

North Carolina Division of Tourism Crisis Communication Plan

Many kinds of situations have the potential to negatively impact the perception of North Carolina as a desirable vacation destination as well as impede travel to and within the state. When these occur, the Division of Tourism can help mitigate these situations through a coordinated involvement with the media, the North Carolina tourism industry and governmental agencies. The details of such involvement form the basis of the Crisis Management Plan.

What constitutes a crisis?

Crises are either natural or of human origin and can be broken down into two general categories:

- A) Incident-based crisis with no advanced warning. Examples of these would include:
 - A sharp rise in violent crimes, or a particularly heinous crime or string of crimes, especially against visitors to North Carolina.
 - Terrorist activities, whether domestic or international in origin, such as bombings and release of chemical or biological agents.
 - Outbreak of a communicable, dangerous disease.
 - Nuclear incident, including accidents/terrorist incidents at nuclear plants in North Carolina
 - Rock slides, forest fires.
 - Animal attacks, such as those involving sharks.
 - Major oil spill.
 - Red tide.
 - Tornadoes or other sudden and severe weather affecting major tourist destinations.
 - An incident that disrupts a major tourist traffic route into North Carolina for an extended period of time.
- B) Developing Crisis in which warning signs may be present. Examples include:
 - Hurricanes
 - Civil unrest
 - Political/religious boycotts
 - Unusual or uncharacteristically severe weather patterns (extensive drought leading to increase in wildfires, etc.)

How does the Division of Tourism learn of the crisis?

The initial notification to the Division of Tourism that a crisis has either erupted or is potentially developing can come from several sources, including but not limited to:

- The mainstream media, whether through print/broadcast coverage or reporter inquiry.
- State/local emergency response officials.

- Governor's Office
- Members Travel and Tourism Board.
- Division of Tourism staff, including Welcome Center and International Office personnel.
- Reports from industry partners, especially CVBs/TDAs, or other segments of the North Carolina tourism industry.

Any real or potential crisis situation is immediately made known to the Executive Director (or delegated backup) who then determines the appropriate level of response for the Division of Tourism. The major question at this point is:

How does the Division of Tourism respond?

Every crisis is different. Each will have unique or unexpected circumstances that will require variations to (and possibly deviations from) even the most exhaustively detailed crisis management plan. Therefore, the Division of Tourism's response to any given crisis situation, while following general guidelines, will also be flexible enough to accommodate changing or unforeseen conditions. However, in the event the Executive Director and Director of Tourism Programs deem a given situation to be actually or potentially serious, a decision then made to activate the Division of Tourism's Communication Response Team (CRT)

MAJOR CRISIS RESPONSE

Activation of the SERT (State Emergency Response Team) will result in the activation of the Division Communications program which consists of notifying the team members and arranging for an immediate meeting of as many as can be reached, or the designated backup staff. Depending on circumstances, the meeting may be done face-to-face, via conference call or a combination of the two. The nature and the extent of the crisis, along with its current and/or potential impact on tourism, is discussed and input actively solicited from particularly impacted segments of the tourism industry.

Team members will be assigned as responsible for various response functions based on the following model:

- Principal Spokesperson: Assistant Secretary Lynn Minges
- Other spokespersons: Wit Tuttell, Director of Public Relations
- CRT Coordinator and Manager: Bryan Gupton
- Media Relations: Wit Tuttell
- Liaison with Office of the Governor: Lynn Minges, Bryan Gupton
- Liaison with Emergency Operations Center: Bryan Gupton, Wit Tuttell, Wally Wazan
- Liaison at Emergency Shelters: Cynthia Ferguson
- Communications with CVBs/TDCs: Kathy Prickett (via NewsLink, 100-county contact list)
- Website updates: Nicolle Jones (www.visitnc.com and www.nccommerce.com/tourism)

- Communications with the Travel and Tourism Board: Eleanor Talley
- Communications with major domestic and international tour operators, national tourism organizations: Heidi Walters
- Liaison with local, state & Federal law enforcement: Bryan Gupton, Wit Tuttell, Wally Wazan
- Internal Communications to Division Staff: Bryan Gupton, Wit Tuttell
- Liaison with Inquiry: Wally Wazan, Cindy Worrill
- Liaison with Welcome Centers: Wally Wazan, Cindy Worrill
- Research Resources: Marlise Taylor

In addition, the CRT will be responsible for the planning and implementation of the Division of Tourism's situation-specific communications strategy. A location will be chosen for the Communication Command Center. In most instances, this will be the Division's Raleigh offices. If, however, that location is not functional because it has been impacted by the crisis, the team will operate from the State of North Carolina Emergency Management Crisis Center, also in Raleigh, or another location to be determined.

CRT will notify the Travel Industry and all parties of the location and contact number of the Crisis Center.

Once situated, the CRT will determine:

- Key messages concerning the crisis, including official statements to be sent to all partners for inclusion of their releases.
- The audience for those messages, such as visitors already in North Carolina, visitors preparing to come to North Carolina, tour operators/travel agents, tourism-related businesses, etc.
- The appropriate media for conveying those messages.
- The appropriate methods for contact.

Timely situational summaries could be placed on the www.visitnc.com website and official releases on www.nccommerce.com/tourism website. If necessary, a formal news conference or media briefing will be arranged. As the crisis continues, the CRT will carefully monitor how the media coverage evolves and respond as appropriate. All media contacts will be logged in detail, containing the name of the reporter, media outlet they represent, their telephone number and a short summary of what was discussed during the contact.

THE RECOVERY PHASE

Once the actual crisis is over and recovery efforts are underway, the CRT, in consultation with the Travel Industry will determine how best to support this effort on behalf of the industry. This may include:

- Periodic status reports to the media, Division of Tourism staff (including field reps and international offices), travel industry, inquiry, and welcome centers as various areas reopen to visitors.

- Preparing situational updates for specific media, such as the Weather Channel, national and statewide media outlets.
- Coordinate media press conferences and remotes as necessary
- The CRT will also plan to reconvene for a post-crisis meeting to evaluate the effectiveness of the communications effort.
- Coordinate post-crisis messages including press releases and possible advertising when necessary.

LOWER LEVEL CRISIS RESPONSE

Not every crisis is a major one requiring a full emergency response from the Division of Tourism. If, after the initial notifications, the Executive Director and the Director of Tourism Programs determine the situation can be handled without convening all members of the CRT and setting up a Communication Command Center, a more conservative approach to crisis management will be taken. That approach, however, will likely include many, if not most of the elements already referenced in the Major Crisis Response plan, such as crafting key messages, identifying target audiences and employing the best media vehicles to reach those audiences.

MEDIA REFERRAL

A part of the Division of Tourism's function in less-intensive crisis situations will be to provide a medial referral service. Of course, the Division of Tourism will provide the media with accurate situational summaries and "official statements" on behalf of the state's tourism industry during a crisis. However, in cases where it is inappropriate for Division staff to comment on the specifics of a crisis or speculate on how that crisis may ultimately impact North Carolina visitation, referrals will be made to the most appropriate person. In those instances, the Division of Tourism will work with the local organization, if requested, to help prepare a coordinated response.