

RISK COMMUNICATION

ROLE OF THE HEALTH OFFICER:

Health officers may occasionally be called upon to address the community or the media in regards to a public health issue. The resources included in this section of the Health Officers' Manual will provide some helpful hints to the health officer in conveying your message to the public. The information provided in this document is from the New Hampshire Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS), Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Handbook that was created by the DHHS Public Information Office. The complete booklet can be found on the DHHS website at www.dhhs.nh.gov or you can contact the Public Information Office at 129 Pleasant Street, Concord NH, 03301 or by telephone at 271-6526.

BASIC RISK COMMUNICATION PRINCIPLES:

1. Get information out as soon as possible, even without all the facts
2. Make sure your organization speaks with one voice
3. Express empathy early
4. Accept and involve the public as a partner
5. Never lie, but it is O.K. to say you don't know
6. Correct errors, especially in the media
7. Work with the media, especially the local outlets
8. Work with your allies and partners and don't withhold information from them
9. You don't have to answer every question
10. Choose the correct spokesperson
11. Listen to the audience
12. Plan carefully and evaluate performance

RISK COMMUNICATION DO'S

Do counter rumors and myths

Do remain consistent in your messaging

Do keep the messages simple

Do give people something to do

Do express empathy early

Do refute allegations without repeating them

- Do** use positive or neutral terms
- Do** use visual aids to emphasize important points and help explain complex issues
- Do** be sensitive to nonverbal messages you are communicating
- Do** promise only what you are sure you can deliver
- Do** emphasize ongoing efforts and what has already been accomplished
- Do** take responsibility for your agency's share of the problem
- Do** pay attention to how you look

RISK COMMUNICATION DON'TS

- Don't** say "no comment" – explain why you can't answer
- Don't** lie...ever
- Don't** over-reassure people
- Don't** use jargon or acronyms
- Don't** discuss money
- Don't** make promises
- Don't** include humor in your messages
- Don't** attack other authority figures
- Don't** let your own feelings interfere with your ability to communicate
- Don't** speculate

SPOKESPERSON GUIDELINES

- A good spokesperson should try to embody their organization's identity.
- Know your organization's policies about the release of information.
- Let the media and the public know when you will be back to share updates with them.
- Tell the truth; be as open as possible.
- Stay within the scope of your responsibilities, unless you are otherwise authorized.
- Don't answer questions that are not within the scope of your organizations' responsibilities.
- Follow up on issues.
- Use visuals when possible.

- Illustrate your point through examples, stories, and analogies. Make sure they clarify and do not patronize or exaggerate.
- Remember that jargon and acronyms cause confusion and imply arrogance.
- Refute negative allegations without repeating them.
- Whenever possible use positive or neutral terms, not negative ones.
- Avoid one-liners, clichés, and off-the-cuff comments because they tend to trivialize people's experiences and kill your credibility.
- Discuss what you know, not what you think.
- Express empathy early on.
- Avoid using excessively large words, because this may cause confusion and makes you look arrogant.
- Don't get riled or show hostility.
- Engage in active listening.
- Don't hurry. Take the time to form your answer.
- Speak slowly and distinctly so people can understand you; when you hurry you can sound nervous.
- Use open body language.
- Pay attention to how you are dressed; it is important to look composed.
- Modulate your voice.
- State the problem, then the recommendation.