



CSC Playbook Series:

Active Shooter—Prepare, Respond, & Recover

Tragically, active shooter events on college campuses are something for which every institution must prepare. APLU's [Council on Strategic Communications](#) has developed a series of playbooks, with support and expertise from [Blue Moon Consulting Group](#), to help you begin to think about the work your campus needs to do to prepare for, respond to, and recover from such a tragic event. Our goal is to share with our members best practice and lessons learned from peer institutions with a specific focus on emergency and strategic communications.

This series is composed of three parts:

[Part 1: Prepare >](#)

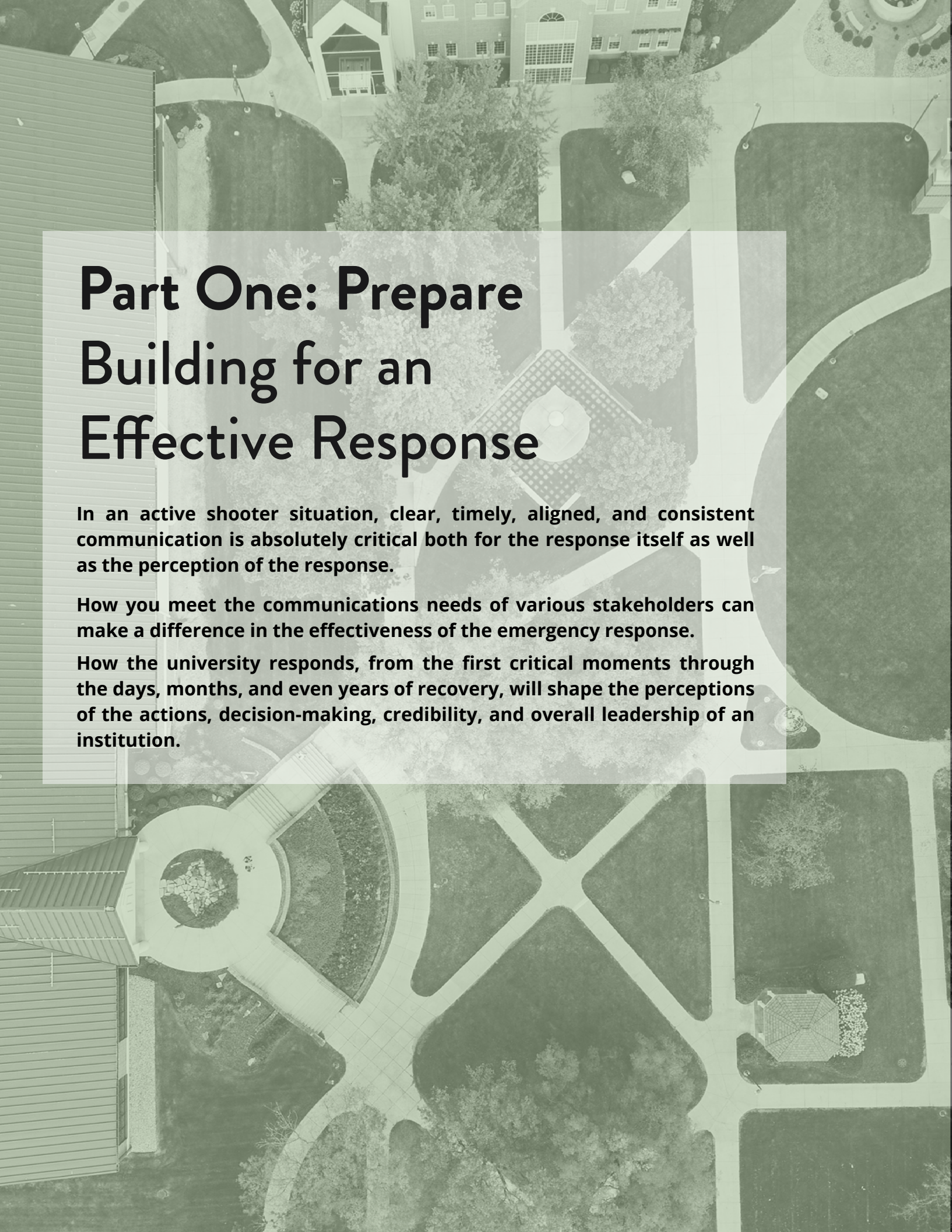
Building for an Effective Response

[Part 2: Respond >](#)

Meeting the Immediate Information Needs of Your Community

[Part 3: Recover >](#)

Providing the Emotional, Humanitarian, and Strategic Support Necessary to Move Forward

An aerial photograph of a university campus, showing various buildings, green spaces, and pathways. A semi-transparent white rectangular box is overlaid on the center of the image, containing the title and three paragraphs of text. The text is in a bold, black, sans-serif font. The background image shows a mix of modern and traditional architecture, with some buildings having multiple stories and others being smaller, single-story structures. There are many trees and landscaped areas throughout the campus.

Part One: Prepare Building for an Effective Response

In an active shooter situation, clear, timely, aligned, and consistent communication is absolutely critical both for the response itself as well as the perception of the response.

How you meet the communications needs of various stakeholders can make a difference in the effectiveness of the emergency response.

How the university responds, from the first critical moments through the days, months, and even years of recovery, will shape the perceptions of the actions, decision-making, credibility, and overall leadership of an institution.

HOW PREPARED IS YOUR COMMUNICATIONS TEAM?

In a crisis, the easy things are hard, and the difficult are seemingly impossible. If your school has been fortunate enough to have avoided major issues or events, it can be easy to fall prey to two pervasive myths:

Believing a Talented Team is Enough

Having smart, effective team members is important; however, relying solely on “smart people” in the room—at any level of the response—simply isn’t enough.

This is especially true if you have newer members who haven’t experienced a significant issue, crisis, or even an exercise with your team.

An active shooter event will put profound personal and professional pressure on your team members—events are unfolding rapidly, verifiable facts are scarce, the demand for information is high, and the community your team loves is under siege.

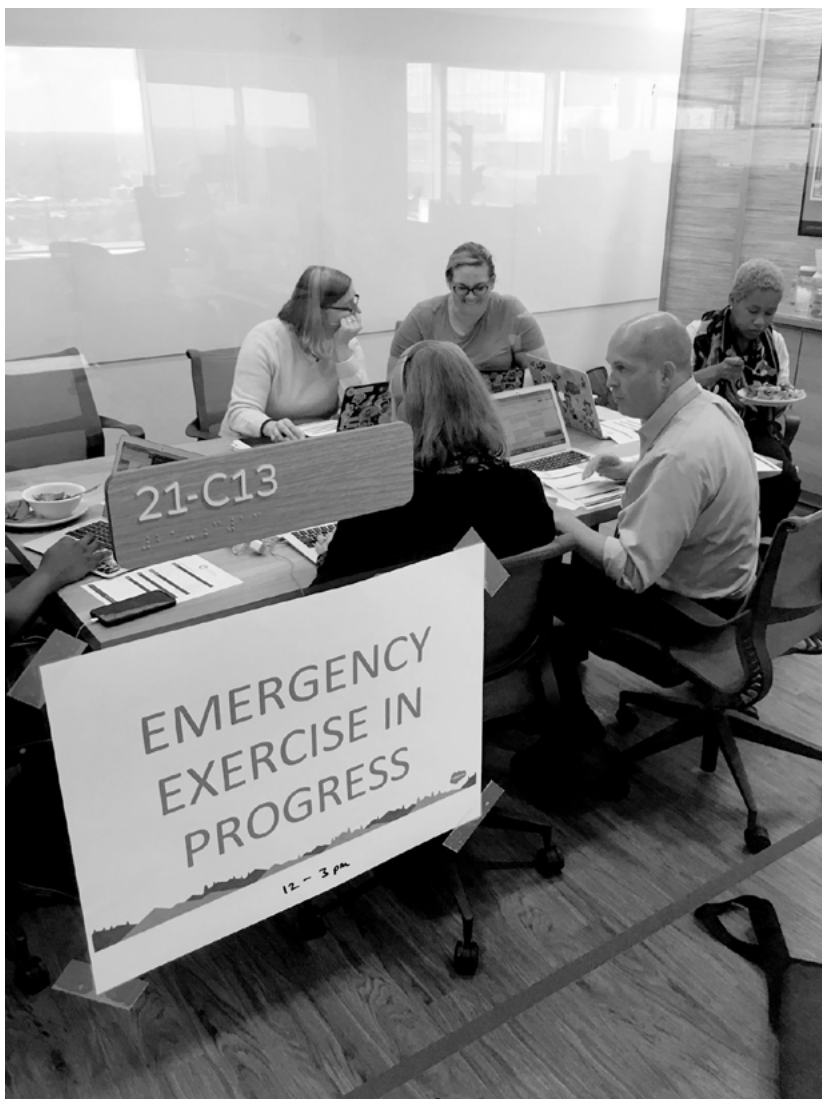
At this most critical moment, when you most need your team to perform at its peak, it will become clear that the very day-to-day processes you rely on are simply not engineered to navigate these treacherous and fast-moving waters.

To make matters worse, once the initial response has passed, the second-guessing and investigations will begin. Every move a university team makes in this high-stakes and emotionally charged environment will be scrutinized and judged.

Surviving Covid Equates to Being Battle-Tested

Unfortunately, and perhaps ironically, the COVID-19 pandemic provides a false sense of security for many schools. When faced with a serious crisis, teams pulled together, heroes appeared from unexpected corners, and the vast majority of colleges and universities were able to—if not emerge triumphant, at least “figure it out” to the general satisfaction of their community.

However, some of the very best approaches schools used—in particular, broad collaboration across the institution—simply will not work in an emergency when time is of the essence.



LEARN FROM FRONT LINE EMERGENCY RESPONDERS

The Incident Command Structure (ICS) used by emergency responders nationwide was developed because of a failed response in the 1970s to a wildfire event in southern California. It ultimately was determined that the problem was not a failure of tactics or resources but a failure of management—a lack of clear roles, responsibilities, and structure for collaboration.



Institute a Disciplined and Practiced Approach

If there is only one thing that you do to prepare your team for the unimaginable, it should be to develop and exercise a crisis communications plan. In fact, research has shown that the single biggest predictor of success in an emergency is having a documented and recently practiced plan in place—a plan that clearly delineates:

- Roles
- Responsibilities
- Processes
- Coordination with communicators across the institution, leadership and key decision makers, and other emergency responders both internal and within the broader community

Training and exercising on this plan—at least annually—with the core and extended teams, primaries and backups, both individually as a crisis communications team and in conjunction with emergency operations and leadership/crisis management—helps move your team from a place of theoretical understanding to a practiced capability.

KNOW WHERE YOUR TEAM PLUGS IN TO THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE

An active shooter event will test:

- The effectiveness of your police department or campus safety team
- The capabilities of your emergency operations team
- The decision-making and strategic abilities of your leadership/crisis management team

It will also challenge your ability to:

- Provide accurate and timely information
- Keep control of the narrative
- Contain the spread of rumors
- Protect the reputation of the institution and its leadership



Effective crisis response requires collaboration, coordination, and clarity on roles and expectations.

KNOW WHERE YOUR TEAM PLUGS IN TO THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Review the Emergency Operations Plan

Many schools have developed Emergency Operations Plans based on generic federal or state plans that, while appropriate for major regional disasters, simply do not provide the direction or detail necessary in a higher education environment. In particular, emergency plan leadership—sometimes called the Executive Policy Group (EPG)—and communications roles tend to be lacking. Conversely, the plans may conflate operational and strategic communications.

It may appear that Emergency Support Function (ESF) Communications Job Aids—FEMA-generated, standardized guidance included in many school plans—provide this direction. Yet a close read will make it clear where they fall short. In particular, the ESF tends to view the communications team through a very narrow, media-focused lens as opposed to the more strategic—and imperative—role the team has in helping to guide leadership decision-making and crafting communications for all stakeholders across the institution.

For this reason, it's important to consider the Emergency Operations, Crisis Management (Leadership) and Crisis Communications plans holistically with a particular focus on the delineation and coordination of communications roles relative to operational and strategic communications.

Operational Communications

Dangerous situations involving an immediate threat to the health or safety of the campus community require clear and immediate notification, including information about a threat or hazard, the actions being taken, and the assistance being provided.

The responsibility for distributing this messaging lies with the police/public safety, and—as the incident progresses—the Emergency Operations Team via the Public Information Officer (PIO) with support from the Crisis Communications Team.

University communications leaders can reduce concern and worry by doing the following:

- Review/Develop emergency notifications with police/public safety to ensure emergency messages are in place, appropriate, and clear.
- Ensure it is absolutely clear who has the authority and ability to send emergency notifications.
- Determine what the “single source of institutional truth” will be—ideally a police social media feed that points to an emergency/dark site for more detailed information. Other social media accounts should amplify that messaging and the homepage should direct users there.
- Understand how your emergency site works, who can activate it, and what existing content may already be in place. If none exists, develop a dark site with key areas of information—i.e. class and activity cancellations, resources for mental health support, family assistance, options for campus closure, etc. Ensure the site will be able to support the unprecedented traffic loads that you can expect to see in the first 24-48 hours.



KNOW WHERE YOUR TEAM PLUGS IN TO THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE

Strategic Communications

By contrast, strategic communications involves values-based messaging designed to convey compassion, reassure the community, and provide updates on administrative actions. Excluding police actions, this vital communication will be the single largest determinant in the perception of the effectiveness of the university's response.

The crisis communications team has the responsibility for developing a communications strategy and materials, which the institution's leadership must approve. In discussions with the leadership team:

- Establish and commit to the importance of aligned communications—speaking with one voice as an institution. In the heat of the moment, every leader will want to communicate the information they know broadly. However, the importance of ensuring that only fact-based and approved information goes out cannot be overstated.
- Develop an expedited approval process—the single-biggest hurdle to effective communications is following a business-as-usual communications approval process. An expedited approval process should be developed and socialized with administration leaders prior to any crisis event.
- Clarify the role that your president or chancellor will take in media relations.



NEXT STEPS

- ☐ **Arrange a briefing with the school's Behavioral Threat Assessment Team.** Ensure you know how/ when the Communications Team will become plugged in.
- ☐ **Meet with other teams to review plans** for both operational and strategic communications ensuring that responsibilities and authorities are clearly delineated and supported by all potential responders.
- ☐ **Confirm Communications is represented on the leadership/crisis management team** to ensure reputational risk—not just legal, operational or financial considerations—is actively incorporated into decision-making.
- ☐ **Identify and clarify the role of the PIO.** Know their reporting lines.
 - NOTE: This role may be assigned either to the police—typically in larger institutions—or to the communications team. In either case, there should be a clear understanding of what this role entails, including expectations around specific responsibilities. If this role falls to the communications team, the team will need a clearer understanding of the PIO's unique requirements, role, and pressures during a crisis and how they can support them. This role should be separate from media relations as the volume of work will be too great for one person to do both.
- ☐ **Develop or update your current Crisis Communication Plan** ensuring that it aligns with expectations detailed in the Crisis Management/Leadership and Emergency Operations Plans.

NEXT STEPS (CONT.)

❑ **Ensure you have a clear plan for activation of your team including:**

- A way to reach all members—core, extended, and backups, day or night. (Ensure that your contact list also includes key members of other teams.)
- A pre-identified meeting location and an understanding of who needs to be onsite and who can join remotely.
- The infrastructure in place necessary to support your approach including access to the plans, tools, and checklists that members will need.

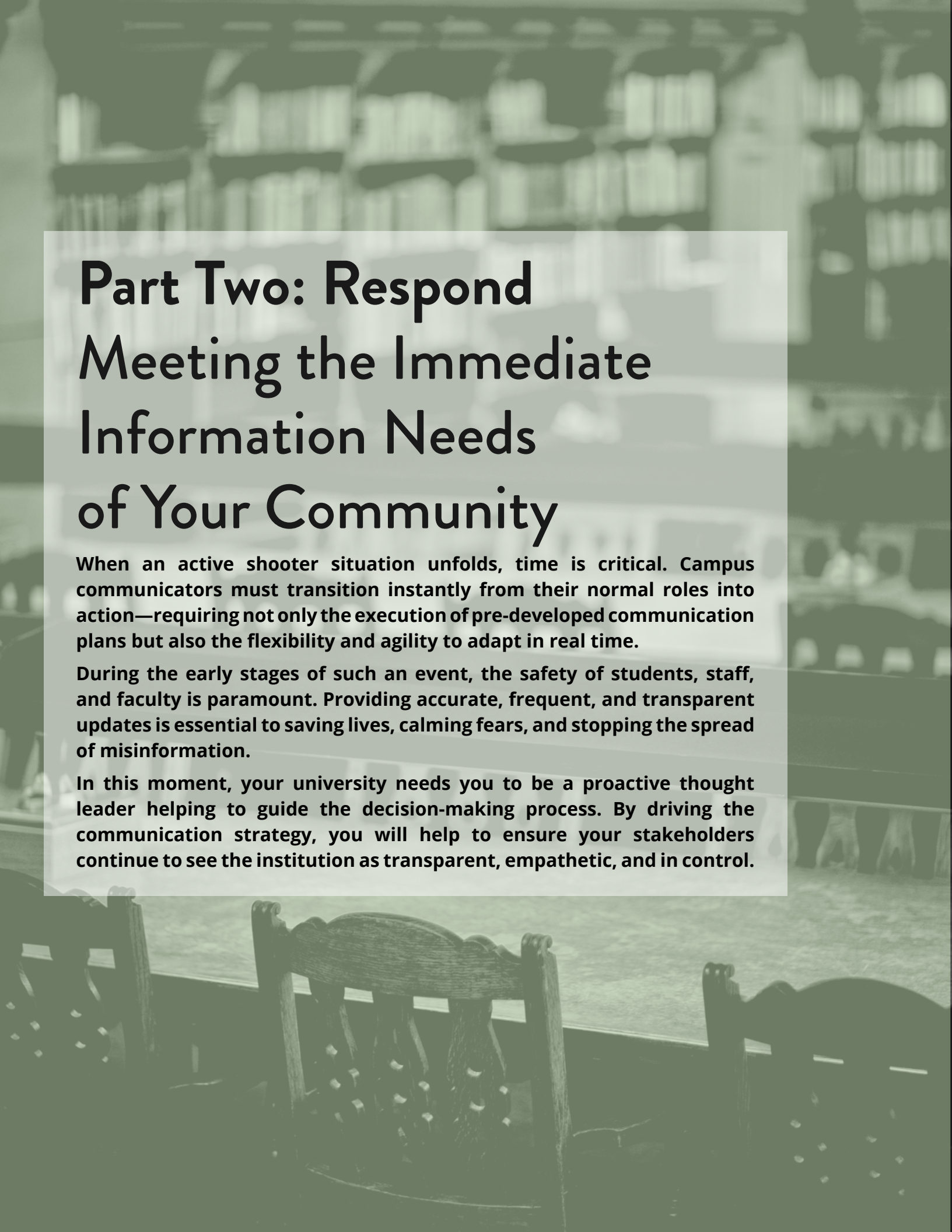
❑ **Exercise your team** on activation process, roles, responsibilities, communications, and coordination using a realistic scenario and a structure aligned with the maturity of your program. Update your plan as necessary based on the team's performance.

BUILD RELATIONSHIPS WITH OTHER RESPONSE TEAMS

One of the most important recommendations shared by schools that have experienced an active shooter is to cultivate and/or build upon relationships with other emergency responders, including campus police/public safety, campus leadership, and other local and regional responders. The goal is to ensure that trusted and collaborative relationships exist prior to any event.

While you may have a theoretical understanding of what each team will do in a response, nothing beats getting to know individuals and the protocols—both written and unwritten—that drive their approach and response. One of the best ways to do this is to have them join your exercises and actively participate in theirs—and when possible, exercise together.





Part Two: Respond

Meeting the Immediate Information Needs of Your Community

When an active shooter situation unfolds, time is critical. Campus communicators must transition instantly from their normal roles into action—requiring not only the execution of pre-developed communication plans but also the flexibility and agility to adapt in real time.

During the early stages of such an event, the safety of students, staff, and faculty is paramount. Providing accurate, frequent, and transparent updates is essential to saving lives, calming fears, and stopping the spread of misinformation.

In this moment, your university needs you to be a proactive thought leader helping to guide the decision-making process. By driving the communication strategy, you will help to ensure your stakeholders continue to see the institution as transparent, empathetic, and in control.

TEAM/PERSONAL SAFETY: THE FIRST CONSIDERATION

During an active shooter event, personal safety must come first. Ensure now that you and your team know and fully understand the “run, hide, fight” basics. Plan a meeting with the team to review your institution’s procedures with a specific focus on your office and other commonly frequented locations. If possible, have police or public safety officials join the meeting to review both personal safety and expectations once police arrive on scene.



[FBI: Run, Hide, Fight](#)

If your school has not produced its own active shooter safety video, watch one of the many such videos you can access online such as those developed by the FBI, “Run, Hide, Fight” or the UK Counterterrorism Policing which has a slightly softer approach but does not discuss actions to take when trapped. Discuss specifics around how the team can accomplish immediate communications tasks virtually if campus has not yet been given the “all-clear.”



[Counter Terrorism Policing: Safety Advice for the Public](#)

STAGE 1: COMMUNITY NOTIFICATIONS

As soon as an event occurs, mass alert notifications become the top communications priority. At most institutions, sending emergency alerts is the responsibility of the university police, public safety, or emergency operations team. Pre-approved messages, templates, and protocols should already be in place, ready for immediate dissemination. These messages should cover critical safety instructions, such as whether there is an active threat, where individuals should shelter, and which specific areas the community should avoid. The central communications office should be prepared to amplify content and understand when and how they will assume responsibility for subsequent alert communications.

Notifications must be frequent and direct:

- Updates should be sent at regular intervals, even when there is no new information.

- The communication must be clear and:
 - Reinforce safety direction (e.g. shelter in place; avoid the area, etc.)
 - Focus on the status of the incident (e.g., is the suspect still at large?)
 - Provide guidance for police engagement (e.g. directing informational tips)
- Fast-moving crises demand quick decisions. Ensure a process exists now that avoids excessive approval layers in the moment.

These notifications should be repeated across multiple platforms, including the university home page and other high-traffic websites, email alerts, and appropriate social media feeds, particularly through verified institutional accounts such as university police. Train social media teams to amplify these accounts emphasizing that they should not embellish or add new and/or unverified information.

STAGE 1: COMMUNITY NOTIFICATIONS

Rumor Control

In these moments, social media will be abuzz with unverified reports and speculation—at times gleaned from police radio communications—which can heighten fear and confusion. Rumor control will be crucial. Ensure your team works closely with law enforcement through the Public Information Officer (PIO)—a trained member of police or the communications team—to monitor and debunk false information. Whenever possible, use official university channels to fact-check rumors, thereby controlling the narrative and keeping the public grounded in reality. As discussed in Part 1: Prepare—Building for an Effective Response, meet with other response teams including the police, the Emergency Operations Team (EOT), and leadership-level Crisis Management Team (CMT) to discuss—in detail—the delineation and coordination of communications and rumor response.



Accounting for Community Members

Having a clear plan in place to account for the status and safety of students, staff, faculty and visitors is essential. But internal accounting—missing, injured, hospitalized, dead—is not synonymous with reporting this information externally. Recognize that although there will be an intense effort to confirm the status of individuals, any release of information will require approval from police and the emergency operations center director and likely will be provided only in the aggregate. Plan to discuss protocols in advance with police, the emergency operations director, and the family assistance center.

EMERGENCY DARK SITE : ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS

The very process of thinking through a dark site will help your team understand what is already in place, identify gaps, and take the strategic lead on this topic, driving your institution to become more prepared.

- Event-specific details (fact-checking, verified reports)
- Family Assistance Center information
- Immediate impacts
 - school/building closures
 - memorial services
 - charity information
 - counseling resources
- Stakeholder-specific information (resources for students, faculty, and staff)
- Clear guidance on how the public can help by giving blood, donating money, or volunteering

Regardless of whether you decide to develop a dark site, it will be essential to obtain access to all available digital communication channels before a crisis and cross-train key personnel on how to deploy these assets in an emergency.

STAGE 2: IMMEDIATE IMPACTS—TODAY AND TOMORROW

Once the initial chaos subsides and the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is established, the communications strategy splits into two parallel but mutually supporting streams: operational and strategic communications.

Operational Communications: This stream focuses on fact-based updates about the crime scene, the ongoing investigation, and public safety information and guidance. The responsibility for distributing this messaging lies with the police/public safety, and—as the incident progresses—the Emergency Operations Team or Joint Information Center via the Public Information Officer (PIO) with support from the Crisis Communications Team. Communicators must ensure that only verified facts are shared to prevent misinformation.

Strategic Communications: Alternately, strategic communications involve values-based messaging designed to convey compassion, reassure the community, and provide updates on administrative actions including modified operations, staffing and schedule changes. It is the “what now”—information that the community needs about moving forward, support, and recovery. This messaging is developed by the crisis communications team in partnership with institutional leaders.

Communications Team Responsibilities

In the immediate aftermath, prioritize establishing a “single source of truth.” We find that most institutions’ police, emergency, or alert sites are not designed to be agile enough to meet the evolving information needs that your community may have over the days, weeks, and months (and even years) that you will need to communicate on the topic.

Given that, we encourage the communications team to consider developing an emergency dark site—fully functional, prepopulated pages that can be published almost immediately should the need arise. Hidden on a development server or other inaccessible place, a dark site can be launched with little to no preparation to share accurate and timely information. A pre-developed emergency microsite provides a number of benefits, including:

- **Quickly Taking Control of the Narrative:** When there isn’t a clear resource for comprehensive information, gaps are filled with rumors and misinformation. A well-designed and quickly launched microsite establishes the primary and authoritative source for information—the “go-to” place for key information and updates.
- **Demonstrating that You Are in Control:** One of the most important things that you will be communicating with a microsite is that you are taking responsibility to “make things right,” rather than simply reacting to a bad situation. You are providing the information that your community needs to move forward.
- **Signaling Transparency:** While the information shared may not always reflect positively on your institution; by providing the facts—the good, the bad, and the ugly—you demonstrate that you are taking the issue seriously. You establish trust through transparency.
- **Providing Frontline Staff Support:** A microsite ensures that you are not dependent on frontline staff or supporters who may have varying levels of expertise and background to share this important information. Instead, provide your representatives a few key talking points and have them redirect stakeholders to this site.

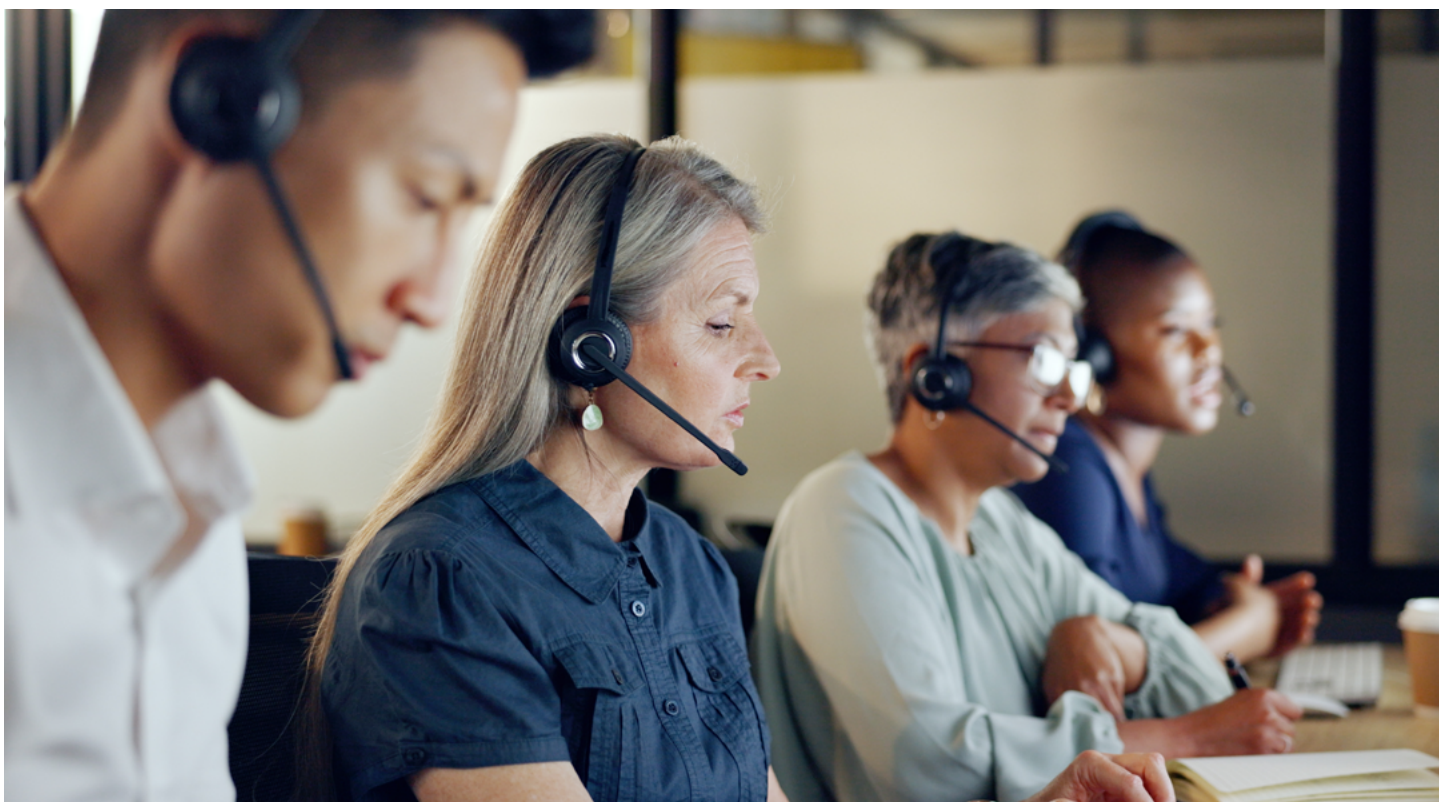
STAGE 2: IMMEDIATE IMPACTS

Incoming Inquires: Cautiously Consider Utilizing a Call Center

Following an active shooter incident, the institution will receive an influx of calls from stakeholders, media, and outside entities unrelated to the school or community. Callers will use any publicly available phone number to reach a contact at the university, regardless of whether that person is qualified or authorized to speak on behalf of the institution.

Frontline staff who typically answer phones should not be tasked with managing the influx of calls in such a volatile situation. Instead, you may consider rerouting calls temporarily to a call center to be logged and managed. While a call center can offer relief from the sheer volume of phone inquiries, Communications teams should be prescriptive in defining the call center's responsibilities. Typically, those should be limited to redirecting callers to resources like the family assistance center, counseling services, and the university's emergency microsite/dark site. Ambiguity about the call center's role and the language it uses to communicate with callers introduces undue reputational risk at a highly sensitive time.

Should you decide against using a call center, communicators must prepare frontline staff to answer, log, and appropriately direct incoming calls. The Communications Team should provide a very short script to staff that acknowledges the emergency and directs callers to the "single source of truth"— the microsite/dark site. Additionally, it will be important to provide them key phrases to manage difficult callers and tools to handle threatening calls and escalate those to the proper authorities. The Communications Team should also provide recommended language for voicemail and auto-reply email messages for key offices and responders. Again, the goal is to avoid having these frontline staff answer questions or extemporize. Leave the FAQ to the emergency dark site or trained leadership.





HOW CAN I HELP?

One of the biggest challenges following any disaster or emergency is addressing the outpouring of offers to help almost from the moment the first warnings go out.

- Speak with police about how outside police forces and individual first responders can be identified by campus stakeholders to help reduce community concern.
- Ensure that the Emergency Operations Team has a plan in place to meet and focus “Good Samaritans” who arrive on campus; otherwise, you risk parallel responses being established.
- Understand whether Student Affairs has in place a formal plan to offer extended counseling services, including how they may verify and incorporate individuals from throughout the community who spontaneously arrive on campus.
- Develop a thoughtful, proactive, and strategic plan for vigils, memorials, and donations in partnership with Student Affairs, Advancement, Legal and other key leadership.
- Work with your leadership team to reinforce the idea of controlled messaging and programing. Every dean, faculty member, manager, and board member will want to communicate on the topic. Point them to your single source of truth and help them understand what information and communications should be simply a passthrough and where they are welcome to develop targeted messaging.
- Consider your extended team—those beyond the tight-knit circle you will initially turn to. How can they be informed and leveraged in the response? For example, most institutions do not have enough people ready to handle the traditional and social media volume and demands that you will see. Cross-train them now. Not including them—or at least keeping them informed—risks hurt and anger in the aftermath.

STAGE 2: IMMEDIATE IMPACTS

Managing the Media

As news spreads, the campus will be inundated with news media representatives. A key task will be managing the flow of information and media access while also supporting law enforcement's investigation and respecting the privacy of victims, their families, and your community. Establishing a Media Information Center (MIC), or Joint Information Center (JIC) if law enforcement jurisdiction is shared, should be a priority. The center serves as a hub for press briefings, housing operational and strategic communicators, and allowing the institution to control the flow of information. This consolidated approach helps to ensure that all public statements are coordinated and consistent.

Media Information Center (MIC): Once the campus is secure (and even before), hundreds of reporters will arrive at the center and seek statements, interviews, and constant updates. Establishing a MIC immediately helps the institution accommodate the influx of media requests, control the dissemination of verified information, and provide vetted authority figures for statements and interviews. The MIC is typically established and run by the Media Relations team. It should be a safe, accessible location away from the ongoing crime scene where briefings are held at regular intervals and media inquiries can be organized and handled professionally. To ensure there is a safe and secure option, identify and stock—in advance—three separate locations across campus. This allows the team to turn to an alternate location should one or more fall within the active hot zone.

Joint Information Center (JIC): The MIC may transition to a JIC, so named because several law enforcement agencies are represented. The JIC helps coordinate communication between the university, law enforcement, and emergency personnel. While still the hosts, the institution's Media Relations team may no longer be the lead but will continue to work closely with other agencies now in the lead (FBI, State Police, government agencies, etc.). The JIC should handle all media briefings, press conferences, and updates, ensuring that information is consistent and reliable across all agencies involved. Scheduling press briefings at predictable intervals will help reduce speculation and misinformation while providing the media with regular opportunities for updates.

The First Press Conference

The first press conference sets the tone for how the community and media will perceive the institution's response. In the immediate aftermath of an active shooter event, the first press conference should focus on providing factual updates and offering reassurance to a traumatized community. Typically held within two hours of the event's resolution, it's essential for your institution to present accurate information in a calm and steady tone to counteract the chaos and rumors already circulating.

The press conference should open with law enforcement as the police chief provides clear updates on the situation—focusing on what is known without speculating. The speaker should project calm and transparency, reassuring the community that the situation is being handled responsibly. Next, the institution's president or a high-ranking official should deliver an empathetic message, acknowledging the pain and grief while avoiding overwhelming details. This speaker should express sympathy for victims and their families and assure the campus that support services are being mobilized.

STAGE 2: IMMEDIATE IMPACTS

Details such as the status of campus activities and mental health services should also be addressed, but in a concise manner. It's essential to assure the community that they will be kept informed as more information becomes available.

After the prepared statements, a brief Q&A session can follow, but it's important to set boundaries about how long it will last and who will address specific questions at the outset. Keeping the press conference short, focused, and respectful is key to maintaining public trust.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS, RUN OF SHOW, BEST PRACTICES

Key Considerations

- Focus on what we know and avoid speculation. Police will be the primary source of incident-specific updates.
- Convey empathy for victims and ensure the institution's leadership demonstrates their focus on supporting the community.
- Limit the number of speakers to two or three to avoid overwhelming stakeholders.



First Press Conference Sample Run of Show

1. Opening by Communications Representative:
 - Introduce speakers and agenda.
 - Set ground rules (e.g., limit on time for questions).
2. Police Chief:
 - Deliver fact-based updates, exuding calm and transparency.
 - Say what is known, acknowledging that much information is still unfolding.
3. Institutional Leader (e.g., President):
 - Express empathy and outline the institution's support efforts.
 - Announce decisions (e.g., class cancellations, campus operations, counseling services).
4. Communications Representative:
 - Open for Q&A, directing questions to appropriate speakers.
 - Close the conference at the predetermined time.

Press Conference Best Practices

- Stick to the basics and keep it short.
- Show calm, authentic leadership.
- Address the incident factually but focus on what steps are being taken to support the community.
- Reassure the community that more information will be shared as it is confirmed. If possible, indicate a planned cadence for updates or, at least, schedule a time for the next briefing.

STAGE 3: THE MEDIUM TERM—SUBSEQUENT DAYS/WEEKS

After the initial response stage, the focus shifts toward healing and recovery. Perhaps the most difficult aspect is recognizing that responses will run the gamut—from debilitating sadness, anger, or fear to seeming indifference. During this stage, your work will guide the community through the recovery process.

What Went Wrong? The Importance of Continued Transparency

Unfortunately, at this stage, the institution is likely to come under intense scrutiny as stakeholders, from students to parents to media, try to understand exactly what happened. In anger and grief, the community will seek to make sense of the event by exploring whether someone did something wrong or someone missed a red flag.

In these situations, the inclination may be to remain silent and retreat to a place of perceived safety. However, it is imperative for communicators—with police/Emergency Operations Director approval—to continue providing key facts and information, building out FAQs as appropriate that address:

- What do we know at this time?
- Who is involved in the criminal investigation?
- Are there any other investigations (legislative, third-party, legal, etc.) and where do they stand?
- What is being done for those directly and indirectly impacted?

FAQs can also be drafted to directly debunk rumors and misinformation. It is highly recommended that law enforcement, without compromising the investigation, provide a timeline of events.

In addition to law enforcement updates, leaders at the institution must continue providing timely



STAGE 3: THE MEDIUM TERM

updates to the community. These will evolve to different forms of updates, from press conferences to community email updates to direct stakeholder engagement with key impacted audiences.

Trauma-Informed Communications: Importance and Approach

Trauma-informed communication goes beyond just relaying information—it's about delivering messages with empathy and sensitivity, recognizing that a community impacted by a traumatic event like an active shooter will be dealing with a wide range of emotions. By understanding the effects of trauma, your communications can help support recovery rather than risk re-traumatizing individuals.

In the wake of such an event, avoid graphic or sensational language that could exacerbate fear and distress. Instead, use calm, neutral language to convey the facts while validating the emotional toll that the incident has had on the community. Phrases like, “We understand this is a difficult time for everyone,” can help people feel acknowledged without being overwhelmed.



Clear and simple language is essential, as trauma can impair people's ability to process complex information. Your communications should focus not only on factual updates but on messages of healing and unity, like, “We will get through this together,” which fosters a sense of community and resilience. Another key element is providing practical support. It is important to outline clearly where people can access mental health resources and offer step-by-step guidance for getting help. Collaborating with mental health professionals can also ensure that your messaging is sensitive to the community's unique needs.

In the aftermath of trauma, balancing the need for information with the emotional well-being of your community members is essential. Compassionate, trauma-informed communication helps people stay informed while also beginning the process of healing.

TRAUMA-INFORMED COMMUNICATIONS

Carefully consider your messaging to ensure that your approach is not only compassionate but presented in a way that helps your community feel safe and informed.

- Avoid adjectives like “horrific” or “senseless.” Instead, use terms like “the violence our community experienced.”
- Balance the need for information with the risk of re-traumatizing the community. Too much communication about the incident can deepen trauma.
- Incorporate messages of hope and community strength while validating the range of emotions people will feel.
- Recognize that different members of your community— students, faculty, staff, parents, and first responders—may need different types of support at different points in time.
- Understand that survivors' guilt presents in a number of ways, and each should be recognized, valued, and addressed.
- Leverage campus Subject Matter Experts with experience in trauma informed approaches.

NEXT STEPS

□ **Meet with your team to develop a plan for personal and team safety:**

- Review “run, hide, fight” basics.
- Consider possible scenarios and discuss actions to take individually and collectively—review escape routes, look for places to hide, reframe “fight” as “survive” and talk through options.

□ **Coordinate with police to ensure a consistent and aligned communications strategy:**

- Templatize basic emergency messages. Assign responsibility for initial as well as second and third levels of notifications. Test alert systems regularly.
- Discuss process to verify tips and debunk rumors—clarify what type of information can be shared without affecting safety or investigations.

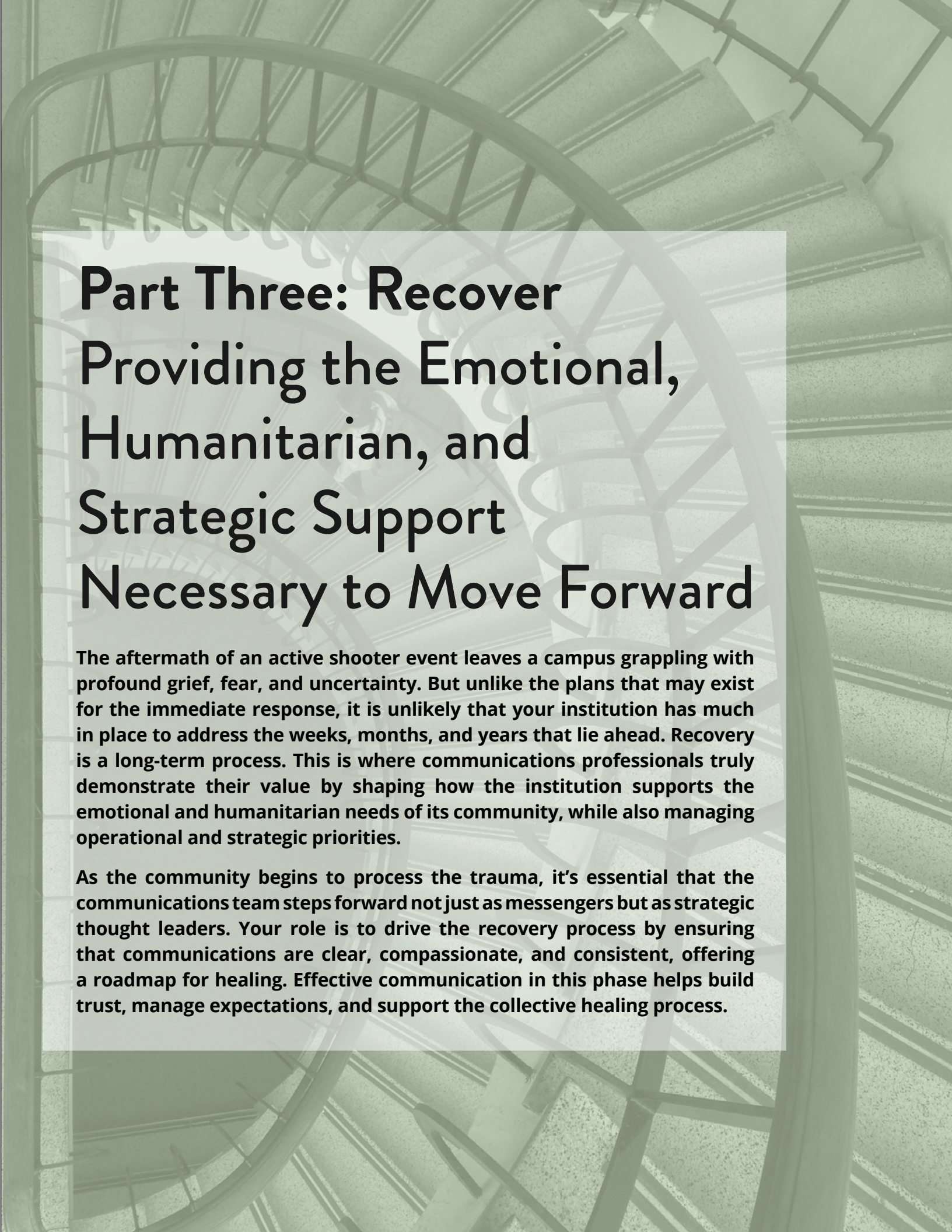
□ **Prepare a rapid response framework:**

- Establish a quick message approval processes to avoid delays.
- Ensure that enough social media resources in place to monitor, collect and analyze tips, and correct misinformation.
- Train your team and communicators across campus on trauma-informed communications.
- Draft basic emergency talking points/FAQs for frontline staff.
- Determine criteria, process, training, and scripts for possible activation of call centers.
- Develop emergency communication guidance beyond top leadership—when and how Deans and other managers should communicate with direct reports.
- Identify and stock a minimum of two possible onsite locations for a MIC/JIC. These should be distant from one another to increase likelihood that they would not fall into a “hot” zone.
- Train your team and other campus communicators around trauma-informed communications.

□ **Work with other institution leaders to:**

- Develop the content for an emergency dark site including key topics such as information on family assistance center, counseling, operations—meal/housing, class schedules, and definition, designation, and guidance of and for “essential” personnel.
- Establish legal, operational, and reputational parameters to guide emergency funds.
- Ensure that consideration has been given to organize volunteers.





Part Three: Recover **Providing the Emotional,** **Humanitarian, and** **Strategic Support** **Necessary to Move Forward**

The aftermath of an active shooter event leaves a campus grappling with profound grief, fear, and uncertainty. But unlike the plans that may exist for the immediate response, it is unlikely that your institution has much in place to address the weeks, months, and years that lie ahead. Recovery is a long-term process. This is where communications professionals truly demonstrate their value by shaping how the institution supports the emotional and humanitarian needs of its community, while also managing operational and strategic priorities.

As the community begins to process the trauma, it's essential that the communications team steps forward not just as messengers but as strategic thought leaders. Your role is to drive the recovery process by ensuring that communications are clear, compassionate, and consistent, offering a roadmap for healing. Effective communication in this phase helps build trust, manage expectations, and support the collective healing process.

OPERATIONAL RECOVERY: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Once the immediate crisis has passed, the focus shifts to getting the institution back on its feet. Operational recovery involves reopening facilities, resuming classes, ensuring a safe environment, and evaluating programmatic services and support. Your role as a communicator is to provide regular updates on these processes in a way that feels accessible and reassuring.

Resuming Operations

Students, faculty, and staff will be anxious to know when and how campus operations will resume. Clear and consistent communication is key to managing expectations.

Provide updates about campus safety enhancements, facility repairs, and any policy changes aimed at preventing future incidents.

Work closely with facilities management and campus security to communicate timelines for reopening buildings (including the recovery of personal effects), the status of any damaged areas, and any new security measures that have been implemented. Reinforce the message that the institution is prioritizing safety while balancing the need to restore normalcy. It is crucial for communications to be clear that leaders are aware of the challenge that teaching and learning in an impacted facility presents and that resources are being made available.



Returning to Classes

While resuming classes is essential, it's important to acknowledge that returning to "normal" will take time. Some students may feel ready to get back to routine, while others may need more support before they can return. Communicating flexibility and support, such as counseling services or alternative academic options, will be key. Recognize that different students will have different needs from an academic perspective—the needs of undergraduates will not be the same as graduate or Ph.D. students.

Be sure to update students and faculty regularly on any changes to the academic schedule and policies to ensure they feel supported during this transition. It is also important to provide guidance and resources to faculty as classes resume so that they feel prepared. Share information with them about trauma-informed communication and how their own messaging can fold into or amplify the institution's approach. Resources—including webinars and trainings—are available through federal groups experienced in mass violence response.





STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS: LEADING THOUGHTFUL, PROACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Beyond operational recovery, strategic communications are vital for maintaining the institution's long-term reputation and trust. Your team needs to anticipate challenges and plan for community needs well beyond the immediate aftermath.

Social Media Monitoring & Info Sharing

In the days and weeks following a traumatic event, social media will be flooded with conversations, rumors, and reactions. Monitor social channels closely, not only for misinformation but to help understanding the emotional pulse of the community. Doing so will help you respond in a timely, sensitive manner.

Establish a clear and consistent cadence for sharing updates and use social media to share resources for emotional and practical support. Monitor hashtags and keywords associated with the event to track discussions and respond when necessary. However, avoid engaging with inflammatory or sensational content that could escalate tensions. It is also important to remember that each campus member will be on their own recovery journey and may express themselves in very different ways, particularly on social media.

Clear, Expedited Approval Process

Similar to the respond phase, the recovery phase also often involves making swift decisions while ensuring that communications remain accurate and thoughtful. Set up an expedited approval process for communications to ensure key updates are shared in a timely fashion without unnecessary delays that could render your messages insensitive or even obsolete.



STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

Role of President (and Board) in Communications

Your institution's leadership plays a crucial role in demonstrating empathy and resolve. Ensure that the president and other senior leaders are aligned with the communications strategy, particularly in delivering messages of solidarity and support to the campus community and the broader local community. It's essential that leadership communicates with compassion, acknowledges the grief and trauma experienced by the community, recognizes the contributions of first responders and support of the local community, and provides a vision for moving forward.



Community Support: Charities and Giving

In the wake of tragedy, the community will seek ways to help. Charities and fundraising efforts will spring up almost immediately, driven by the desire to offer support to victims and their families. Work with advancement, legal, and other key leadership to develop a proactive, thoughtful, and strategic approach while treading carefully to ensure that the institution's involvement is respectful and appropriate. When possible, we encourage coordination—or at minimum communication with—the individuals and families directly impacted. Incorporate their feedback as appropriate.

Although well-intentioned, many unofficial fundraising efforts can lead to confusion or even exploitation. The institution should not be directly involved in these third-party efforts. Instead, it's best to partner with an established, reputable charity or create a new initiative specifically designed to support the victims and their families.

If a new charity fund is established, clear objectives must be communicated, including how funds will be used—whether for covering healthcare costs, supporting families, or providing mental health resources. The institution should also provide guidance on how the community can contribute and ensure transparency about where the funds are going. In particular, take care if your institution would like to use donations for campus safety initiatives as some donors will consider that the institution's responsibility and not an appropriate use of donated funds. Unfortunately, it will also be important to communicate the risk of fraudulent charities that may appear in the wake of tragedy. Remind the community to verify the legitimacy of any organization before donating.



PARTNERING WITH EXTERNAL CHARITIES

- **Assess Reputation:** Ensure the charity has a well-established, trustworthy background. Research their financial records, prior work, and community involvement.
- **Clarify Purpose:** Clearly define the specific goals of the partnership, whether it's supporting victims, families, or broader mental health initiatives.
- **Involve Key Stakeholders:** As appropriate, include families, survivors, and impacted groups in conversations about how the charity will be involved.
- **Secure Long-Term Commitment:** Ensure the partnership can provide ongoing support beyond the initial aftermath, addressing long-term community needs.
- **Prevent Scams:** Actively communicate with the public about legitimate channels for donations, using the institution's platforms to endorse trusted options. Encourage the community to be wary of GoFundMe campaigns. Your state attorney general can be a valuable ally in providing scam alerts and tips.
- **Initiate Legal and Financial Oversight:** Collaborate with your legal team to review how funds are managed, ensuring transparency and accountability.
- **Recognize That Saying "No" Is Sometimes the Right Choice:** Your institution will receive more offers of help than it can realistically handle and feasibly engage. Consider strategic fit and community impact when choosing partner charities.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS

Memorials and Vigils: Honoring Lives Lost

In the days immediately following an event, it's common for community-led vigils to emerge as a way to grieve and find solidarity. The institution's role should be supportive but not overbearing. Advise senior leadership to attend these events but refrain from taking an active role unless specifically requested. The focus should remain on those affected, and your communications should help guide people toward mental health services and resources as part of the healing process.

Impromptu memorials—often makeshift gatherings of flowers, photos, and mementos—will also likely appear near the scene of the tragedy. These can provide a powerful emotional outlet, but can grow quickly and create logistical challenges especially when symbolic campus locations are used. It's important to respect these memorials while also ensuring they don't block access to buildings or roadways. Establish a process to preserve signs, letters, candles, stuffed animals and various personal mementos in a central repository and communicate early about how and when these memorials will be respectfully removed, and what will be done with the items left behind.

Finally, a formal university-led vigil organized by the institution provides an opportunity for the entire campus community to come together and grieve. This doesn't need to happen immediately—it's often held a week or two after the event, allowing space for funerals and other personal memorials.

Planning this event requires particular sensitivity—especially toward the victims' families who may not want to be involved or even have their family member included as part of the ceremony. Leadership participation should be by invitation only, with the focus on honoring the victims. Trusted community figures and voices, rather than institutional leaders, should take center stage. Your communications should clearly convey the purpose of the vigil while also providing logistical details about location, timing, and what attendees can expect.

As time passes, the institution must continue supporting the community while also preparing for long-term remembrance initiatives. This includes planning for key milestones like the one-year anniversary or potentially building a permanent memorial.



LONG-TERM: REMEMBERING AND HEALING

One-Year Remembrance

The one-year mark is a significant emotional milestone for the community. Planning for this remembrance requires thoughtful, inclusive communication. Work closely with campus stakeholders, families of the victims, and community leaders to ensure that the event is respectful and meets the needs of all involved. Develop a clear communications plan for the event, including objectives, key messages, and potential risks.

Permanent Memorial

A permanent memorial can be another important step in helping the community heal. The planning process for this memorial should begin early, and it should involve those most directly impacted by the event. Communications professionals will play a key role in ensuring that the project is managed sensitively, with regular updates to the community and a clear vision for what the memorial represents. Communicators will also play a role in gathering community input for the memorial process.

PLANNING THE ONE-YEAR REMEMBRANCE EVENT

- **Plan Early:** Begin planning the event at least six months in advance, considering key dates, such as the academic calendar, and personal milestones for the affected families.
- **Engage the Community:** Hold listening sessions with students, staff, and victims' families to gather input on the tone and format of the remembrance.
- **Vary the Event Format:** Consider a mix of formal and informal elements—vigils, speeches, service events, and quiet reflection spaces. Digital remembrances (like virtual walls of remembrance) can also engage those unable to attend. Meet your community where they are—allow them to engage if and how they choose through opt-in versus required events.
- **Develop Key Messaging:** Honor those lost while focusing on healing and moving forward. Empathy and sensitivity are crucial in framing the tone.
- **Recognize Media Impacts:** Consider limiting media presence or designate specific areas for press to avoid disrupting the solemn nature of the event.
- **Create Commemorative Material:** Plan for a lasting physical or digital memorial that attendees can contribute to, such as plaques, a garden, or an online memory book.
- **Focus on Mental Health:** Ensure mental health services are highly visible and accessible during and after the event, with trained counselors on hand. Counselors from outside the campus community can provide internal employees needed space to grieve.
- **Consider Context:** There may be scheduled events outside of the purview of the institution (athletic, performances, etc.) that may impact the perceived solemnity of the remembrance. Coordinate with organizers to the degree possible to move or reschedule those events.

RECOVERY COMMUNICATIONS

Throughout the response, clear, transparent, and predictable communications will be critical to building a sense of trust and safety. As with the press conference, the recovery team will want to focus on:

What: Decisions made and steps that have been taken.

Why: The reasoning behind those decisions and actions.

What Next: What the community can expect both in the short and long-term.

Continue to use the centralized microsite established to share key updates with the community, to reinforce and build upon the existing messaging, and to respond as necessary to concerns without overreacting.



COORDINATION OF RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

In the same way most institutions quickly established a COVID response taskforce, the response to an event as impactful as an active shooter would benefit by having a similar team established to provide centralized coordination of resources and information. In fact, two months after the February 13, 2023, violence on their campus, Michigan State University established its own Office for Resource and Support Coordination (ORSC) with available federal resources.

This team or office would be responsible for:

- Supporting and connecting those directly impacted to campus counseling and resources.
- Providing trauma-informed guidance to the institution as well as individual departments and units on policies, practices, communications, programs, events, and related decisions.
- Promoting campus healing and resilience with long-term structures and programs.
- Coordinating efforts with local, state, and federal recovery entities and funding.

NEXT STEPS:

Recovery is not a quick or simple process. It requires thoughtful, strategic planning from communications professionals, who must continue to lead with empathy and foresight. Below is a list of key next steps to consider in the months and years following an event:

- ❑ **Monitor social media:** Continue tracking community sentiment and misinformation.
- ❑ **Expedite communications processes:** Maintain clear approval paths for timely updates.
- ❑ **Coordinate leadership messaging:** Ensure senior leaders' communications are aligned and supportive.
- ❑ **Support fundraising efforts:** Guide the community to legitimate charity options.
- ❑ **Plan memorials and vigils:** Support community efforts while planning institution-led remembrances including anniversaries and permanent memorials.
- ❑ **Regularly communicate** mental health and counseling resources.
- ❑ **Facilitate third-party reviews** to assess and improve future responses.
- ❑ **Consider creating a dedicated office** for handling aftermath-related communications and resources for victims, their families, and the broader community.
- ❑ **Recognize that as time passes, it will be important to acknowledge that part of the healing process is for individuals and the institution to move forward.** Plan accordingly. After the first year, subsequent remembrances may focus less on grieving and more on learning and growth through meaningful engagement rooted in the mission of academics, research, and community.

As you lead the recovery communications efforts, expect a lengthy process and many challenges, including long-term litigation. With thoughtful, strategic leadership—that delineates the path between the institution's response to the tragedy and its legal strategy—communications professionals can help the community find a path forward—one marked by compassion, resilience, and hope.



“Regularly communicate mental health and counseling resources.”



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