Developing a Message

What is a "Message"?

Simply said, a message is an overarching theme supported by three or four (and no more) significant points. Most often, a "message" communicates underlying values, not just information. Facts and figures, however, are key elements in supporting the message.

Why Do We Need A Message?

In an emergency, crisis or risk situation, a message is absolutely necessary to convey concerns, values and emotions -- empathy, compassion, credibility and authority.

A message gives you a framework and offers more control in your communications with the media – and the public.

Developing Key Messages

- The very first communication is the most important communication during an emergency event
- Do not wait until you have all the answers before you start to communicate
- Keep information simple & accurate
- Acknowledge the emergency, crisis or risk
- Express concern, empathy and compassion for victims, families and the community.
- Recognize peoples' fears – but do not over-do it, "feed" or "fuel" it
- If you don't have all of the information, say so – but let the media know when you'll get back to them, and then get back to them.
- By being fast & accurate, you establish your credibility with the media, identify your department as the "go to" source for information and begin to manage the public's response to the event

Elements of a Message in Emergency Event

In an emergency, crisis or risk event, the message includes an overarching theme (concern, empathy, compassion) and three major points with supporting facts.

Make sure to keep the information simple and accurate. If you don't have all the information right away, say so -- but let the media know when you'll get back to them with updated information.

Be mindful about how much information people can absorb at any one time. This is particularly true during an emergency event, when people are emotional and upset. Address what the public needs to hear, even more than what you want to say. Adjust your response and message accordingly by thinking about tone and wording.

Acknowledge the crisis by expressing concern for victims, family and community. Do not overlook how important it is to express sympathy and empathy, as well as to acknowledge people's fears. As soon as possible, put a statement of concern on the Web site and address the emotional side of the event at the beginning of a media briefing or update.

Don't try to allay the panic people will be feeling by avoiding bad news. Panic does not necessarily come from bad news; it is more likely to come from no information, conflicting information or misinformation from authorities. Provide the best information you have in a clear and confident manner.

Developing a Message

Element #1: Situation

"What has happened?"
- What happened?
- When did it happen?
- Where did it happen?
- How did it happen?
- Why did it happen?
- Who is involved?

Element #2: Risks

Who is at risk? Who is at the greatest risk?
- What are the signs/symptoms?
- Is it contagious, communicable and/or spreading? How?
- Are there effective treatments?
- What are they?

Element #3: Actions

What actions are being taken by Public Health?
- How is the Public Health Department responding to the event?
- What is being done?
- Who is doing it?
- Why is it being done?
- How is it being done?

What actions should you and your family take?
What does the public need to know and/or do?

- How do I respond?
- How do I protect myself/family?
- How can I get more information?
- How can I help?
- When will there be more information?

Corresponding message development documents/templates-- "General Message 'Roadmap'" and "Message Map" -- follow in this section of this plan.

Message Map "Roadmap"

Stakeholder/Target Audience:	Category:	Subject:	Date updated:

Scenario:

SITUATION

Key Message/Fact 1: Situation

What has happened?
Express concern, empathy and compassion.

Supporting Fact 1-1:

State facts as you know them at the time.
If it is serious, say so.

Supporting Fact 1-2:

Demonstrate credibility.
How do we know what we know?
Who is Public Health working with?

Supporting Fact 1-3:

Public Health is working with…name agencies and key response to the situation.

RISKS

Key Message/Fact 2: Risks

Who is at risk?
Who is at the greatest risk?

Supporting Fact 2-1:

Is it contagious, communicable, or spreading? If so, give details. If not, say so.

Supporting Fact 2-2:

What are the symptoms?

Supporting Fact 2-3:

Are there effective treatments? If so, what are they?

ACTIONS

Key Message/Fact 3: Actions

What actions are being taken by Public Health? What actions should individuals/families take?

Supporting Fact 3-1:

Immediate actions for those affected or potentially affected. Provide instructions to protect yourself and your family.

Supporting Fact 3-2:

Actions being taken by the Public Health Department. For example, the SNS has been called, or Health Alerts have been sent, etc.

Supporting Fact 3-3:

Public Health will provide additional information as it becomes available.
If there is a time frame, say so.
Give web/phone/other info here.
Reiterate empathy/concern message.

Message Map Template

Stakeholder/Target Audience:	Category:	Subject:	Date updated:
Scenario:			

SITUATION	RISKS	ACTIONS
Key Message 1: Situation	**Key Message 2: Risks**	**Key Message 3: Actions**
Supporting Fact 1-1:	**Supporting Fact 2-1:**	**Supporting Fact 3-1:**
Supporting Fact 1-2:	**Supporting Fact 2-2:**	**Supporting Fact 3-2:**
Supporting Fact 1-3:	**Supporting Fact 2-3:**	**Supporting Fact 3-3:**