

Planning and Communicating for Open Population Disasters

By Dr. Vivian Marinelli, Psy.D, Contributing Writer

Sports and entertainment venues typically involve accessibility that is open to the public. The majority of spectators have purchased a ticket that identifies where they are seated, but the venue has no identifying information about the ticket holder. Having a written plan in place to help account for people in the event of a crisis is a crucial element to allow security personnel and first responders to focus on incident management. A predetermined plan also helps with the success of the business recovery efforts.



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At a large event, your security staff may have information on the teams, entertainers and their support staff but the attendees are often anonymous. Same holds true for event staff, vendors, media and even tailgaters on site. If a crisis occurs, how would your department confirm involvement, location and status of any one individual...the three pieces of information that will be critical for their families and friends?

The First Moments

In a crisis situation, the first priority of security staff is to get the people out of the way in a safe manner. When a crisis event impacts a large population, the initial environment is very chaotic. Security and first responders are quickly making an assessment of the situa-

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tion to determine the level of response needed. Basic human instinct will have everyone else moving away from the threat and trying to find family members and friends that accompanied them. As a result, the cell towers in the area will be overwhelmed. During a crisis event when everyone is trying to place calls at the same time, you can easily predict there will be a major disruption.

Expect that families and friends will be calling your organization asking for information on the situation and if their loved ones are involved. Let's think about a stadium holding 70,000 visitors. Can your telecom infrastructure process thousands of calls in a timely manner? If not, as part of your crisis plan, you may want to include a contract with an external vendor that can provide this support in the form of an off-site emergency call center.

Communicating to the Masses

In addition to a written crisis plan, knowing how to manage communication is key. While security and first responders take control of the situation, your predetermined crisis communication team will handle communication efforts, including social media channels and the news media. Recent crisis events have shown us that social media will play an integral part in the response – especially for those on the ground. Many of those impacted will utilize Facebook and Twitter to get updates and send messages to their families and friends. It's also an opportunity for security/venue staff to share confirmed information about situation details

and safe exit routes. During the Boston Marathon bombings, some family members were notified by their loved ones via Twitter before the notice of the bombings even got the media's attention.

Your social media plan should include a hashtag strategy. However, this is something that needs to be developed, practiced and integrated into your emergency response plan prior to a crisis occurring. The key component to your strategy is the use of a consistent hashtag to group relevant information together about the crisis on Twitter.

This crisis hashtag strategy also should include:

- Defining the role a hashtag will and must play within your crisis communications
- Guidelines and policies for using the hashtag
- Information on your emergency website explaining how you would like your audience to use the crisis hashtag
- Who will monitor/manage the hashtag
- How to minimize false hashtags and feeds of misinformation

In addition to Twitter, your organizational Facebook page and emergency website are resources for you to communicate and help locate attendees. Communication links should be included on these sites for the emergency call center as well as other agencies involved in the response. Keeping in mind the need for ongoing information, updates on the response and future events also can be posted.

Location and Status

The American Red Cross (ARC) Safe and Well website can also be a resource to track self-reports from those directly involved and inquiries from their families and friends. It requires registration by affected individuals along with their address and phone number. You may want to consider putting this information on the ticket stub and your website to increase awareness of location websites like the ARC Safe and Well program. Loved ones of attendees at your venue can click “Search Registrants” and enter the person's name and pre-disaster phone number or address. If the missing person previously registered, anything they may have posted about their location and/or status will be visible. You may want to consider working with a consultant to identify other options for self-reporting and inquiries via the Internet.

Every crisis is unique. The best practice for any sports or entertainment organization is to include a number of these technological resources in your emergency response plan, keeping in mind that the focus should always be on the people who are impacted – those directly affected, their families and friends, your organization, stakeholders and the community. By allowing first responders and security personnel to do their job of managing the crisis, the communication team can focus on providing timely communication and support. In the long run, that allows your organization to maintain its positive reputation, focus on business recovery efforts and enhance its resiliency to weather the storm. **SECURITY**

About the Author:

Vivian Marinelli is the Senior Director of Crisis Management Services for FEI Behavioral Health. She holds a Doctorate Degree in Clinical Psychology and is a Licensed Psychologist in Wisconsin. She has more than 15 years of work in direct clinical services specializing in trauma and grief counseling to her position, which focuses on assisting individuals involved in critical incidents, such as in the event of a mass casualty disaster.