UA Crisis Communications

Crisis Communications Background

- Our planning started immediately following Virginia Tech in 2007.
- We update and revise our plans regularly, as we add new vehicles and other incidents occur.
- We use the plan and vehicles for severe weather, which gives us lots of opportunity to practice and improve, and helps educate stakeholders on how we communicate with them in an emergency.
- In an emergency, our goal is to provide accurate, timely information to key stakeholders so they can make the most informed decision possible regarding their personal safety and well-being.

Crisis Communications Plan Core Principles

University Relations’ crisis communications strategy is built on the following core principles:

- If possible, issue **timely early alert messages** about severe weather to campus, providing students, faculty and staff the opportunity to take protective measures.
- As the situation evolves, provide **frequent updates** to campus as information becomes available, particularly if the event has a significant impact on campus.
- Rather than rely on a single tool to provide notifications, ensure maximum reach of emergency information through **redundancy** by using a **variety of tools to deliver alert messages**.
- Provide a running stream of information about the situation on the institutional home page ([http://www.ua.edu](http://www.ua.edu)) and use all other tools to drive recipients to the home page for the latest and most complete information.

Communication Methods

UA’s crisis communications plan relies on a variety of electronic vehicles to deliver critical information in a timely manner to students, faculty and staff during an emergency. University Relations actively utilized each of the following methods to communicate prior to and following the tornado of April 27, 2011. There is no one perfect method, so you’ll notice lots of redundancy. We used all these vehicles extensively before, during and subsequent to the storm.

- **Web** (UA Home Page, Weather page, UA Mobile Web)
- **UA Alerts** (SMS text messages, emails to faculty/staff/students). Simultaneously deploys text messages, emails and phone calls to cell phones, office phones and home phones. It’s important for students and employees to keep their contact information updated!
- **Public Address System**
- **Campuswide emails** (UA News, UA Student News, Dialog Extra)
- **UA Facebook Page**
- **UA Twitter Page**
- **Broadcast and Media Relations** – TV and radio stations and newspapers
- **Emergency Call Center**
- **Digital signage across campus**
- **Marquees on the Crimson Ride buses**
- **Campus cable network**
- **UAPD sirens**

The campus community will be notified that the emergency or crisis has been resolved using these same methods.

If a crisis, emergency or dangerous weather situation occurs, students and employees are instructed to **immediately** take safety precautions based on their personal situation.

- Immediately move to a safe location.
- Alert others, if they can do so safely.
- Stay in a safe place until they are notified that the emergency is over.
- Call UAPD at 205-348-5454 as quickly as they can if the situation directly affects them.

It's important to constantly educate faculty, staff and students on our procedures and their response (severe weather as well). We test the UA Alerts vehicles at least monthly. Following each test, we send a message to students, faculty and staff, asking them to update their Banner information. We also use this as training/educational opportunities – convey information about safe rooms on campus, for example. This year, we will focus on helping students understand how they can enhance their personal safety in severe weather situations.

**Additional Information:**

**Guiding Principles**

- In deciding when and how to communicate with stakeholders, it's crucial to differentiate between a warning and a notification. UA issues a warning when stakeholders need to act immediately. A warning message will include basic information on the location and nature of the threat as we know it to be at that chaotic point in time. It's important to note, however, that a warning will have incomplete, preliminary and limited information that will be subject to change.
- If there is no need for stakeholders to take immediate action, UA will determine the true nature of the threat as quickly as possible and communicate with stakeholders as quickly as possible so that stakeholders can respond appropriately based on where they are in relation to the situation.

**Considerations:**

- There is no one perfect vehicle that will reach all stakeholders. Our approach is to use multiple vehicles simultaneously, to expand our reach and ability to communicate with as many stakeholders as possible as quickly as possible.
- We can activate our vehicles within 10 minutes of the decision to communicate. The PA system is more immediate. UA Alerts uses telecommunications outside the region and moves “traffic” to available bandwidth, but we can assume that there will be delays in transmission/receipt locally. The PA system gives us immediate access to stakeholders on campus.
- University Relations has built a great deal of redundancy and details into our plans. Each task is listed separately and assigned to a specific person. Each person has at least two backups. We review and update the plan regularly, and always after an event at another school. We train our staff at least annually on the plan. At least 8 people can activate specific vehicles remotely. We assume that we will not access to information that is stored electronically stored. We have hard
copies of contact numbers, and other essential information, and regularly update that information.

- We use the same vehicles for severe weather, which gives us a lot of hands-on practice and helps stakeholders understand how we will communicate with them.
- We have worked with UAPD to anticipate how the communications plan will be activated after normal business hours and on weekends. We have pre-programmed messages into the PA system and UA Alerts that can be activated quickly by UR or UAPD. If we are not able to communicate with UR personnel using cell/wireline phones, our staff knows to respond immediately, and do what needs to be done. They have each been designated as essential personnel and asked to have a plan in place to handle their own personal situations.
- We will use the PA system, social media and the UA Home page to update information in a real-time situation. If there is no need for stakeholders to take immediate action, the Policy Group will gain the most accurate information possible and UR will communicate with stakeholders as quickly as possible.
- About the vehicles we will use:
  - The UA Home page/dark site will become the clearinghouse for all communications during and in the aftermath of a crisis on campus. It is imperative that the site continue to function in the face of high-volume traffic. Because the other vehicles are limited in how much information we can provide using them, the Home page is critical to be able to provide in-depth and constantly updated information. If the wireless-wireline network supporting UA's Web site is impacted, we must have immediate access to a dark site in an area that is not impacted. UR must be able to activate the dark site ourselves.
  - UA Alerts is as effective as the quality of the information students, faculty and staff enter. We regularly remind and encourage stakeholders to update and provide comprehensive information.
  - UA Alerts allows us to tailor the vehicles to the situation (the snow day, for example; because of the early-morning hour, we did not use phone calls).
  - Because students list their parents' home numbers, these numbers will also be contacted in a crisis. This will automatically create more traffic on the wireline/wireless communications systems on campus, slowing our ability to reach stakeholders using those vehicles.
  - UA Alerts reaches 30,000 individuals, an amount that is increased every year as our enrollment grows.

- It's important to constantly educate faculty, staff and students on our procedures and their response (severe weather as well). We test the UA Alerts vehicles monthly and use it as well during severe weather. Following each, we send a message to students, faculty and staff, asking them to update their Banner information.
- We have a seek-and-find website that can be activated in an emergency. This site enables students, faculty and staff to let us know they're okay, lets others report missing students, faculty and staff, and lets others check to see if a specific student, faculty or staff member is okay.