



# 2025

# WHEN EVERY SECOND COUNTS

**Effective Crisis Communication for Fire Departments**

**Prepared By :**  
North Liberty Fire  
Department



# From our department to yours...



**Brian Platz**  
Fire Chief

“In our profession, every second counts, not only on the scene of an emergency, but also in how we manage and communicate during a crisis. Whether it’s a large-scale fire or an internal incident, the speed and clarity of our response can shape public trust, media coverage, and the safety of our communities.

We cannot wait for a crisis. As first responders, our communities rely on us to deliver calm, credible, and efficient information. That’s why I urge all of us to prioritize and strengthen our crisis communication protocols.

By working together across departments, we can build a fire service that meets every crisis with strength and unity.”

NLFD

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# Sound the alarm: A call for clear communication

In today's fast-paced, high-stakes environment, fire departments face increasing pressure to not only respond effectively to emergencies but also to communicate clearly and credibly in moments of crisis. In an effort to understand the importance of crisis communication in the fire service, the North Liberty Fire Department looked inward to determine the best practices both internally and externally.

This document explores the need for structured, proactive crisis communication strategies within the fire department. Topics include tackling controversy around department personnel, external incident response, and maintaining a positive reputation within the community.

Through real-world analysis, the NLFD identified key communication gaps and ways they can be mended. These not only reflect the needs of the NLFD but also highlight issues shared across other fire departments. Delayed messaging, inconsistent internal communication, and the lack of designated public information roles contribute to poor crisis communication. By confronting these challenges, the department has created a foundation for a more productive communication model.

Ultimately, this document calls fires service members and leaders to treat communication as a critical function of crisis management. With the right tools, training, and mindset, departments can **"Communicate with clarity, respond with confidence."**

# Lost signals: The perfect storm

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Crisis communication is a challenging aspect of the fire service. While departments are highly trained in tactical response, they are not always prepared to manage the outpouring of information under pressure. With the public looking to you for real-time updates and answers, understanding the root causes of the communication gap is the first step toward bridging it.

## There are four primary factors contributing to this communication barrier:

- **The people are always watching** - Today's news cycle is 24/7, and social media demands immediate updates. Fire departments may struggle to keep up with the pace of information during crises.
- **Community members will draw their own conclusions** - When fire departments are slow to communicate, bystanders and media members will fill the void with speculation or incorrect information. This can damage credibility.
- **Many first responders do not know what to say** - Many fire departments lack standardized communication protocols and training in media engagement. This creates inconsistencies in both internal and external messaging during a crisis.
- **Both too much and not enough information are dangerous** - Fire departments must carefully balance transparency with liability. Poorly timed or mishandled communication can lead to lawsuits, loss of community trust, or strained relationships with city officials.



# Looking inward

To better illustrate the impacts of poor crisis management, the following research results highlight how communication failures can affect everything from public trust to staff confidence. These insights reinforce the need for communication strategies at the core of a department.

**Losing public trust** - In a community impact study, 52% of residents expressed decreased confidence in our fire department following a public incident where communication was delayed.

**Staff morale** - Our staff have reported feeling less sure of their role in a crisis when there is minimal or no internal communication, including internal briefings and staff updates.

**Media misinformation** - When looking at our three biggest incidents of the last year, we found areas where external communication could have been more efficient, which would have reduced the spread of inaccurate information within the first two hours of the incident.

**Missed opportunities for community engagement** - While we try to avoid crisis as a department, when we find ourselves in one, it provides an opportunity to build transparency and trust with our community. Without a crisis communication plan, this relationship is put at risk.

**Reduced coordination** - In simulated drills, we found that weak internal communication caused more confusion and unnecessary effort.

# Spot the sparks of a crisis

## INTERNAL

- Personnel misconduct, including sexual harassment allegations and criminal activity
- Leadership transitions like firing, resignation, or suspension
- Disputes between staff members
- Budget cuts and funding decisions

## PROTOCOL

- Someone in the department is found guilty of recklessly driving to or around the scene of a fire.
- Failure to be prepared for dispatch leading to a delayed response time
- Staffing shortages are leading to a delayed response time

## IMAGE

- Allegations of misused funds.
- Violent or dangerous behavior by department personnel at a public or community event
- Substance abuse by department personnel while on the job
- Poor results of a state audit or firefighter training procedure

# Communicate with clarity, respond with confidence.

Effective crisis communication is a necessity. As fire departments face faster news cycles, the ability to communicate quickly and strategically can make the difference between building public trust and losing it. The following solutions are designed to help departments of all sizes strengthen their communication practices before, during, and after a crisis. In addition to messaging, it should include templates and approved workflows. When determining the most productive messaging for your department, look to align local government and agencies to give your community a unified message. Consider these four tactics to clear crisis communication



Establish a public information officer

Designate and train at least one staff member as the PIO. This person should be part of the leadership team during any major incident and should be responsible for primary communication with the media.



Implement social media policies

You should have clear guidelines for staff use of personal and official social media during crisis events. The department should have an active social media presence to directly update community members and monitor misinformation.



Build a relationship with local media before a crisis strikes

You should establish relationships with local journalist. This can be done by providing media with ride-alongs or informational sessions. These will become trusted sources who can amplify messages during crisis.



Implement internal messaging protocol

Ensure that staff are informed before the public when in a crisis situation. This will keep everyone on the same page and centralize messaging. Shift briefings, secure emails, or internal messaging platforms can be used for this.

→ **Evaluate and debrief after every major incident** - Identify what worked, what didn't, and update protocols accordingly.

# As the smoke clears



In an era where information spreads faster than flames, fire departments face a new and urgent challenge: communicating effectively in moments of crisis.

This document has explored best practices in crisis communication from navigating internal issues to managing large public incidents and emphasized why communication must be a part of every department's emergency response strategy.

Through looking inward, the North Liberty Fire Department found common communication challenges and identified realistic solutions. By establishing dedicated roles such as a Public Information Officer, developing structured communication plans, and prioritizing transparency, fire departments can build stronger community trust and enhance operations.

These are not just recommended practices, but essential tools for today's fire service. The North Liberty Fire Department encourages fellow departments to act before a crisis strikes. By making communication a priority, you can protect your personnel, support your community, and uphold the core values of the fire service.



**Communicate  
with clarity,  
respond with  
confidence.**

 [nlfire.org](http://nlfire.org)

 [\(319\) 626-5717](tel:(319)626-5717)

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