

CRISIS TRIGGERS: HOW TO DETECT THE WARNING SIGNS

With thousands (or millions) of residents and many square miles of jurisdiction, Florida cities can find themselves in a crisis at any time.

A hurricane or other natural disaster puts countless lives at risk. A tanker truck crashes within the city limits, spilling its contents into a local river. A city employee commits an action that puts his agency, and city leadership, in the full glare of negative publicity. The list of possibilities goes on and on.

Whatever the nature of the triggering event, how your city government responds can make all the difference in determining whether the situation is elevated to become a full-blown crisis. Slow response, isolated decision-making and lack of planning can turn a difficult, but manageable, situation into a crisis.

Fortunately, there often are indications that a crisis is developing. These triggers can come through various channels, such as increased inquiries to your city's customer call center, an audit uncovering the mishandling of public money, or an increased interest by reporters on a particular matter.

It is critical that your city employees be attuned to potential triggers and immediately notify their supervisors that a crisis could be developing. This response will give city leaders an opportunity to identify the potential catalyst early, providing you time to respond before the problem truly becomes a crisis.

TYPES OF POTENTIAL CRISES

Not all events or occurrences will develop into a crisis, and not all crises will give an early indication that a problem is imminent. Listed below are some examples of the many types of potential threats to your city government. This is intended to offer a general overview of possible crises, but the list of actual challenges is limited only by your imagination.

That's why it is crucial that your city's leaders and staff discuss and prepare for potential threats to your community, among them:

- Natural disasters
- Large-scale service outages (often in the wake of natural disasters)
- Incidents involving public safety (police and fire)
- Financial mismanagement
- A data breach (involving residents' personal information)
- A lawsuit against the city
- Criminal charges against an employee or elected official
- A serious accident on city property or at a city-sponsored event
- Confidential information leaked by employees
- An act of terrorism

Each of these triggering events has its own unique set of circumstances and challenges. But they all have one thing in common: They can threaten your city's reputation and must be addressed quickly but carefully.

That's where an effective crisis communications plan comes into play.