MLA

MICHIGAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION
CRISIS COMMUNICATION GUIDE

As of late, libraries have been seemingly under scrutiny due to the concerns regarding how students can access certain books and literature. In fact, [school libraries banned more books than ever before in 2021](). MLA values an individual's right to choose information concepts and media to formulate thought and opinion without repercussion, restrictions to access and barriers to privacy of information constitute intellectual freedom issues.

This guide is intended to serve as a planning tool so each library can respond to situations of all sizes and feel safe if confronted.

What is crisis communication?

A crisis is defined as an event that happens suddenly and unexpectedly that poses a significant threat to the operations and reputation of your library. Intellectual freedom and censorship may spark reactions that may be easily diffused or addressed, or could escalate to include threats or collective action by community members.

A crisis communication plan is a critical part of crisis management. This structured approach provides a framework for how and what to communicate to intentionally address crises to minimize impact.

Effective crisis communication will:
1. Inform the public about the situation by providing accurate and timely information.
2. Maintain a public perception about how your leadership is responding to a crisis.
3. Provide clear instructions about what to do or how to help in order to reduce or limit the duration or impact of the crisis.
4. Reinstate confidence and provide a future-oriented perspective.

Responding to a book banning /censorship crisis

Preparation is key. The purpose of this guide is to construct a framework to provide an accurate rapid response, establish accountability and minimize the impacts of a negative event.

How to prepare for and respond to a book banning/censorship crisis that is happening within your library:

PRE-CRISIS PLANNING:
- ***Outline and review "what-if" scenarios.***
  - Identify situations that could lead to a crisis.

        i.   Identify what specific literature or topic areas are currently in the media as being controversial and the reasoning behind it.

        ii.   Obtain information about what books are currently being scrutinized in the national media, what happened when complaints were made in other states and what the results were of those complaints.

        iii.   Discuss possible responses without the actual pressure to an angry parent or community member who is vocal and abrasive about removing this book from your catalog.

                1.   Identify protocol for replacement if theft or property damage occurs.

- Establish protocols for when potential situations arise and determine whether it is cause for concern or action. Some examples include:

        i.   A patron inquires or issues a complaint by email, phone or in person.

                1.   What is their tone?

                2.   Is it elevating or becoming threatening?

        ii.   Protestors.

                1.   What are they doing and saying?

                      a.   What is the tone and is it concerning?

                2.   Are they peaceful or causing a disturbance?

                3.   Are they inhibiting or restricting access in any way, either for patrons to the library or for potential emergency vehicles.

                4.   Are they staying outside or coming inside?

        iii.   Threats.

                1.   How are they posing a threat?

                2.   How is the threat delivered?

                      a.   Email, phone, in person, other.

                3.   How is the threat being documented, reported and monitored?

        iv.   **Examples:**

                1.   A library in Indiana is considering adding Catcher in the Rye, and due to that consideration there have been protests outside the local branches, calling on them not to add the book because of its association with promoting alcohol abuse, as well as its references to prostitution and premarital sex. In response to the crisis, your branch's staff meets in an emergency staff meeting to discuss the situation and to update all staff.

                2.   A children's book is recently being scrutinized in a local community because it contains a transgendered character. A patron speaks calmly with a library team member about their concerns, who uses their agreed upon messaging to describe the library's stance on intellectual freedom and censorship. The patron's demeanor becomes agitated and threatening because they aren't hearing what they want. The library staff member

needs to call in appropriate support to de-escalate the situation and feel safe.

3. A community member has intentionally damaged books under scrutiny so they can no longer be used. The library replaces those books and flags other books to monitor closely and protect.

- Administer employee training or role playing to help people feel confident with how to react.

- **Clarify roles and responsibilities for library staff for how and when to respond.**
  - List team members' titles and duties as well as their names.
    - i. By planning ahead, team members will know their roles and you'll have contact information at the ready if needed.
      1. This will provide people with a feeling of security if they are dealing with a situation where they don't feel comfortable or safe, particularly if they don't come from a place of authority.
    - ii. Select your library's leader-spokesperson.
      1. This could be leadership, but doesn't necessarily have to be. Think through availability, the ability to speak clearly and confidently, and overall knowledge of your library's services, staff and operations.
  - Establish a crisis chain of command. Team members will be working together closely, and knowing when to handle a complaint or action themselves versus when to call in support or a designated person in charge will eliminate potential problems when a crisis occurs. For example, If your staff is structure similar to the model below, please leave all the front-facing communication to the Librarians and other Full-Time Supervisory Staff members, but input should be included from all staff on what should be communicated to the community:
    - i. Staff Structure
      1. Interns
      2. Library Aides
      3. Library Assistants
      4. Librarians - Speak with community members and media
      5. Supervisory-Technical - Speak with community members and media
      6. Administration - Speak with community members and media
    - ii. It would be helpful to map out the lines of authority; this will look similar to an organizational chart.
  - Create a rapid-response mechanism (telephone tree, cell phone list, email) for getting in touch with team members if a situation arises. Create a group chat that can be for emergencies only.
  - Let everyone in the organization know via email who's on the team and what the lines of authority are.
- **Draft messaging and talking points that focus strictly on the facts and the library's stance on intellectual freedom.**

- ○ Ask your team to answer the following questions when drafting messaging:
    - i. What does the book banning crisis consist of?
    - ii. Why is the book questionable?
    - iii. What topic areas within the book are causing concerns?
    - iv. Has this book caused action in other areas before?
    - v. Who are key players that are the most vocal or seen as leadership of this call for the book banning?
    - vi. Who is bringing the concern to our attention (school, parent, grandparent, rando, etc)?
    - vii. Who do they consider is at risk of being harmed by these books?
    - viii. Is this occurring inside the library space or outside in the parking lot or patio area if your branch has one?
    - ix. Were there any threats of violence towards staff members?
    - x. Were there any threats towards any community members of the library space?
    - xi. Was there any damage to library property?
    - xii. Are there any staff members involved in this call to ban these specific books?
    - xiii. When did the call to ban these specific books occur or how long has this crisis lasted?
    - xiv. What can your branch do in response to show unity and solidarity amongst staff members?
- ○ If and when you do not have an answer to a question (from the public, on social media or from a member of the media):
    - i. Provide as much context or information that you know is true on the topic (i.e. the answers to the above questions).
    - ii. Let the audience know you will follow up with those who may know or when you have answers, and you will follow up with the individual who asked the question.
    - iii. NEVER say "no comment." Always address the question even if you don't have an answer. Responding with "we'll let you know as soon as we know more," is sufficient.

DURING THE CRISIS:
- **Monitor the situation.**
    - ○ Determine when backup or additional action steps are required, following established procedures.
- **Monitor and manage communications channels.**
    - ○ Internal:
        - i. Contact all employees to provide a summary of the crisis, facts and next steps.
            1. What do they need to know?
            2. What are they expected to do?

- ○ External:
  - i. Social media:
    1. Develop and use a relevant hashtag specific to the crisis. Hashtags should be easy to remember and used on every post addressing the crisis.
       a. Examples:
          i. #IntellectualFreedom
          ii. #NoCensorship
          iii. #BooksForAll
          iv. #ArticleNineteen
    2. Post a concise statement within 24 hours of the crisis on your social channels using the key messages you've drafted.
       a. Avoid placing blame on a particular person or a particular movement. As a stakeholder in the community it is important to maintain the high road when crafting messages.
       b. Emphasize in messaging how you are here to provide a service to all citizens of the community and acknowledge the concern that people may have concerning a particular book.
       c. Reiterate that the proper process is in place to request the removal of books that are thoroughly reviewed by a group of experienced members who take all factors in consideration. The same process is done when adding books to the library catalog.
       d. Be sure to add a point of contact for anyone to reach out to in order to express concerns and also to gain updates.
    3. Monitor social media and immediately address any incorrect information or comments.
       a. Beyond the initial opportunity for education, only engage in authentic conversation or offer an invitation for those who want to discuss more to use the point of contact information.
    4. Answer questions; don't leave followers room for interpretation.
       a. Be sure to follow up periodically on original postings to ensure you are not missing any questions or comments.
  - ii. Media:
    1. Your library will likely be contacted by the media if attention is drawn as a result of a complaint or crisis event made by a community member. Remember, they are doing their jobs and not trying to trap you.

a. Make sure your messaging with the media is the same or close to identical to the messaging you have on social media to not confuse each audience.

b. Make sure each staff member has access to the same messaging just in case they are approached by media outlets.

2. Stick to your messaging and do not deviate from it. We understand that you might be prone to speaking your mind freely but remember that you are representing yourself, you are representing that branch which is a public service provider to the community.

3. If you're unsure of a response, let them know you'll follow up with information as it becomes available.

iii. Website:

1. Proactively post information on your website within 24 hours using the key messages. This is your chance to present facts and outline your side of the story.

POST-CRISIS FOLLOW UP AND MONITORING:

- **After the crisis:**
  - Deliver any information that was promised to media, internal teams or other stakeholders during the crisis.
    - i. Check your social media pages once a day to make sure you catch any misinformation or questions so that they do not go unanswered. This is very important to maintaining that connection to the community.
  - Keep your community informed on progress related to crisis management.
  - Evaluate your response to identify areas for improvement to prevent future issues and prepare for similar events. You can do a SWOT Analysis to prepare for next time:
    - i. Strengths - What things were handled well during the crisis communications plan?
    - ii. Weaknesses - What things need improvement for next time with the crisis communications plan?
    - iii. Opportunities - What are any new strategies or tactics to incorporate into your crisis communications plan?
    - iv. Threats - What are factors that prohibit you from incorporating those new strategies or tactics into your crisis communications plan?

CONCLUSION:

While it's difficult to predict human behavior, there are instances where books are being banned and libraries are under attack. Whether a complaint is peaceful or threatening, individual libraries will be in a better position to handle and respond every situation with some planning.