

Susan G. Komen and Planned Parenthood Grant Crisis

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Crisis Overview

Susan G. Komen's ethics and morals were put into question Jan. 31, 2012, when The Associated Press broke the news Komen had adopted new grant policies that prevented Planned Parenthood from receiving funding. It is important to note that the revision of Komen's grant policies was voted on unanimously by its board on Nov. 29, 2011. Planned Parenthood was then on Dec. 16, 2011.

For years, Komen had aided Planned Parenthood with thousands of dollars in grants used for education and breast cancer screenings for low-income women. The new policy bars any funding given to an organization under government investigation. This applied to Planned Parenthood, as it was under investigation by Rep. Cliff Stearns, R-Fla. , on the topic of whether the group was using public money improperly on abortions.

This decision stirred immense backlash. Many accused Komen of allowing politics to interfere with women's health advocacy, ultimately causing a decline in trust. On top of social media backlash against Komen, Planned Parenthood gained more than \$3 million dollars worth of donations, exceeding the \$400,000 grant it annually receives from Komen. Local Komen affiliates also voiced their frustration with their organization's leadership, highlighting internal divisions and reputational damage.

Under the pressure and backlash, Komen reversed its decision Feb. 3rd, 2012. Komen revised policy to now state investigations must be "criminal and conclusive in nature and not political". However, this reversal did not reinstate credibility. Donations and public support declined and many executives resigned including Komen's top public health official, Mollie Williams, and Karen Handel, senior vice president of public policy. Komen's lack of transparency and inconsistent messaging with its mission was the true cause of this crisis.

Key Messages

The following were the initial public messages made by Komen after news broke of their grant changes.

1. Komen is implementing more stringent eligibility on grant standards to "safeguard donor dollars."
2. Komen aims to ensure funds are allocated to organizations that directly offer breast health services, not just referrals, to better access to women's health.
3. There is no connection to anti-abortion politics or Planned Parenthood's congressional investigation.

The following are the additional or revised messages Komen made after the negative responses came to light.

1. Komen acknowledges the pain and confusion their supporters are feeling.
2. Komen is committed to rebuilding trust and unity in helping all women access life-saving care.
3. Komen is working towards a renewed focus on collaboration rather than division in their decision making processes.

Response Procedure

Initial

Komen had between one and two months between its unanimous board decision, and notifying Planned Parenthood before the news was broken by The Associated Press. Even after the news broke, Komen was initially silent on the criticism. Planned Parenthood spoke out first, releasing a statement describing how saddened it was that Komen was giving into pressure from anti-abortion groups and influenced by a “politically motivated” Congressional investigation. Planned Parenthood asked for donations in place of the money they usually receive from Komen and experienced a surplus of donations and numerous comments attacking Komen for its changes.

Later within the evening, Komen spoke on the matter in a statement given to AP News ignoring the hate and only addressing how it is “regrettable” it dissolved its longstanding partnership with Planned Parenthood. The response was defensive and unclear, only explaining the decision was made due to a new policy barring grants to organizations under investigations.

Further explanations for its separation by Komen were given the following morning in videos released on Komen’s YouTube from their founder and CEO Nancy Brinker, stating they were tightening grant efforts and it had nothing to do with congressional investigation. They also note their actions were widely mischaracterized, most likely as a result of its lack of communication which led to the media and rumors controlling the narrative.

Continuing

As many of Komen’s responses failed in the public eye, Komen speaks with the Washington Post to now state the new reason for revising the grant policy is because it doesn’t directly provide mammogram services for women, but only provides referrals. Komen continues to state this is not a target at Planned Parenthood.

The lack of unified messaging and empathy fueled public anger. Instead of engaging openly, the organization released conflicting messages that appeared reactive and disorganized. Donors, volunteers and longtime partners felt betrayed by what seemed to be a departure from Komen’s nonpartisan mission.

Twenty-two senators sent a letter to CEO Nancy Brinker urging Komen to reverse its decision.

CEO Nancy Brinker called a press conference to assure the public and donors the decision regarding the grants had nothing to do with abortion or politics. She doesn't acknowledge Planned Parenthood was the only organization affected by the policy changes.

Post Crisis

Feb. 3, 2012 Komen ultimately switched its reasoning back to the investigation and reversed its decision allowing Planned Parenthood to be eligible for grants. While the reversal was a step toward repairing the damage, it was seen as too late and insincere by many. The quick reversal also gave the impression that the organization lacked conviction or strategic foresight.

The organization's messaging also shifted during this stage. Komen began emphasizing apologies, clarification and reaffirmation of its dedication to breast cancer prevention and care. Instead of deflecting blame, the organization focused on rebuilding relationships with partners and supporters.

New key messages were developed to support this approach, including:

- Acknowledgement of the harm and confusion caused by the initial decision.
- Reaffirmation of Komen's mission to serve all women, regardless of politics or background.
- A promise to review internal decision-making processes to ensure transparency and accountability.
- Promotion of initiatives aimed at restoring trust with affiliates, partners and the public.
- While trust was not instantly restored, this phase marked a crucial step toward recovery and demonstrated a willingness to learn from its mistakes.

Results

By the end of the crisis, Susan G. Komen for the Cure faced extensive reputational, financial and organizational damage that reshaped how the nonprofit operated. The backlash following the decision to cut funding to Planned Parenthood — and the quick reversal that followed — resulted in a dramatic loss of trust, donations, and credibility for an organization once considered the nation's most powerful force in the fight against breast cancer.

Financially, Komen suffered a major decline in donations and event participation. Contributions dropped sharply in 2012 and continued to decline for several years afterward. The number of participants in the Race for the Cure events decreased nationwide, and many corporate sponsors and local affiliates distanced themselves from the brand. Reports estimated Komen's revenue fell by more than 20%, forcing the organization to lay off staff and close multiple regional offices.

The reputational damage was even more severe. Komen, long associated with unity and women's empowerment, became a symbol of political division. The organization faced intense media scrutiny and widespread criticism from supporters, advocacy groups, and even some of its own affiliates. While Planned Parenthood ultimately benefited — raising millions in donations within days — Komen's credibility as a nonpartisan health nonprofit was deeply undermined.

Internally, the crisis led to major leadership fallout. Senior Vice President Karen Handel, who was heavily linked to the decision, resigned amid public outrage. Several affiliate leaders also stepped down or publicly criticized national leadership for failing to uphold the organization's mission. The crisis exposed deep communication and policy gaps within Komen's structure.

Despite the damage, Komen made several efforts to regain trust and rebuild its reputation, taking the following actions:

- Reinstated funding eligibility for Planned Parenthood, reaffirming its commitment to breast cancer screening and prevention for all women.
- Issued multiple public apologies and clarified the organization would focus on health outcomes rather than political influence.
- Restructured leadership and implemented internal policy reviews to prevent similar missteps.
- Strengthened communication with affiliates, creating new feedback and decision-making processes to ensure local voices were included in national decisions.
- Launched renewed marketing and educational campaigns focused on Komen's mission, research impact, and support for breast cancer patients.
- Created partnerships with other women's health organizations to demonstrate unity and shared purpose in fighting breast cancer.
- Focused messaging on transparency and accountability, ensuring future funding and advocacy decisions aligned with Komen's mission and values.
- Expanded efforts to rebuild community trust, emphasizing survivor stories, volunteer involvement, and local impact through events and social media.

Proposed Crisis Plan

Team

- Crisis communication leader
- Spokesperson
- PR Specialist
- Internal communications manager

- Legal counsel
- Social media manager
- IT Specialist
- Human resources
- Community and Affiliate Relations Coordinator
- Donor Relations Manager

Stakeholders

Internal

- Employees
- Shareholders
- Executives
- Investors

External

- Donors
- Beneficiaries
- Partner organizations
- Affiliates/local chapters
- Advocacy Groups and Competitors
- Government and Regulatory Bodies
- Media

Communication Channels

Internal

- Email
- Face-to-Face Meetings
- Komen's intranet
- Instant messaging platforms

Face-to-face meetings will take place with Komen's leadership team, biweekly meetings for investors and shareholders and as-needed meetings for employees led by management to help facilitate the flow of information and ensure stakeholders are updated.

For employees, Komen will use its intranet system to supply with the most up to date information including company announcements, press releases, briefings from meetings listed above, memos and FAQs.

Email will be used for organization-wide updates and updates for individual internal audiences. These also include announcements, memos and statements from the leadership team.

Executives and managers will use their instant messaging platforms for communicating urgent information that cannot be communicated through email. This is to help the flow of information and allow for issues to be addressed as soon as possible, allowing Komen to control the narrative.

External

- Facebook
- X
- Instagram
- Youtube
- Komen's newsroom/website
 - Grant resources
- Customer service hotline

For communicating with customers, Komen will leverage social media platforms for open two-way communication.

Instagram, X and Facebook will be used to directly respond to questions and concerns from supporters and stakeholders. Leadership statements, key messages and videos will also be released here.

Youtube will host the longer form videos like statements from leadership, explanations on grant policies, testimonials from partners and beneficiaries and educational content on breast health initiatives. These videos will provide transparency and humanize Komen's response to the crisis.

The Komen website will act as the central hub for all media, supporters and affiliates. The home page will have the most up to date information on grants and partnerships, statements and links to Komen's video statements and information on Youtube.

Komen will continue to use its newsroom and grant policy information pages for FAQs, feedback forms, press releases, summaries of grant review procedures and downloadable resources for affiliates, donors and media that is easily accessible.

The media will receive press releases via email with contact information for Komen's PR specialist. An initial press conference with our spokesperson will occur, with follow up conferences if needed regarding the internal review or new grant or partnership decisions are made.

Komen will conduct face-to-face meetings with key partners including Planned Parenthood to ensure alignment with Komen's missions and address concerns more directly. Regular check-ins with advisory bodies will occur as needed to ensure transparency and compliance with nonprofit standards.

A hotline will also be available to answer questions and receive feedback regarding Komen's funding policies and crisis response. Feedback forms will also be

accessible via social media and Komen's website to collect data on supporter concerns, perceptions and suggestions enabling continuous improvement and engagement.

Key Messages

We recommend Komen prioritize the following key messages.

1. We recognize how important it is to be transparent about our funding decisions as it impacts thousands of women. We take responsibility for the confusion and concern caused by our earlier announcement and are actively reviewing our grant-making process to ensure it reflects both our values and the needs of every woman we serve. Every decision we make is guided by our commitment to women's health.
2. At Komen, women's health is not political but personal and universal. We highly value our partnerships with all organizations that work with us to help advance access to care to continue to reach those who need it most. We are all here for women.
3. We hear and understand the disappointment and frustration expressed by many of our supporters, donors, survivors and volunteers of this organization. We encourage feedback and conversation through our feedback forms in order to help our teams understand what our next steps will look like towards the improvement of our organization.

Responses

Initial

- Immediately contact all key partners (this includes Planned Parenthood) to explain the decision and reaffirm Komen's commitment to women's health
- Establish a media info center to gather and assemble the crisis team to quickly assess the situation in order to brief the crisis team to ensure everyone is up to date and informed. Also identifying the key stakeholders affected.
- Develop clear key messages emphasizing Komen's commitment to women's health and cancer prevention.
- From these key messages, create an proactive initial statement drafted by the PR specialist and legal counsel to provide transparency and explanation on the situation.
- All internal stakeholders will be informed first, before going public, via email and internal messaging. An FAQ sheet will also be provided for employees and representatives to feel informed and confident enough to answer questions if needed.

- Initial press release will be released to the public on all social media platforms (X, Instagram, Facebook) and Komen's website.
- A press conference will be called within two hours of the initial press release and led by the organizations' spokesperson, emphasizing the key message and Komen's mission to women's health and cancer prevention.
- The team's social media manager and PR specialist will monitor social media for any sort of comments and news to ensure all questions are being answered and no misinformation is spreading.

Continuing

- At this phase, if the initial efforts don't seem to be sufficient with the results of the backlash and internal affiliate feedback the leadership team will decide if a reversal needs to be reinstated.
- An immediate reversal of the funding policy will be announced, reinstating Planned Parenthood's eligibility for breast cancer screening grants
- A press release outlining Komen's updated decision, reaffirming its commitment to women's health, and clarifying that politics does not influence its funding choices will be drafted and distributed to the media. The release will also include a public apology for the confusion and hurt caused by the initial decision.
- At the same time, this update will be shared across all internal and external communication channels — including affiliate offices, corporate partners, volunteers, donors, and the general public — to ensure consistency and transparency.
- A press conference will occur emphasizing Komen's key messages: acknowledgment of mistakes, commitment to refocusing on the organization's mission, and dedication to serving all women in need of breast health services.
- Additional statements and FAQs will be released as new information becomes available, ensuring that the public and affiliates are kept informed of the organization's recovery efforts and next steps.
- Stakeholder-specific messaging will be developed to address the unique concerns of donors, affiliates, advocacy groups, and health partners, reinforcing Komen is listening, learning, and taking corrective action.
- At this time, Komen's national and local leaders will take a more active and personal role in communication — appearing in interviews, community events, and video messages to express accountability and reaffirm the organization's values.
- Video messages featuring Komen leadership, survivors and affiliates will be posted on YouTube, shared on social media, and featured on Komen's

website, demonstrating transparency, empathy and a renewed focus on collaboration and women's health.

Monitoring and Feedback

Monitoring and feedback during this crisis will focus on social media and public sentiment.

For social media, the social media manager will oversee tracking conversations and engagement related to the Planned Parenthood controversy across platforms such as Facebook, Twitter (X), and Instagram. The manager will identify misinformation, trending criticisms, and emerging questions, ensuring Komen responds quickly with accurate and compassionate information. Social listening tools like Brandwatch or Hootsuite will be used to analyze sentiment, track hashtags and monitor changes in public perception as the organization communicates updates about the funding reversal and its renewed mission focus.

The public relations specialist will oversee media monitoring, ensuring the organization's revised messages—those emphasizing accountability, unity and commitment to women's health—are being accurately represented in national and local coverage. This monitoring will help Komen evaluate how the story is evolving, understand which narratives are resonating, and determine if clarification or additional information is needed to correct misinformation or reinforce key messages.

The affiliate relations and community outreach manager will monitor direct public feedback from supporters, volunteers, and local chapters. This includes reviewing comments from affiliate meetings, donor communications, hotline inquiries, and emails. These insights will help Komen understand how the crisis and its reversal are affecting trust and engagement at the community level.

Post Crisis

- Following the crisis, Komen will continue to analyze its grant making policies with an internal review to make sure they are aligned with their mission and values. A summary report of its analysis will be published to the public.
- Employees will take part in ethics and non-partisan workshops to strengthen internal alignment and ensure all representatives reflect the organization's true purpose. These sessions will include real-world case studies and best-practice discussions.
- Through virtual forums, outreach efforts and meetings, Komen will reconnect with affiliates, volunteers and donors to address concerns and rebuild trust.
- Messaging and newsletters will be used to communicate progress posted to the company website, social media and sent to the press.

- Komen will release feedback forms and online surveys for affiliates, donors, volunteers, and partners, encouraging open dialogue and continuous improvement.
- A post-crisis evaluation will be undertaken, allowing the organization to review the crisis and its responses, improving in any areas that were lacking.

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IMMEDIATE RELEASE

DALLAS — For more than 30 years, Susan G. Komen has been dedicated to serving women by funding breast cancer research, supporting patients, and ensuring access to life-saving care. We recognize that recent changes to our grant policy, which affected Planned Parenthood, have raised concern among our supporters, partners, and the public.

Komen is actively reviewing all grant procedures to ensure accountability, consistency, and transparency. We want to be clear: our policies are designed to be nonpolitical and focused on supporting organizations that provide breast health services. Importantly, no woman should lose access to these essential healthcare services as a result of our grant policies.

We are listening carefully to feedback from our supporters, volunteers, and partners and are taking steps to ensure that our actions align with our mission. Our commitment remains steadfast: to help all women access the breast health services they need, regardless of politics or circumstances.

“Serving women has been at the heart of our work for more than three decades,” said Nancy G. Brinker, founder and CEO of Susan G. Komen. “We regret any confusion caused by prior communications and remain dedicated to supporting all women in their fight against breast cancer.”

For more information about Komen’s grant programs, please visit www.komen.org/grants.

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Press Conference

- Talk Komen’s mission to serving women for 30 years

- Acknowledge concern
- Actively review grants to ensure accountability procedural consistency not political
- However, make sure no woman loses access to this healthcare
- Emphasize they are listening to feedback
- Restate commitment to women's health

Cancer affects everyone, providing all women with resources in fight against cancer, goal is women.

Increasing reach to women of all backgrounds