you constantly want to return to when communicating about this crisis, and they should be concise enough to fit on a single Post-It Note (hence the name). These messages need to support the "Promote-Protect-Evolve" goals discussed in the previous section.

While each situation will require a unique response, the messages could follow this outline:

- Acknowledge and clarify what you can of the main issue and your role in it *(Protect)*
    - Potentially add a second statement with any further detail you feel is important to convey
- Affirm the purpose and mission of your organization *(Promote)*
    - Consider an additional statement to reiterate your values/priorities (e.g., "Child safety is our utmost concern")
- Explain the steps your organization has taken/is taking to fix the problem/prevent it from happening again *(Evolve)*

Keep each statement simple and make sure they're easily spoken. Your spokesperson should know these by heart and be prepared to share these statements naturally, reiterating in multiple ways and with slightly different wording so as not to appear too rehearsed.

Prepare Your FAQs

Once you've confirmed your main messages, you need to prep for everything else you may need to discuss (or avoid discussing) during an interview and organize your response. Consider all of the notes taken in your messaging prep and discuss which pieces of the story you can and cannot discuss (based on confidentiality, client privacy, what's best for your organization, etc.).

This part of your messaging response needs to involve a perspective switch: take the side of the reporter and write down all of the questions you would want to ask someone else in this situation, from softballs to curveballs and gotchas. Once your team has come up with every question you can possibly think of, start determining how you would answer each one (or how you would pivot away using a bridge statement to one of your Post-It messages).

After analyzing the full story and all potential questions, organize your thoughts into a series of FAQ bullet points, including the key points that you definitely want to avoid/pivot away from. Having these points clearly organized will allow your spokesperson to thoroughly prepare and practice in advance of any interviews.

Written Statement

If you decide to deliver a written statement, ensure it is comprehensive and not likely to draw more questions and interview requests. This should mirror your key Post-It Note messages.

- Use only factual, verifiable statements
- Affirm the truth of the situation and clarify the story as needed
- Take responsibility as appropriate and show empathy where possible
- Include your mission in some way (may not be full statement but you do need to tell them how

your CASA program is focused on the best interest of children, etc.)

- Keep it short so that it's less likely the media will only share handpicked sentences from it
    - 3 sentences ideally, 4 max
- Review the wording piece by piece and make sure that no specific phrase or sentence could be taken out of context on its own

Plan Your Messaging Distribution

As part of your crisis plan, keep a full list of any and all stakeholders and audiences you may need to communicate with (check out a sample distribution list on page 31 in the in the Crisis Management & Communications Plan from CASA of Travis County). This doesn't mean you'll talk to every group every time, but you need them on the list so you can take them into consideration.

Consider all communication channels you have at your disposal: if you have an email list and a forum or Facebook group for volunteers, use both to communicate the same message to them. Consider who needs to know what type of information, including your judge, board, community partners, volunteers, donors, funders.

Your crisis team will need to consider the following for each group/audience:

- Should they hear directly from us about this issue?
- When should they hear about it?
    - Do we alert them in advance?
        - Being the one to break the story to your close stakeholders means you control the situation (somewhat) from the beginning and can establish truth and a sense of transparency/honesty.
    - Will they be okay to simply see our response on social media and our website?
- How do we communicate with each group?
    - Does your staff need an in-person meeting where they can ask questions and get immediate responses?
    - Are there small, close stakeholder groups that deserve a phone call (e.g., judges, people involved in the incident, board executive committee, anyone for whom you know the incident will be personally triggering)?
    - Will a well-crafted email suffice for notification (e.g., volunteers, major funders/grantors)?
        - Who gets a personal email?
        - Who gets a mass distribution message sent from an email marketing system like MailChimp or Constant Contact?
    - Are they fine to see our social media and website response only?
- Is this group close enough to the situation that they deserve their own talking points, in case they get questions?
    - Your recruitment and training teams need to be equipped to handle concerns from incoming volunteers.
    - You may want to give volunteers instructions to redirect questions they receive to their supervisors.
- Do they deserve follow-up responses?
    - This will depend on the situation, especially if it's an evolving and more information comes out after initial outreach, or a later message about positive changes made/actions taken will boost your reputation.

Mass Audience Messaging

If a crisis situation has become public knowledge, you will need to have a consistent public response accessible via your social media channels and your website homepage. If you've submitted a written statement to the media, reshare that (or frame your Post-It message into a brief paragraph).

This message might include:

- A brief factual statement of the incident that occurred
- The acknowledgment that stories will be/are airing on the media, or circulating online
- The messaging or written statement you've shared with the media (so you can get your full response out there even if they only publish a single clip or sentence)
- Potentially a contact if someone has concerns/questions (be cautious about this)

If it's possible to share this in advance of (but not too early before) the story goes live, do so! If you can be the one to break the story to your supporters, you will look better.

Closely monitor anything you post on social media and respond to comments/questions appropriately and in a timely way through designated persons assigned with this task.

Practice for Interviews

If you're planning to respond on camera or over the phone, practice your messaging. Have your crisis team quiz your spokesperson. Put a camera in front of them and make them practice interviews on film (then rewatch together and look for areas of improvement). Try to trip them up so they get used to it and can test out bridge statements. Don't be afraid to give them tough feedback (even if it's your boss!).

Stay Vigilant

Once you've submitted a written statement or completed interviews with the press, you will want to use your team and monitoring tools (see more on page 16) to stay vigilant on when stories air or get published online. You will, hopefully, have already asked every publication when they plan to publish, but that's not always a guaranteed date. Depending on media cycles and what else is happening in the world, stories can get pushed early or later, or you may not be given specifics.

Review your Google alerts, watch news stations' websites and social media channels, and keep an ear to the ground in your community for when stories go public and how they're being responded to. Once stories are live, make sure that someone is monitoring the response via comments (on your social media channels and on the news stations'). You will most likely not want to respond to comments on channels that aren't your own to avoid fanning flames, but you'll definitely want to be aware of and documenting the conversations to understand where public opinion is leaning.

Keep in mind that not every crisis wraps up within a specific amount of time. Depending on the nature of the story, it may come up again in later news cycles, or be brought to light in a different way later on. Your crisis team should continue to monitor coverage and how it's discussed in the community for however long is necessary.

Review & Report

We've already mentioned documentation a few times in this guidebook: document everything. Being able to refer to clear notes of the entire process (especially the situational assessment) may be crucial to making decisions on what you share with reporters or stakeholders.

Document the situation, the messaging options you're considering, your plans for distribution, any media coverage received, and more. Screenshot and save social media feeds and comments responding to the situation. Save any email messages you receive from your audiences and stakeholder, positive or negative, to remember how people responded to the way you communicated about this incident.

With all of this documentation, review the situation and evaluate how you handled it:

- What did you miss?
- Whose feelings did you not consider enough?
- Were there any messaging choices you would change after the fact?
- Was anyone missing from your crisis team?

Convene your crisis team and any other pertinent team members once the crisis scenario has calmed down for an after-action or post-incident meeting to have these critical discussions. Use this meeting to further update your crisis plan and enact any other needed changes to your organization that were identified throughout this crisis.

Evolve

We mentioned the goals of "Promote, Protect and Evolve" as part of messaging development, but want to reiterate the final bullet here.

If you do not use a crisis incident as a time to evolve your organization, you will most likely see a repeat or similar incident in the future. Your goal is not just to survive this crisis, but to make crucial changes for a safer, stronger, more secure nonprofit for your stakeholders.

"Evolve" cannot just be a messaging tactic. You need to take real action to fix issues and close gaps within your organization. Consider what policies as well as practices need to be revised.

Social Media During a Crisis

Adjusting Your Content Strategy

If you have a calendar in place for publishing content on your social media channels, you will want to review and consider what adjustments need to take place during a crisis.

Depending on the nature of the crisis:

- Are there any planned posts that may come off as insensitive or may exacerbate the crisis issue?
- Is there any content we can share that will reinforce our Post-It Note messages and bolster our reputation?
- Would it be best to go completely quiet on social media channels for some time (after posting your official mass audience response)?

Social Media Monitoring & Response Tactics

It's highly recommended that you have an agreed-upon policy in place with your team for how to respond to negative comments on your social media on an ongoing basis. That policy will be especially useful during a crisis when conversations are more heated and decision-making around the response is more urgent.

The key levels to determine are when a negative comment merits response, deletion, banning, or simply ignoring. Keep in mind that any removal of comments during a crisis could be seen as lacking in transparency or being unable to take criticism, so be more judicious about comment removal during an incident.

Here are potential situations that could fall under each to help guide your own policy:

Ignore

There will likely be inflammatory comments or trolling that take place during a crisis incident. Some comments may simply be worth ignoring so that the commenter feels heard and doesn't feel a need to continue commenting or complain about being censored.

Respond

- Genuine question about the situation/organization
- Genuine criticism of the situation/organization
- Misconception or generalization that could be corrected

Delete

- Anything breaking confidentiality
- Anything that could put an individual involved in the incident in harm's way (especially if named in comment)
- Grievances/complaints that don't have anything to do with current situation and should be dealt with privately
    - May be worth communicating with the commenter privately to address other issues

Screenshot and document everything before removing.

Delete and Ban/Block User

- Anything threatening, violent, referencing illegal activity, etc.
- Spam comments or repetitive posters
- Inappropriate language/profanity
- Comments that reinforce racism, sexism, homophobia, transphobia, etc.

Screenshot and document everything before removing and banning.

Avoiding Social Media Superheroes

Another good policy to have in place for your staff, board and volunteers is to avoid playing "social media superhero." Inform everyone that it is *not* their job to rush in and defend your organization when negative comments are made online, whether during a crisis or not.

Most of the time, incendiary online comments are best left ignored so that the commenters can move on to criticize something else. A volunteer or board member jumping into a conversation (on your own channels, on a news station website, or somewhere else) to defend your organization may just fan the flames of the original commenter and draw more attention for a longer time period. This should be avoided.

Resilience & Mental Health During a Crisis

Ensuring that you have sustenance for your intensive crisis meetings is more important than you would think. Taking care of yourself and your team is vital to ensure you have high-functioning brains working to solve these problems.

A crisis moment may provoke secondary trauma for the team members involved, depending on the severity of the situation they have to investigate, assess and report on. It may also create doubts for your team members about the organization they've chosen to work for, especially if they feel the program was seriously 'in the wrong.'

Considering that most crisis work must be highly confidential, your team members may also feel very alone during one of the toughest moments of their job, unable to share their stress with friends, family or even other colleagues who are not in the crisis inner circle.

Here are some items to consider and watch for with regards to yourself and your team members working on the crisis:

- Depending on the nature of the incident and potential for secondary trauma, are professional mental health resources available to your team members? Can you provide these?
- Do you have a clear, easy-to-follow crisis plan in place so that team members have an obvious checklist to work through and don't have to scramble or make things up on the spot?
- Are people getting enough sleep?
- Can you bring in healthy food options (covered by the organization) to ensure people don't skip meals during long workdays?
- Are you discouraging the majority of your team from reading disparaging comments?
    - While at least one person should be in charge of monitoring and documenting, you don't want numerous team members having to wade through online comments from trolls.
- Are you checking in on yourself and how clear-headed and/or stressed you're feeling?
    - Are you having the same conversations with your crisis team or other people involved in resolving the crisis?
- Are you taking breaks to recharge and gain perspective?
- Are you taking opportunities to discuss the crisis in terms of how it can eventually make the program stronger and better?
- Are you thanking team members for their invaluable contribution during a time of crisis?

Guidelines to Build Trust & Reputation to Survive a Crisis

No matter how much you try to prevent or prepare for a crisis, you may still find yourself in a situation with the potential to seriously damage your organization's reputation. In that moment, the stakeholder relationships and trust you have built within your community could be what save you.

Cultivate Stakeholder Relationships

Your relationships with community stakeholders are never more important than when you're in crisis. You may need to proactively ask someone to speak up or vouch for you in a moment of need. You may be able to rely on a network of influential people who stick by your organization because of the relationships you've developed.

Who are the key stakeholders with whom you need to cultivate strong relationships?

- Judges
- Child Welfare Leaders and Staff
- Former Foster Youth
- Community Leaders/Organizers
    - Make sure you are building relationships with stakeholders from a variety of diverse communities
- Philanthropists/Foundations
- Politicians
- Business Leaders
- Nonprofit Leaders
- Media

How are you deliberately and consistently working to start or bolster these relationships?

- If you don't have a positive working relationship with someone you've identified as a key stakeholder, how are you going about building one?
    - Have you identified connections from your board/other stakeholders to these people to make introductions?
- For existing relationships, how often do your staff and board leadership meet with stakeholders?
- Have you taken stakeholders to observe court to learn more about your mission (if appropriate)?
- Do you document contacts with stakeholders to note their attitudes towards your organization and which aspects interest and/or concern them most?
- Do you communicate regular updates on progress towards goals or new programs and initiatives via phone or email?
- How responsive are you to stakeholder feedback and/or criticism of the organization?
- How do you communicate changes or improvements that you know key stakeholders are interested in?

Consistent Communication

Having consistent, responsive communication with your community via every media channel at your disposal will help establish your organization as transparent and trustworthy.

Your goal will be to convey messages that display your integrity as an organization:

- You're focused on the safety and best interest of children
- You're responsive to feedback from the community
- You're constantly evolving and improving as an organization
- You steward resources well
- You're organized and responsible

You can help accomplish this by:

- Keeping your website up-to-date and modern feeling
    - This includes updating your blog on a regular basis if you have one
- Posting regularly on social media
- Being responsive to questions and comments on your social media channels or messages sent via a website contact form or to a general organizational email address
- Sending consistent email newsletters updating your audiences on program success and progress with new initiatives (not just fundraising requests and events)
- Securing regular news features to help establish your leadership as reliable sources and experts in their field

In Conclusion

All organizations that work within the child welfare system will encounter crisis moments, whether big or small. It doesn't signify complete failure as a program, but sometimes a crisis can be an eye-opener for how you should evolve as an organization supporting vulnerable populations.

We encourage you to employ this guidebook in every way possible:

- Use the risk assessments to take a critical look at the safety and security of your organization.
- Develop a thorough crisis communications plan (and keep it updated) to be prepared when/if the moment arises.
- Practice media skills on a regular basis so your spokesperson feels equipped for a tough interview.
- Build those crucial stakeholder relationships to strengthen your network of supporters.

You can handle a crisis moment, and hopefully, through advanced prevention and preparation, you won't have to face a worst-possible scenario.

We hope you have found value in this guidebook, and don't hesitate to reach out to Texas CASA if you feel lost in a tough situation.

Sample Crisis Management & Communications Plan

The following is the Crisis Management & Communications Plan of CASA of Travis County as of 2021. It may be used as a sample for other programs to consider in adopting their own crisis management and communications plans, as required by Texas CASA Program Standards.

CASA
Court Appointed Special Advocates
FOR CHILDREN
CASA OF TRAVIS COUNTY, INC.

Key Crisis* Management Objectives

- Always prioritize child safety and the best interests of the children we serve.
- Be proactive, timely**, transparent, accurate, consistent and unified in the messages we present to media, stakeholders and the public.
- Maintain strong relationships with all stakeholders and audience members, while always considering their interests and feelings in the planning and messaging process.
- Evaluate our advocacy/actions/policies/protocols and demonstrate to stakeholders and general public how we are evolving as an organization to correct past challenges and improve our advocacy for children in the child welfare system.
- Prepare for a potential crisis year-round, not just when one occurs.

**For purposes of implementation of this plan, a "crisis" is defined as any occurrence that threatens the public reputation or immediate financial integrity of CASA of Travis County or that may create a situation of legal liability to the organization or its directors or officers. If in doubt as to whether an occurrence constitutes a "crisis," any employee or volunteer should immediately consult with their supervisor and any board member should consult with the Board Chair or Chief Executive Officer.*

***Keeping in mind the speed with which news is broken via online media, it is highly recommended that once a crisis is identified, the team begin implementing pieces of the following plan within 2 hours.*

Internal Communication & Initial Planning

1. All crises should be reported to a supervisor and to the Chief Executive Officer immediately.
    a. In the absence of the Chief Executive Officer, crises should be reported to the Chief Program Officer, who will act for the Chief Executive Officer.
2. If the crisis is likely to have implications beyond a single case to which CASA has been appointed, the Chief Executive Officer will notify the Board Chair and will notify the Director of Communications to begin assembling the Crisis Communications Team.
3. The Crisis Communications Team will typically consist of the Chief Executive Officer, the Board Chair, the Chief Program Officer, the Director of Communications and other key staff as designated.
    a. Depending on the nature of the crisis and the involvement of and potential damage to CASA's reputation or financial integrity, the Chief Executive Officer, Board Chair and Director of Communications may decide to consult with an outside public relations professional.
    b. In some cases, a larger Crisis Management Team may be needed when action surrounding

the crisis involves more than just handling communications. In those cases, the Crisis Communication Team would be a part of the larger team, and this plan would only outline the steps to take in the communication needs surrounding a crisis

4. Once assembled, the Crisis Communications Team will immediately go into action, meeting to review the issue and starting the situational assessment, gathering as much information from key people and sources as possible, setting up online monitoring of the topic (Google Alerts, Facebook media outlets set on notify esp. if we know who is publishing something, Twitter feeds, etc.) and determining and delegating next steps for internal and possibly external communications. These team actions will be coordinated by the Director of Communications.
    a. Director of Communications should immediately reinforce with any front desk/reception staff that all media calls be directed to the Director of Communication's office, and that it should be confirmed that the Director of Communications is in office. If not in office, media should be given the cell phone number for the Director of Communications. It is not important to explain the situation to front desk staff at this time, merely to reinforce the response plan for media calls early on.
5. Unless determined otherwise by the Board Chair, such as in the event that the Chief Executive Officer is involved in creating the crisis, the Chief Executive Officer will be the designated lead person for crisis management and will serve as the public spokesperson for the crisis, with all media and public appearances coordinated by the Director of Communications.
    a. In the event that the Chief Executive Officer is involved in creating the crisis, the Director of Communications will work directly with the Board Chair, and the Board Chair or a board designee will serve as the public spokesperson.
    b. All other staff, volunteers and board members should be professional and helpful to the media only by connecting them with the Director of Communications, but will neither speak to the media, nor provide any information.
6. The Crisis Communications Team (based on the initial situational assessment) will determine next steps for internal notification, including board members, staff members, judges, and the Texas and National CASA organizations, in order to ensure that these stakeholders are made aware of the crisis via CASA and do not learn about it in the media. The majority of these internal notifications should take place over the phone or in person to avoid sharing specific information in writing via email that could at some point be shared with media.
    a. The Chief Executive Officer and the Board Chair will determine the extent to which other members of the board should be notified. If determined necessary, the Board Chair or designee will alert the Executive Committee, who will alert the remaining board members via phone. After initial phone alert, updates will be sent via email when possible. If nothing else, after the crisis an email will be sent providing a summary of the situation and resolution details.
        i. The board phone tree is the responsibility of the board, not the staff. Staff attention shall remain focused on the crisis situation at hand.
    b. The Chief Executive Officer and Chief Program Officer will determine the extent to which staff members are notified and how much information is shared. Depending upon the timeline of information potentially hitting the media, the ideal situation to announce a crisis will be in a pre-planned staff meeting or by calling an emergency meeting. If information must be sent via email, share as little specific information as possible. Imagine the email being

quoted verbatim in a newspaper when writing. Remind staff not to candidly discuss issue with acquaintances in person, via text, online or via email.

i. If it is imperative that information not be sent via email and the crisis occurs when staff are not in the office and is time-sensitive or jeopardizes the safety of the office, a phone tree may be used to communicate the information to staff, starting with Directors and Program Managers.

c. The Chief Executive Officer and Director of Communications will determine if Texas CASA, National CASA and/or other local CASA programs need to be notified and what information to share with them based on the potential reach and impact of the crisis. This should also be based on whether or not they may receive calls from media, and in that case whether they should direct calls to our organization, or respond in an agreed upon manner based on confidentiality.

7. Depending on the nature of the crisis, the Chief Executive Officer and Board Chair are encouraged to consider consultation with legal counsel and/or providing information about the nature of the crisis to CASA's general liability insurance carrier.

Situational Assessment

As soon as the Crisis Communications Team has been notified and assembled, a situational assessment should begin to determine facts and decide upon upcoming internal and external communications.

In the case of immediate media attention with limited time to prep, it's recommended to immediately be able to answer the following 3 questions:

- When did you know about the issue/problem?
- What did you do when you found out?
- What will you do now?

Further questions to help devise appropriate crisis communications response, include, but are not limited to:

- What is the situation? What will happen next?
- Who is affected by this situation?
- What is known and who already knows it?
- What are people feeling or what will they be feeling (including children on a case and their bio/adoptive/foster families)? What emotions need to be considered?
- How deeply is CASA involved? What role did CASA play in this situation happening?
- Who from CASA is involved: staff member, board member, volunteer, child/youth client, other? Are they easily connected to CASA via information on CASA's website/online presence, or via their online presence, or is their connection to CASA not public at this time?
- Do we need to talk to anyone else (e.g., current or former youth, volunteer, caseworker, etc.) at this time to understand more about the situation?
    - If talking to current or former youth, here are guidelines for how to approach the conversation and who to include:
        - Current youth - Involve their attorneys
        - Former youth - Involve their attorneys depending on age
        - Decide on contacting all who may have been affected, all who we know were affected, or none (especially if needed to preserve an investigation)
        - If contacting, do so preferably by phone and prepare a specific script of what we

should and should not say during the conversation, including a script for voicemail
    - Decide on who youth should be directed to if they call back
- How will this issue affect CASA's reputation, both short- and long-term?
- What can and cannot be said about this issue? How do CASA's confidentiality policies affect our ability to react publicly to this situation?
- Will CASA immediately be publicly connected to this issue or will the connection potentially remain unknown?
- How prominent will CASA's role be in any media around this issue?
- How much public interest will there be in this issue? What other media has happened recently around similar issues? What other issues may this bring up?
- What current media and/or online content efforts does CASA have in progress or scheduled that may need to be adjusted or prepped in a different way for?
- How long do we think this situation will last?
- What additional information is needed and who beyond organizational staff needs to get it? When will it be available?
- What would be in CASA's best interest in regards to this issue and media?
    - Proactively discuss publicly
    - Respond when reached out to on camera with appropriate media outlets
    - Respond when reached out to with a written statement to appropriate media outlets
    - Respond with confidentiality policies/unable to confirm or deny due to confidentiality
    - Refer media to another organization
    - Try to avoid media recognition in issue entirely
- If applicable, what would be in the best interest of children on the case and their bio/adoptive/foster families? How can we take them into account?
- Who will need to be able to respond to questions regarding this situation?
    - Only the designated public spokesperson
    - Full staff and board members
    - Volunteers
    - Other stakeholders
- Where could this issue go in the future? What potential continued challenges does CASA need to contemplate in connection to this issue?

Messaging Development & External Distribution Planning

Key Messaging Concepts: Promote, Protect, Evolve

Any comments to members of the public, to the media, to funders, volunteers, staff or Board members should be guided by professionalism and, within CASA's confidentiality policy, transparency and should serve to mitigate the crisis while reinforcing the leadership role and communicating the stability of CASA of Travis County. When possible, responses should be proactive, responsive, action-oriented, apologetic as needed, and clear enough to leave nothing to interpretation. The Crisis Communications Team should develop the key messages to be delivered to the public and to internal and external stakeholders as needed.

Based on the situational assessment, messaging development should start as quickly as possible to be ready for potential early media calls or inquiries, whether or not CASA wants to go public with the information—we may not have a choice. Messaging will depend upon the situation and CASA's confidentiality requirements. It may be necessary to update messaging as more information is released or uncovered. The Crisis Communications Team will need to remain alert and responsive to the situation at all times.

It will be important to develop factual, detailed messages that reflect the status of the crisis, CASA's response, and, if needed/possible, proactive steps to resolve the situation. Every situation will be different and will require specific messaging development.

Standard Confidentiality Messages

When complete case confidentiality is required, the media response might be something simple and non-quotable like the following statement (delivered to media by the Director of Communications, not a spokesperson):

- We can neither confirm nor deny if a child is our client. We have a strict confidentiality policy, as required by law.
- CASA programs cannot identify or comment on individual cases because of our obligation under the law to maintain confidentiality. CASA's role is to…

Sometimes, even when we have to maintain some confidentiality, it will still be important to develop messages to deliver to internal and external audiences.

Planning for External Distribution

Once determined that CASA will most likely be publicly recognized in this issue, or if CASA has decided to proactively communicate about the issue, the Crisis Communications Team will establish a distribution plan and timeline that will be coordinated by the Director of Communications.

If CASA is proactively communicating to the public, determine if a general press release or specific outreach to selected media contacts is best.

Whether proactive or responsive to media inquiries, external audience outreach should ideally begin before any stories air on media or are released on social media. Determine when and how (written, video, etc.) to post public information to CASA's website/blog/social media channels, ideally in advance of media breaking the story.

Messaging & Distribution by Audience/Channel

Determine what specific messaging including talking points (+) needs to be prepared for and how you will communicate (email from whom, phone calls from whom, email followed by phone call, etc., or not at all) with each of the following audiences/channels:

- Media (TV, Radio, Print, Online, etc.)
    - On camera/in interview
    - Written statements
- Social Media
- CASA Website/Blog
- Board*+
- Staff*+
    - Ideally before situation is public, let staff members know who to direct questions to if they receive any from outside stakeholders.
    - Consider prepping and printing specific talking points for the recruitment, screening and training staff who are often talking to the public or to volunteers in our offices or references. This is especially important if a training cycle is in progress or about to start
- Volunteers*+
- Current Active and/or Assigned Volunteers

        - Updated list of current active or assigned volunteers can be pulled by Director of Data and Evaluation, or the larger volunteer email database can be used but may on occasion include non-current volunteers and will definitely include volunteers not assigned to cases.
        - A limited number of volunteers can be communicated with via the Facebook Forum
    - Volunteers in Training
    - Applicants
    - Info Session RSVPs or Attendees
- Judges*+
- Specific family (bio/foster/adoptive) involved in the case and their agencies as needed (especially if updates about media efforts would be helpful to them, and most especially if they're likely to be identified in the process)
- Attorneys, CPS and other parties on cases
    - Chief Program Officer should maintain this list for notification.
- Funders
    - Director of Development should maintain this list for notification.
- Legislators
- Texas/National CASA/Other Local CASA Programs*+
- Contractors, vendors, auditors, bankers, insurance carriers, etc.
    - Administration team should maintain this list for notification.
- Other community partners/stakeholders/nonprofit organizations
- Child/youth clients (only in very rare circumstances will youth be messaged to)
- General CASA email list (least likely to be used)

+ Some messaging may need to not only explain the situation to these audiences, but also offer talking points that they are allowed to share if asked about the situation by friends or family, while at the same time reminding them to direct all media inquiries to our organization and not discuss the situation online or via email.

** For internal audiences, these may be second rounds of communication, but it will be important to send an update so that they're aware of impending media stories and especially if you want to provide them with any talking point responses.*

Media Messaging Prep

Messaging and brief talking points should be developed based on all potential media angles. Consider what questions could be asked. Prepare responses for all of them.

In addition to being able to clarify and share our concern and accountability for the issue, determine the 3 key "Post-It note" messages that CASA should focus on (concise and focused enough to be carried around on a Post-It note). These key messages should be quick sound bites for the spokesperson to focus any interview on and should be messages that we want to reinforce with the public, which may mean we find ways to get them across even when they don't actually answer the media's question. They should be positive, proactive and transparent.

Depending upon the outcomes of the situational assessment and the severity of the issue, the spokesperson may wish to practice responding to media questions to ensure focus and comfort in such settings.

Additional Messaging Support

Beyond messaging for the initial audiences/channels, determine if any other messaging collateral is needed, such as a fact sheet, FAQs, etc. Throughout the situation, evaluate the effectiveness of messaging by monitoring publications, social media response, comments, forums, etc. How are people reacting to it? In the time period around the issue, be conscious of what other messaging/content is shared on CASA's website, email newsletters, blog and social media to ensure it will not add to or inflame the situation.

Recognize that unfavorable, inaccurate information, if not corrected, could have future negative consequences requiring additional responses. Know that "no comment" is never good for an organization, and "off-the-record" communication with media doesn't really exist.

Media Interview Prep

- If interviewed over the phone, make sure 2 other members of the Crisis Comm Team (e.g., Dir. Of Comm and Chief Program Officer) in room to support interviewee (likely CEO) by redirecting to talking points, reminders to be brief or share less, or offering supportive stats/facts.
    - If possible, have a third person in the room to take notes on the call, but have them far from the interviewee so they don't distract. If you can record phone as well, that is helpful to have exact quotes available.
- In severe situations, build logistical plan for handling large number of media inquiries and interviews.
    - Director of Communications should handle all logistics with media and interview scheduling for spokesperson, trying to gather as much information in advance from media outlets while sharing none of CASA's messaging. Only the spokesperson should deliver CASA's messaging.
    - If media coming to office, Director of Communications should plan to greet media and escort to chosen interview or waiting space, giving spokesperson time to prep in between interviews.
- In severe situations, determine if a press conference is needed and what on-location resources will be necessary to implement that in a professional, organized manner.

Response & Follow-Up Planning

Build a response plan for online comments and social media mentions. Determine what to respond to and threshold for deletion of comments if possible/needed. Also consider a response plan for emails from stakeholders.

Depending on longevity of issue, determine ongoing updates as needed for various audiences/channels.

As a situation is wrapping up, determine who needs to receive post-crisis communications with outcomes, changes CASA may be implementing, and other follow-up.

Monitoring

In addition to online monitoring with Google Alerts, Facebook notifications, social media searches and hashtag review, ensure that someone with the capacity to record and review local television news is monitoring at minimum the 2 reporting cycles (afternoon/evening, or evening/morning, etc.) following the incident breaking. Depending on the severity of the situation, longer term monitoring may be necessary.

Documentation

Throughout any crisis situation, the Director of Communications should keep records of critical conversations, decisions, details known, all iterations of messaging (distributed or not distributed), notes on media interviews, all media mentions, media questions regarding the crisis situation, anything missed in the initial process that proved necessary, and community response in order to effectively evaluate crisis communications management after the event, as well as to have resources for future potential events. Ensure that any pertinent information is relayed to the Chief Program Officer for inclusion in the incident report.

Post-Incident Review

This review should take place as part of the Program team's incident debrief process:

- Review the documentation
- Discuss how the organization is evolving in regard to the incident, and in ways that should be communicated, and to whom, in the future to show our progress and response
- Review feedback received from the community
- Note any lessons learned or successful messaging
- Note any items missed
- Make updates to this plan as needed

Ongoing Preparation/Maintenance

Preparation for a potential crisis should be a year-round effort.

This plan should be reviewed/updated every year, after every incident, and anytime a new crisis resource or training is reviewed, to ensure the plan is up to date and highly functional.

Communications team members and key spokespeople should practice for media interviews on a regular basis, and it's recommended that they secure yearly media speaker training and/or attend crisis communications workshops.

It is also highly recommended that CASA follow how other similar organizations handle crisis situations and document strong responses for use as future resources for our organization.