



Flood damage this summer in Iowa.

# Plan ahead for successful crisis communications

**J**OHN F. KENNEDY once said that the time to repair the roof is when the sun is shining.

It's a good motto for the subject of crisis communications.

When roaring fires swept down the San Diego hillsides, Qualcomm Stadium field and operations manager Steve Wightman had to quickly marshal his troops.

Instead of preparing the field for planned San Diego State Aztecs and San Diego Chargers football games, they had to turn on a dime to help prepare and staff the stadium to house up to 11,000 fire evacuees and their animals.

"Having a plan is the key component," Wightman said. "We're a city-owned facility, and fortunately, the city had a plan in place. We knew what our roles would be. Since we're

here with the keys to everything in the building, we're an integral part of the process."

That plan, in the fall of 2007, meant reassigning his ground crew to temporary jobs, including driving forklifts to offload tents, cots, food, and clothing donations and transport medical supplies. It even included turning storage bins into horse stables and spreading straw so that livestock could lie down in a makeshift corral on the Chargers' old practice field.

"As of late, about every other year we've been an emergency evacuation center," Wightman said. "Each time, we revisit what happened before and try to think about things that are needed to accommodate people—and then get back in shape for the next game."

That kind of before- and after-event communication is essential to manage activities and people well in out-of-the-ordinary times, counsels Dan Wilinsky, a senior partner at the public relations firm of Fleishman-Hillard in Kansas City.

Wilinsky, who has spent 25 years in crisis communications, advising the likes of Sprint, Hallmark Cards and H&R Block, said it doesn't matter whether there's an abrupt need to communicate with the public or one's staff. The key is having a plan "that is a living, breathing document, not something that's stuck on a shelf and never read," he said.

The "living, breathing document," for turf managers or parks department heads that might need to quickly contact staff members, should include multiple ways to contact each staff member.

And, in addition to multiple contact methods to reach employees, it's vital for employees to know how and when to call their employers, advises Barbara Paynter, partner in Hennes Communications in Cleveland.

"Your crisis communications plan needs very clear instructions for two-way communication," Paynter said. "Lots of companies don't have ways for employees to initiate communication, such as an 800 number or a web site, if they're prevented by disaster from reporting to work. A good plan gives them specific instructions about who to report to and when."



**The old Chargers practice field became an animal shelter.**

When Hurricane Ike bore down on Houston, Dan Bergstrom, director of major league field operations at Minute Maid Park, had about 10 days to prepare his staff and his stadium for the possibility of a direct hit.

"We had a home stand scheduled for September 12, 13, 14, and we worked as normal starting on the 8th to prepare for baseball, but we started holding staff meetings twice a day to update our people on the hurricane and our emergency plan."

On September 11, when forecasters told Houston to prepare for a direct hit from Ike, the Astros' games were canceled, and Bergstrom and his staff moved all equipment from their below-street level shop to an upper concourse to protect it from possible flooding.

"Everyone was on site, working, so the prep work was easy," Bergstrom said. "But after the hurricane, cell phone towers were down. So, for two days, I wasn't sure where all my people were. With our retractable roof on and tied down and our prep work done, we had no field problem, no flooding. The problem was getting back in touch with all our staff."

Wilinsky, the crisis communications expert, said a lot of companies got a quick baptism in crisis communication waters after 9-11, when, as in Houston after the hurricane, cell phone contact was lost.

"That's why it helps to have multiple contact points, not just cell phones," Wilinsky said. "Do you also have land line numbers? E-mails? Other sources of communication? It gets down to someone sitting down and understanding the process: Who are the main players? Who needs to know what? Who needs to be involved? And once you know that, it must be written down. It must be an accessible, updated document that everyone knows about."

Crisis communications specialists, Wilinsky said, follow the RACE acronym: Research, take Action, Communicate, and Evaluate.

"If you have a plan, you don't just act off the cuff," he said. "You do what you've planned, and then you evaluate it. Write it down so you can do things better next time."

And, before troubles strike, it's important for both smooth operations and employee morale, to make sure that staff members know how their roles and duties might change. A time of disaster is no time to argue with someone about what's in a job description or what hours a job entails.

Making disaster duty reminders a small part of regular employee performance reviews or other manager/worker conversations can help things run more smoothly in a crisis situation.

Wightman and Bergstrom also agreed that even when disasters become usual, or at least repetitive, there will always be something new or someone new involved when disruption occurs again. That's why a written plan, periodically revised, is wise. It provides the institutional memory plus the newer, better solutions that have emerged. ■

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This is the fourth in a series of six articles in the new Ewing Professional Development Series. STMA and Ewing have partnered in this series to bring sports turf industry professional development and career issues to the forefront.