The Environment

Trust in government is fragile.

- The Partnership for Public Service survey found **trust** in government **decreased** from 35 percent in 2022 to 28 percent in 2024 with **distrust increasing** from 46 percent to 63 percent in that same timeframe.

- 58% of local officials say public trust is the *top* challenge their communities face. (2023 – American City & County study)

Municipal leaders feel the weight of declining trust – and recognize the need for effective communication.

The Environment

- Constantly evolving complex regulatory and administrative rules and protocols

- Budgetary and staffing constraints

- Complex department and interagency communications

- Public/stakeholders lack understanding of how municipal government works

- Increase in incivility

- Growing mis/disinformation

Why Crisis Communication Matters

Crisis communications allows you to address crises/issues quickly, get to a resolution faster, protect your reputation and build trust with stakeholders.

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Goals for Today's Session

- **Plan and prepare** before a situation arises
- **Understand** the 7 essential steps to respond effectively during a municipal crisis
- **Learn** how to craft clear, timely messages that build public trust
- **See** real-world examples – what worked, what backfired, and why

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What Counts as a Crisis?

- Water/Sewer Issues
- School Threats
- Employee Matters
- Weather Disasters
- Fire/Police Events
- Service Delivery Issues
- Public Health Threats
- Election Security
- Cyberattacks/Data Security
- And more!

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Plan & Prepare

What's in the plan?

- **Assign a crisis team** – Administrative lead, legal, public information, department leads, IT, etc. Include back-up members.

- **Add external crisis advisor** – Serves as media conduit/buffer and provides external advice and perspective.

- **Define roles** – Who is responsible for what tasks and when.

- **Put it in writing** – Share with all team members. Update it regularly!

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Plan & Prepare

What's in the plan?

- **Conduct regular trainings** – Perform simulation/tabletop exercises in person or virtually. Review materials, roles, messages, etc.

- **Create a file** of pre-approved messages, infographics, social media hashtags, statements, etc.

Set internal expectations that inaction – "no comment" – is not an option.

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Prepared Comms Materials

- Holding statements – pre, during and post event
- Translated materials
- "Swiss cheese" releases
- Social media graphics
- B-roll for certain types of crises to explain how things work

What to do

When a Crisis Strikes

Your Crisis Communications Roadmap

7-Step Framework:

- Confirm Situation
- Activate Team
- Determine Scope
- Craft Messages
- Set Plan
- Release Information
- Listen & Adjust

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Step 1: Confirm What's Happening

What are the facts?

- Coordinate with all relevant departments to confirm scope

- Gather accurate information

- Determine what is known and what's still being verified

Avoid relying on early rumors and assumptions

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Step 2: Activate the Team

Don't hesitate – Get together!

- Gather pre-identified team members
- Clarify roles: spokesperson, social media lead, internal comms
- Set internal chain of command and reporting structure

Empower the team to act – don't wait for a perfect moment!

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Step 3: Determine Scope

Who needs to know?

Each crisis presents a different set of stakeholders and represents a different threat level.

It is important that **the most relevant/directly impacted people/groups hear from you first** or at the same time as everyone else, e.g., internal staff, residents, parents, media, law enforcement, state officials, etc.

Not every event needs a press release – but every audience needs the same message.

Step 4: Craft the Statement

Create clear, credible messaging.

- Use a holding statement format: *what happened □ what's being done □ what to expect next*
- Be transparent: say what you know, and what you don't yet know
- Avoid speculation, jargon, or defensiveness
- Employ empathy – especially when safety is involved
- Develop a Q&A and update it regularly
- Streamline approvals

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Sample Holding Statement

As of [date/time], we are investigating a report(s) of [issue]. Preliminary [work being done] is underway.

Out of an abundance of caution, we are asking [who or what and where] to [what action] until [when].

The [city, departments, agency, etc.] are coordinating with [name relevant agencies] to confirm [the source and scope of the issue].

We are committed to keeping [audience(s)] informed. We expect to provide our next update at [time/date].

All new information will be posted on [e.g., website, social media channels, etc.] and shared via [local name] alerts.

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Step 5: Set the Crisis Response Plan in Motion

Take action.

- Select communications channels (social, email, website, media briefing, telephone alert, video statement, etc.)

- Brief elected officials and department heads

- Coordinate with other agencies to stay consistent (local, regional, state, federal)

- Prep for evolving conditions (and new messaging needs)

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Step 6: Get the Word Out
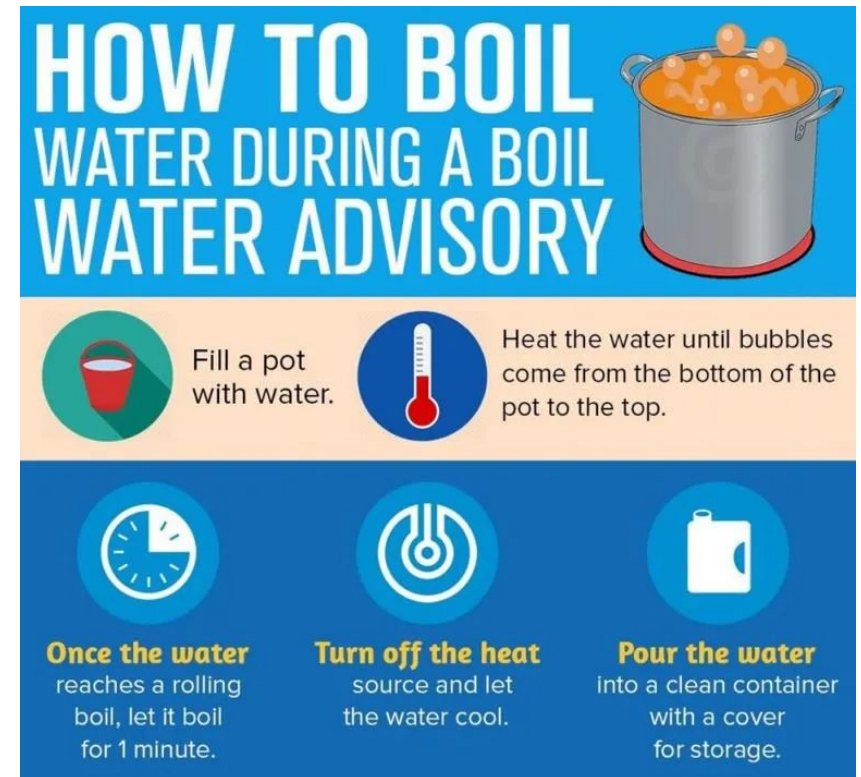
Approve and distribute the statements.

- Push statement(s) to all relevant platforms simultaneously

- Ensure consistent messaging across spokespeople

- Don't forget staff briefings – they're your frontline ambassadors

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Example

As of 11:00 a.m., we are investigating reports of a potential issue affecting the town's water supply. Preliminary testing is underway. Out of an abundance of caution, we are asking residents on Main St. to boil their water before drinking or cooking until further notice. A boil water advisory is in effect.

The Department of Public Works is coordinating with the state Department of Environmental Protection to determine the source and scope of the issue.

We are committed to keeping the public informed. Updates will be posted on the town's website and social media accounts and shared via CodeRED alerts.

HOW TO BOIL WATER DURING A BOIL WATER ADVISORY

Fill a pot with water.

Heat the water until bubbles come from the bottom of the pot to the top.

Once the water reaches a rolling boil, let it boil for 1 minute.

Turn off the heat source and let the water cool.

Pour the water into a clean container with a cover for storage.

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Step 7: Watch, Listen, and Adjust

Monitor and respond.

- Track social media, news coverage, and community response
- Myth-bust: address misinformation early and calmly
- Gather staff feedback for internal improvements
- Update messages as needed – don't go silent
- Be willing to course-correct

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Case Studies

Who's to Blame?

Everyone wants there to be a bad guy.

- Proactively disclose mistakes or emerging problems before external sources uncover them

- Offer apologies, corrective actions, and empathy

- Avoid shifting blame

Transparency, even about errors, is far more effective at maintaining public trust.

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Case Study – What Went Wrong: Flint Water Crisis

Leaked internal memo shows federal regulator's concerns about lead in Flint's water

Michigan Public | By Lindsey Smith
Published July 13, 2015 at 7:00 AM EDT

From: Muchmore, Dennis (GOV)
Sent: Friday, September 25, 2015 10:29 AM
To: Snyder, Rick (GOV) ██████████████ Calley, Brian (GOV ████████████
Cc: Scott, Allison (GOV) <scotta12@michigan.gov>; Agen, Jarrod (GOV) <AgenJ@michigan.gov>
Subject: Flint water

The issue of Flint water and its quality continues to be a challenging topic. The switch over to use Flint river water has spurred most of the controversy and contention. The DEQ and DCH feel that some in Flint are taking the very sensitive issue of children's exposure to lead and trying to turn it into a political football claiming the departments are underestimating the impacts on the populations and particularly trying to shift responsibility to the state.

Michigan LIVE

FLINT

State says Flint River water meets all standards but more than twice the hardness of lake water

Updated: May. 23, 2014, 8:30 p.m. | Published: May. 23, 2014, 7:30 p.m.

The Atlantic
'We Fear the Water'

EMILY ANNE EPSTEIN | FEBRUARY 7, 2016 | 16 PHOTOS | SPOTLIGHT

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Flint Water Crisis

- **Delayed Acknowledgment**: 18 months passed before officials admitted the problem

- **Dismissed Complaints**: Residents' concerns about smell, color, and health were ignored

- **Information Suppression**: Officials knew about contamination but didn't alert the public

- **Conflicting Messages**: Local, state, and federal agencies gave contradictory information

- **Lack of Transparency**: Communication was defensive, technical, and unclear

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Case Study – What Worked: Hurricane Sandy Response

Governor Cuomo Declares State of Emergency in New York in Preparation for Potential Impact of Hurricane Sandy

VELMANETTE MONTGOMERY | October 26, 2012 | ISSUE: HURRICANES, NATIONAL DISASTERS

gt government technology

RECOVERY

Sandy Marked a Shift for Social Media Use in Disasters

Government agencies and others turned to online technologies to communicate with the public like never before.

March 07, 2013 • Sara Estes Cohen

New Jersey

Sandy's center is expected to make landfall in New Jersey late Monday. But by daybreak, thousands of homes and businesses were already without electricity. Raritan Bay is expected to be one of the worst hit areas, and governor Chris Christie ordered a mandatory evacuation for most of the community. Thousands of people left homes in low-lying areas. Likewise, many inland towns hit by flooding from storm Irene last year issued evacuation orders.

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By the Numbers

- Between October 26 and November 9, NYC.gov received 4 million unique visitors and 16 million page views.
- Mayor Bloomberg's YouTube channel had nearly 1 million views between October 26 and November 9.
- OEM sent Notify NYC alerts via landline, mobile, text, email, and Twitter to more than 165,000 residents.
- The City sent more than 2,000 tweets and gained more than 175,000 social media followers during the storm, including a 71% increase in followers of the NYC Mayor's Office Twitter feed.

NYC Hurricane Sandy After Action

Report and Recommendations to Mayor Michael R. Bloomberg

May 2013

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Hurricane Sandy Response

- **48+ Hours Warning**: Pre-storm evacuation alerts via multiple platforms

- **Multi-Channel Strategy**: TV, radio, text alerts, door-to-door, social media

- **Regular Briefings**: Every 4–6 hours with clear updates from consistent officials

- **Actionable Information**: What to do, where to go, what to bring

- **Post-Storm Follow-Through**: Recovery updates and realistic timelines

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Comparing the Two:
Crisis Comms in Action

Step	Flint, MI		Hurricane Sandy	
Confirm & activate	❌	Dismissed concerns	✅	Verified early, mobilized teams
Message scope	❌	Underestimated	✅	Regional coordination
Craft the message	❌	Confusing, defensive	✅	Clear, frequent, empathetic
Deliver & adjust	❌	Delayed & contradictory	✅	Real-time updates, myth-busting

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A Local Journalist's Wishes

1. "That community leaders respond to a reporter as soon as possible, even if there is not a lot of information to give out at the time. Media outlets are under pressure to report stories as soon as possible on-line, so early responses from leaders are important."

2. "Provide as much information as you can. Be as forthright and honest as possible."

3. "Provide frequent updates. Make sure that all outlets know where to find that information (such as the time and location of a press conference)."

-Paul Leighton, The Beverly Beat

Key Takeaways

✅ **Be prepared**, not over reactive – Build your team and plan before a crisis hits

🗣 **Communicate clearly, early, and often** – Share whatever information you have available

🔍 **Transparency builds trust** – Even if you do not have all the answers and may not for some time

🔁 **Monitor and adapt** – Stay responsive during and after the crisis

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Open floor for questions

Q&A

Thank You!

McMahon Communications is a full-service marketing communications firm that works alongside municipal leaders and public agencies to strengthen communication, deepen community trust, and navigate high-stakes moments – from launching new projects and developments to dealing with crises.

With roots in local and state government, and expertise in stakeholder engagement, we help local leaders communicate clearly, credibly, and confidently.

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