

## PHILANTHROPY AND CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

# MAINTAINING COMMUNICATION AFTER A CRISIS: ENGAGING SUPPORTERS THROUGH RECOVERY

When a crisis occurs, philanthropy becomes a lifeline for affected communities and nonprofit organizations. This guide empowers nonprofit leaders to maximize their organization's impact through strategic fundraising and donor engagement. The guide also includes tips on how to harness the power of philanthropy in times of crisis, with actionable steps for crafting urgent appeals, nurturing donor relationships, and sustaining support from the immediate aftermath through long-term rebuilding efforts.

# COMMUNICATION IS FOUNDATIONAL

In the aftermath of a natural disaster, timely, clear, and compassionate communication is essential for nonprofit organizations seeking to raise funds and support for recovery efforts. This philanthropic communications toolkit is designed to help nonprofits effectively convey the urgency of their community's (and organization's) needs, offering tips, advice, and sample language focused on inspiring generosity and staying connected to your donors – both immediately after you have assessed the damages, and in the months following as you continue to rebuild.



## IN THIS TOOLKIT:

**Where to start. What to consider.**

**Sample Donor Communication**

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# WHERE TO START. WHAT TO CONSIDER



Once you have assessed the damages and identified urgent community needs, it's time to initiate your communications. But don't wait too long. **You don't have to have all the answers before you start to reach out. Prioritize transparency and urgency in your outreach, while also offering hope and tangible ways for donors to make an impact.** Early communications should focus on immediate needs and establish a foundation for ongoing updates as recovery efforts continue.

## **IF YOU WERE AFFECTED BY THE DISASTER:**

**Identify a communications point person.** During a crisis, it's often an "all hands on deck" approach to recovery. But if everyone is communicating with their own constituents within an organization, some people may get overwhelmed and the messaging might not be aligned.

**Keep your donors, participants, and community updated as frequently as possible.** Use social media AND email to show images, share stats and tell stories. Communicate with empathy and an understanding that the readers may also be affected by events.

**Ask for what you need. Be specific and lift up needs large and small.** If you need volunteers, ask for people with specific skills, letting them know what actions are needed and when. If you can't handle volunteer support yet because it's not safe, tell them you will let them know when the time is right. Direct emergency appeal funds to a general, unrestricted fund in order to offer flexibility in using them where needed most. Update the list often and say thanks for every bit of help you're receiving.

**Show people how your mission is relevant in the crisis. Show what you CAN and ARE doing.** Are you a respite center for weary residents without power or water? Have you diverted resources to help your community deal with the crisis? Connect the dots from your mission to the current need.

**If you've temporarily halted a program, explain why and when you expect to resume service.** Emphasize that your focus is on participant safety and meeting current critical needs

**Don't talk about the future until you are ready. Stick to the facts.** As you are assessing the damages and planning for repairs, make no promises on when the repairs (or rebuild) will be complete. Reiterate your commitment to your mission and that you will keep them informed of progress. It's highly possible that the timeline and/or scope of your project will change over time. Leave yourself room to provide the right information at the right time.



**IF YOU WEREN'T IN THE STORM'S PATH, BUT ARE SERVING A COMMUNITY THAT WAS:**

**Acknowledge your concern and sympathy for those who are suffering.** If you are part of a larger national organization that has coordinated a relief fund, let your community know about the good work that fund can do.

If you raise money for hurricane relief, **be clear on how this differs from your normal fund drive.**

**Keep telling your story.** There is still need in your community. Local donors may be more generous than ever as they reflect on their blessings.

**MOVING INTO RECOVERY:**

Once the immediate crisis is over, you'll probably still be left with your normal year-end fundraising goals, capital campaign needs and more. How do you transition between messages?

**Remind people that the storm only exacerbated the needs** you were already addressing. Most likely, the need is even greater now.

If it's necessary to change the focus or timing of a campaign, **be transparent about what has changed and why.** That may require personal visits with some key donors and partners.

**Be excellent stewards of the relief gifts you receive.** Perhaps the silver lining in these very dark clouds is a chance to bring new donors to your organization. Ensure prompt and relevant acknowledgement of their gifts and be sure to keep them informed as you continue to rebuild and support your community.



# SAMPLE DONOR COMMUNICATION

The following communication samples provide a general framework for fundraising after a natural disaster. However, it's important to tailor the message to reflect your community's unique circumstances and the specific disaster you are responding to. Customize the details to ensure your message resonates with those affected and aligns with your organization's immediate needs.



## A NOTE ABOUT SOCIAL POSTS

Use relevant local photos of the damage, repairs, work in progress, or the areas where you are serving others. Write a few sentences about how more support is needed. Include a link to your donation web page. Not all posts should ask. Some should also give updates, others can be shout-outs to partners and donors. A steady drip will ensure you remain relevant and will increase your chances of getting read. Make sure to have a point person that can respond to questions and comments.

## SAMPLE EMAIL IMMEDIATELY AFTER DISASTER

Dear [donor name],

We hope this message finds you and your loved ones safe in the wake of the recent [disaster/hurricane/tornado/flood/fire]. As we collectively begin the difficult process of recovery, our thoughts are with our entire community.

Unfortunately, the storm left its mark on us, as well. [Talk here about what was damaged.] While our facility is damaged, our commitment to our mission remains steadfast.

We are [name of your organization]. As part of this community for more than XX years, we have [talk about your mission and what you do]. Today, we need your help to continue this critical mission.

The [winds, floodwaters, fires, tornado, etc] took away more than a building. Our organization is an important part of daily life for [list those you serve – i.e. families who rely on us to stretch their grocery budget and provide a few additional meals each month]. For some of our staff, this disaster has also impacted their livelihood.

As a supporter of [name of your organization], you know our commitment to our community. Today we are asking for your help to rebuild.

[List your needs based on your programs/services here, i.e. We have to temporarily suspend our weekly food distribution from our Main Street location until we can safely reopen and welcome guests. We will list alternate sites on our webpage and on social media so those needing food can access it.]

Please consider a gift to ensure we can recover, rebuild, and continue to serve the children and families who rely on us. [donate link]

We are grateful to everyone in the community who is stepping up to support one another and especially for those working to support recovery efforts. As we always do, we know we can get through this together.

Thank you for considering a gift today for our work tomorrow.

Sincerely,  
[Signature]

P.S. Your gift will [list the ways it will help]. Please give today at [WEB DONATION LINK]. If you would like to make a gift through your donor-advised fund or retirement distribution, please contact [NAME and contact info].



## SAMPLE EMAIL - IN THE MONTHS AFTER

Dear [donor name],

We are so grateful for the tremendous outpouring of support from so many of our friends. Thank you. Certainly, your financial support has been incredible, but so too have your sincere phone calls, social media comments and emails. We are happy to be able to share the following updates with you:

- List of updates you've made/progress thanks to their gift
- List any community support you have offered (recharging station, rest for line workers, etc)

We are honored and humbled by the number of people who love [name of your organization]. We have exceeded \$XXX,000 in gifts in response to the [crisis/name of disaster].

Even as we move past crisis mode and begin to rebuild, more support is clearly needed. [Talk about your needs, what is still left to do, and how you are using it to offer support to others.] Every donation makes a difference, no matter how large or small. If you have not yet contributed we invite you to do so at: [WEB DONATION LINK].

Thank you for being part of the [name of your organization] family. We are so humbled by your support.

With sincere gratitude –  
[Signature]

Sincerely,  
[Signature]



## ACKNOWLEDGMENT LANGUAGE

**Use this language on your Thank You page after someone has made a donation. Elaborate on their impact in subsequent letters and stewardship efforts.**

Thank you for supporting our [name of disaster] relief efforts. Your gift is making an immediate impact in helping to rebuild our community.

Your gift ensures [list here what you are doing to rebuild/with contributed funds, i.e. we are a place where the community can find a meal and use our computers and electricity.]. Your generosity is helping us restore hope and strength in the face of this devastation.

Thank you for generosity. Together, we are rebuilding our community.





# NONPROFIT CRISIS COMMUNICATION 101

## **A GROUNDING EXERCISE - POWER AND PURPOSE**

As a guiding exercise for the leadership of an organization coming together to plan during a time of crisis, consider asking team members to share their thoughts on the organization's power and purpose.

**What is our power?** What are gifts, strengths, assets you have (like supportive donors and partners).

**What is our purpose?** What are we here to accomplish and what do we have to offer?

Grounding your leaders in your organization's collective power and purpose can renew strength, inspire positive action, and help your organization be of service to others.

## **COMMUNICATION PREPARATION**

### **Prepare Clear and Timely Information**

Provide frequent updates on the situation, your organization's response, and how people can get help or contribute.

### **Utilize a Multi-Channel Approach**

Use various communication channels (social media, email, website, text messages) to reach different audiences.

Review your online presence:

- Does each platform include posts, banners, and updates with the information you want people to be able to find easily?
- Are photos and/or videos included?
- Does each update or post include a date so that what the reader finds does not appear out of date?

Review online donation page(s):

- Are they easy to use?
- Are the right options listed? Relief giving, unrestricted giving, other?
- Have you updated your acknowledgement screens/emails? (see sample language on page 8)



## **Create Consistency and Select Point People**

Ensure all team members are sharing consistent information to avoid confusion. This should all flow through and be directed by your point person.

Determine who is responsible for communicating with:

- Board Members
- Donors
- Employees
- Members
- Vendors
- Media
- Others?

## **Prepare to Answer Frequently Asked Questions**

Developing an FAQ for staff after a disaster or crisis is an excellent way to ensure consistent communication and address common concerns. You may have an internal version and a public version for your website. Here are some relevant questions to consider:

- What is the current status of operations?
- How will the impact of any closures affect constituents?
- How long will it take to (re-open, resume operations, run certain programs, etc.)? Don't speculate. If you don't know, say so.
- How are we assisting our members/beneficiaries/clients and our community during this time?
- What resources are available for staff who have been personally affected by the disaster?
- How should staff communicate with members/clients/beneficiaries and our community about our services?
- How are we coordinating with local authorities and other organizations?
- What should staff tell volunteers or donors who want to help?
- Are there any changes to our regular programs or services?
- What is our protocol for sharing information on social media during this time?
- How can staff help with our disaster response efforts?
- How can constituents/members/alumni help?
- Will our organization hold/cancel upcoming/planned events?
- What kind of support will help the organization most?
- Are volunteers welcome now or will they be in the future?
- Can someone donate items and if so, where can they bring them?



## **DRAFTING YOUR COMMUNICATIONS**

### **Empathy, Language and Tone**

Communicate with compassion, acknowledging the difficulties people are facing. Speak to the future of the organization with declarative words. “We are,” “We know,” “We will,” communicate your strength and determination. If applicable, communicate that people are safe and out of harms way.

### **Accuracy**

Verify information before sharing to maintain credibility and avoid spreading misinformation. Don’t speculate on things you can’t be certain about.

### **Accessibility**

Ensure communications are accessible to all, including those with disabilities or limited internet access. Provide information in multiple languages for diverse communities.

### **Calls to Action**

Clearly state how people can help, whether through donations, volunteering, or other means. As donations start to come in, thank your community for its generosity.

### **Public Relations**

Prepare a draft statement/press release. Include how your organization is helping the community and how people can engage with or help. Be as specific as possible.

### **General Outreach and Communication**

Script outreach phone calls, letters, emails and updates designed for people who will expect to hear from you. Include:

1. State or restate your mission (infuse your organization’s power and purpose)
2. Offer a connection point and empathy
3. Provide update with a brief story, photo, or current example of what is going on
4. Offer availability to be reached with questions
5. Provide thanks
6. At an appropriate time, include an ask or appeal to support areas of need (remind your community that even small recurring gifts can make a difference to charitable nonprofit(s) assisting the community and its residents in getting back into their homes/jobs and on their feet).
7. Keep communicating. Use the disaster/crisis as context to share your message in an honest and authentic way.



## **Connect with Major Donors**

Develop a list of your top donors. Make a plan to make personal phone calls to as many of your major donors as possible. The agenda for the call is simple:

1. How are you?
2. Can we do anything to help you?
3. How are we?
4. IF THEY ASK how they can help, let them.

Read more tips on connecting with major donors [here](#).

## **Tie your Future Plans to Mission**

As you start to talk about what you're doing to recover your facility and operations, don't forget to explain the impact these changes will have for your community long after the crisis has passed.



# CRISIS COMMUNICATION PLAN FOR NONPROFITS

This Crisis Communication Plan is designed to guide your organization through challenging times with compassion and support. It embodies the 5 Cs of Crisis Communications: demonstrating genuine **Concern** for all, reinforcing your unwavering **Commitment** to your mission, showcasing your **Competency** in handling the situation, providing **Clarity** in all your messages, and instilling **Confidence** in your ability to overcome challenges and adversity caused by the crisis. By following this plan, your organization will be well-equipped to maintain trust and transparency.

## DAYS 1-7: EARLY PHASE

### Days 1-2: First Steps

- Identify and collect contact information for organization-wide leadership knowing you may be utilizing cell phones for calling and texting if power outages or in-office phones and computers are not available.
- Identify and coordinate communications through a point person/team.
- Determine access (to your CRM or other system) to constituent contact information including phone numbers, emails, and address lists.
- Craft a concise, factual statement acknowledging the event, and how your organization is coming together to respond/support the community. Include that you will communicate in more detail in the days/weeks/months ahead when more information is available. Tailor messages for different groups:
  - Staff and volunteers
  - Board members
  - Donors
  - Beneficiaries
  - Media
  - General public
- Use a multi-channel approach to distribute your statement (phone, text, email, social media, website, etc.) knowing your audiences will access it through a variety of channels.
- Begin to collect stories. Create a shared document for leaders to record internal updates. Think of this as a simple one sentence journal - literally a date followed by a running list of observations, notes, activities, goals, etc. New day = new date, list and so on.



### **Days 3-4: Steady Communication**

- Draft, finalize and distribute Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) documents and share with all staff. A sample structure is included later in this guide. Remember: from CEO, to front desk, to Board, everyone should have access to the FAQ or a version of it to answer questions in a consistent and coordinated way.
- Collect stories (photos, videos, notes, etc. and store them in a place the team can access/edit them) \*Important note: not all photos and videos can and should be shared immediately on social media – store/review them and make a plan for how to disseminate them in a way that works for your coordinated efforts.
- Begin personal outreach to major donors. Find out how they are: Are they/is their family ok? Has their work or business been impacted? Is there a way to offer support?
- Send initial updates to key audiences:
  - Donors (all levels)
  - Staff and volunteers
  - Board members
  - Members/beneficiaries/clients
  - Local community
  - Media outlets
- Establish a general way to receive unrestricted funds (people will want to give).
- Determine your messaging and mechanisms for a potential fundraising campaign.
- Update website and social media channels. Make messaging consistent and easy to find.

### **Days 5-7: Stabilization and Assessment**

- Conduct daily briefings with leadership team. Review strategic plans/master plans to inform the path forward or to process revisions to those based on crisis, damage, etc.
- Provide detailed updates to all audiences.
- Continue personal outreach to major donors.
- Assess immediate needs, then document for communications.
- Coordinate with local authorities and partner organizations on collaborative recovery efforts.



## WEEKS AHEAD (Weeks 2-4)

- Maintain regular communication cadence with all audiences.
- Host virtual meetings or live discussions for groups to come together, hear updates, ask questions.
- Share stories of impact and recovery efforts.
- Refine messaging based on evolving situation.
- Engage with media for broader community updates.
- Continue personal check-ins with major donors.
- Launch volunteer coordination efforts (if safe to do so).

## MONTHS AHEAD (Month 2 and beyond)

- Develop long-term recovery plan and communicate milestones.
- Organize staff, donor, and community appreciation events.
- Prepare and share detailed impact reports.
- Conduct review of your recent crisis response and update strategic plans and site master plans.
- Communicate the ways in which you are re-engaging with regular programming and fundraising activities.
- Plan for anniversary of the event (if appropriate)



## AUDIENCE-SPECIFIC CONSIDERATIONS

### Donors

- Segment communication by giving level in your communications when possible
- Provide clear information on how funds are being used
- Offer opportunities for additional engagement
- Thank your donors for their support and commitment

### Staff and Volunteers

- Prioritize their safety and well-being
- Provide regular internal updates
- Offer resources for those personally affected
- Thank them for their dedication to your organization during this unexpected crisis

### Board Members

- Include in high-level decision making
- Leverage their networks for support
- Thank your Board members for their support and commitment

### Members/Beneficiaries/Clients

- Clearly communicate any changes to services
- Update them on what to expect in the coming days weeks
- Outline any support your organization is able to offer
- Provide resources for additional support

### Local Community

- Share how your organization is contributing to overall recovery
- Collaborate with other local organizations
- Share your stories

### Media

- Designate a spokesperson
- Prepare key messages and talking points
- Be proactive in sharing stories

## FAQs

[See page 10 for sample questions](#)





## SAMPLE TEMPLATES

### Internal Crisis Announcement

Dear [Name],

We are writing to inform you that [brief description of the crisis] has occurred. Our top priority is the safety of our staff, volunteers, and those we serve. We are actively responding to the situation and will provide regular updates as more information becomes available.

Key points:

- [2-3 bullet points on current known facts]

We appreciate your support during this challenging time. For the most up-to-date information, please visit our website at [URL] or follow us on [social media platforms].

Sincerely,

[CEO's Name]

[Organization Name]

### Donor Update Email

Dear [Name],

Dear [Donor Name],

Thank you for your continued support of [Organization Name]. We wanted to provide you with an update on our response to [crisis event].

In the past [timeframe], we have:

- [List accomplishments]

Your generous contributions have made this possible. Here's how you can continue to help:

- [Specific ways to help]

As a trusted partner, we are committed to transparency and will continue to share regular updates on our progress. If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to reach out.

With gratitude,

[CEO's Name]

[Organization Name]



### **Media Talking Points**

- Our hearts are with everyone impacted by [crisis].
- Our organization's primary focus is [key priority].
- We are working closely with [relevant authorities/partners] to [objective].
- The safety and well-being of our [staff/volunteers/beneficiaries] remain our top priority.
- We are grateful for the outpouring of support from our community.
- We are committed to transparency and will provide regular updates as the situation evolves.

# ADDITIONAL RESOURCES



At DBD Group, we are committed to supporting nonprofits year-round with the guidance and tools needed to fulfill their missions. In times of crisis, our dedication remains stronger than ever. We've selected a few of our blogs that will help you navigate challenges and continue making a positive impact in your community when it's needed most.

**[Close Enough to Smell the Smoke](#)**

**[Change in Plans: Embracing Adaptability in Leadership](#)**

**[Drop the Paddle](#)**

**[Hold the Line](#)**

**[Firm In Mission. Flexible in Delivery](#)**



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