Communicating in a Crisis
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Introduction

New York and the nation are in uncharted territory as we work to address the challenges of COVID-19 at all levels of government, as well as in our homes and businesses. In crisis situations such as this, for elected officials and high-level government employees, transparency and maintaining open lines of communication are keys to establishing public trust.

The emergence of a pandemic virus has already profoundly affected our state and our communities. Many people are frightened for their physical and/or financial health. All are hungry for accurate information from trustworthy sources.

Do we have all the answers to every question county constituents may have? No. But, counterintuitively, telling them that can actually be one way to earn their trust because they know you’re at least not giving them false information. Never be afraid to tell a constituent or reporter “I don’t know,” just make sure they believe their question has been taken seriously and you will actually work to find them an answer.

Additional steps you can take to better prepare for communicating in this or any other crisis:

- Transparency is key
- Develop your message
- Create a plan
- Communicate inside and out
- Prepare for tough questions
Transparency is key

Yes, we said it before, but it bears repeating. Be as open and honest with your constituents about what you are doing to address the issues that are most important to them, which are typically related to health, safety, and personal finances.

Develop your message

Never go to a mic or talk to a reporter without first having an idea of what you want your headline to be. But as you develop your message, don’t just think about what you want to say, give consideration to what you think the public wants or needs to hear. You want to meet them where they are. In this case, people want to know what you are doing to:

• Keep them from getting sick;
• Ensure they can be tested if they need it;
• Make sure they can be treated if they get sick;
• Get their kids back to school, and;
• Minimize the financial hardship being created by social distancing measures.

Communicate inside and out

Internal communications is so important in preserving accuracy, consistency, and even employee morale. If people on the inside feel informed and involved in the solutions process, that will reflect outwardly and make them more inclined to engage in the ways you need them.

Create a plan

Communicating during a crisis is about more than conducting press conferences, it’s about using every tool at your disposal to ensure people are informed and mitigate myths and rumors that circulate during times of crisis.

• Pick your team. Who are the people communicating on your behalf?
• Train everyone. Make sure anyone who interacts with the media or the public knows what to say to prevent the further spread of misinformation. Even people who aren’t “allowed to speak to reporters” speak to reporters and influencers. You want them armed with the facts.
• Identify your tools. Know all the communications tools available to you and have a plan for putting them to use frequently and consistently. They could include:
  » Media – Print, broadcast, and online
  » County website
  » County TV station
  » Facebook
  » Twitter
  » Instagram
  » Social media influencers
  » Email
  » Texting

Prepare for the tough questions

When you are dealing with reporters, no question is off-limits, even if it isn’t related to the crisis at hand. Be prepared for that by working up a list of possible tough questions and the answers you should be giving to them. You may also want to practice the art of pivoting back to the message you are trying to deliver at that moment, without appearing to be evasive.
Staying in touch with your constituents

As part of the effort to contain the spread of COVID-19, public health experts are urging people to limit their direct, person-to-person contact with others. While nothing beats direct interaction with constituents, there are other ways to connect. The suite of technologies that we have available to reach out to our constituents includes the internet, phones, and of course, the U.S. Postal Service. Most of us have used some or all of these at various times.

Before reaching out, it is incredibly important to keep in mind how people are feeling in this moment. Some are scared because of the health and personal financial impacts. Some are hungry for information. Some are confused or misinformed. Some are even already burned out of hearing about the pandemic 24/7.

Here are a few suggestions of ways you can continue to communicate with people in your county:

- Digital technology allows us to interact with multiple people in live, on camera moments.
- Google Hangouts allow us to communicate live with one or more constituents. It works as an instant messenger, for video calls, and even as a voice telephone. Group chats can accommodate up to 100 people.
- Facebook Live is “the best way to connect with followers in real time.” The website offers easy to use tutorials on how to connect with small and large audiences.
- Everyone knows that social media has become important to maintaining contact. With people isolated in their homes, a regular presence is more important now than ever before.
- Telephones and telephone networks also could be more important than ever in making and maintaining contact with friends, supporters and constituents. One suggestion: Set up “virtual office hours” to accept incoming calls, to make outgoing calls, or set up video chat times. Advertise those regular hours throughout different communication modes. People will appreciate the access that you provide.
- Mail, including official letters and mail pieces are other way to maintain visibility maintain open lines of communication with people in your county.
Topics

While people may be hungry for information, they still hate spam so you want to make sure you are reaching out with purpose. Some potential topics that you can address in calls, letters, etc., include:

- Information on unemployment or underemployment insurance.

- Potential job opportunities. For example, as more people turn to Amazon for supplies, the company is in need of drivers. Similarly, the US Census is still in need of assistance. Grocery stores are even looking for stock help. Keep an eye out for others and share as appropriate. Just make sure the information you are sharing is accurate and verifiable.

- Encouraging constituents to respond to the US Census.

- Explain how you are helping seniors (working with local retailers for senior shopping hours, for example).

- Links to key online resources regarding the pandemic including, the school district, CDC, the state, public transportation sites, etc.

Messaging and offering up opportunities to reach you are more important than ever. Consider your messaging platforms as mutually supporting, for example, with mail pieces giving information on virtual office hours or upcoming internet-access events.

And of course, take every opportunity to include a message from you of concern for the health and well-being of all the people and families in your counties.