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Crisis Communications: Best Practices for Race Directors

Be prepared to respond appropriately and communicate effectively with staff, athletes, spectators and media in the event of an emergency.

No race director is immune to facing an extreme situation outside of their control, but we can all be well prepared for it. Below are a few best practices for emergency contingency planning with your communications team, as well as sample messaging for several scenarios.

Note: This document is specific to communications, including public-facing messaging to athletes, spectators and the media. For event operations-specific information, please refer to the weather and medical event contingency planning documents in the [Race Director Toolbox](#).

Crisis Communications Tips

- Establish a chain of reporting for all incident scenarios. For example:
 - Any issues will be reported immediately to the race director.
 - Race director will contact medical and/or police lead (depending if medical, security or weather situation)
 - Medical lead will contact emergency personnel (911), followed by the athlete's emergency contact
 - Race director will notify communications lead
 - Communications lead will notify key communications staff at other involved organizations, including parks & rec, city, etc. (Note, there should still be a single primary lead who will be the point person on drafting a statement)
 - Race director will contact USA Triathlon (in all cases, race directors are urged to contact USA Triathlon for guidance BEFORE issuing any type of public statement)
- Establish a protocol for all event staff and volunteers. For example, if questioned by any media, staff and volunteers should always respond: "All questions and inquiries at this time are being handled by the communications team and the race director." If a public statement is provided online in response to an incident, staff and volunteers may direct the inquirer to the website for more information.
- Establish a single media spokesperson. If a reporter inquires about a crisis before a public statement has been made, the response should be: "We are gathering information at this time and will share a public statement as soon as it is available." Be sure to take down the reporter's contact information and respond with the statement as soon as it is finalized.



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- Ensure your communications team is monitoring social media closely. If at all possible, be prepared to issue a statement as soon as an athlete, spectator or media member posts something publicly about the incident. **However, don't be reflexive** — ensure you have all of the correct information and your core team has approved all messaging before you publish.
- For medical situations, do not provide the athlete's name or identity publicly before speaking to the family. If a statement is needed urgently, it can say "a man in his 40s," for example, and can later be updated with the athlete's name.
- For medical situations, be aware of HIPAA laws and respect the family's privacy — do not share medical details with media. Once a transport to the hospital has occurred, you can also defer media requests to the hospital's media relations staff. You should identify these contacts for local hospitals in advance as part of your event preparation.
- For emergency scenarios that involve all athletes — such as a weather or security incident — it's important to cover all bases to ensure your message gets to event participants ASAP:
 - In-person: Have your event announcer/emcee make an urgent announcement. Radio to your staff out on the course to communicate with nearby athletes in person.
 - App: If you have an event app, share your message with a push notification
 - Social media: Post on your event's social pages
 - Email: Send urgent messaging to all participants
- For crisis scenarios that involve just one or a small group of people — such as a medical issue or fatality — immediate communication to all participants is not recommended. Be aware of your tone and use proper judgement on social media. Unless you're providing live coverage, halt any scheduled social media posts that aren't operational in nature. The last thing you want is to post something that says, "We're having the best day! What a great event!" when a tragedy has just occurred.
- Post-event, continue to monitor social media and email closely, and be responsive to all questions from media, athletes and spectators. Provide the approved written statement as the response to all inquiries, unless follow-up questions are asked. For follow-ups, work closely with the communications staff, race director and USA Triathlon to handle on a case-by-case basis. Remember that privacy and HIPAA concerns still apply, and you are not obligated to answer every question a reporter asks if it would constitute a violation of privacy.

MESSAGING EXAMPLES

Expected Weather (Template)



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PLEASE NOTE: INCLEMENT WEATHER EXPECTED

Be aware of changing weather conditions in and around [VENUE] tomorrow. The weather forecast may cause delays and changes to the schedule. For the most current updates, visit [WEBSITE], and our event social media channels (XXXXXXX on Facebook and XXXXXXX on Twitter). We will also have updates at the venue as available.

Confirmed Event Changes Due to Weather (Template)

IMPORTANT EVENT UPDATE [DATE AND TIME]

Due to [heavy rain and flooding overnight/high winds/waves in excess of XX feet/storm surge/currents/other unexpected event], the following modifications have been made to the schedule for [date] at the [event name] to ensure athlete safety:

- List event changes (course shifts, schedule changes, etc.)
- Provide updated course maps if/when available

Updates will be posted on the event website and social media channels when available. Visit [WEBSITE], [XXXXXXX on Facebook] and [XXXXXXX on Twitter] and listen to race announcements at the venue for the latest information.

Fatality (2018 USA Triathlon Age Group National Championships)

USA Triathlon is deeply saddened to confirm the death of Jim Hix, 75, from Claremore, Oklahoma, while competing in the swim portion of the Olympic-Distance race today at the USA Triathlon Age Group National Championships in Cleveland, Ohio.

“Our sport lost a member of its beloved community and we extend our heartfelt condolences to Jim’s wife, Ann, his family and friends,” said USA Triathlon CEO Rocky Harris. “As one of the nation’s top multisport athletes in his age group, Jim and USA Triathlon shared a close relationship and his passing is particularly difficult.”

Hix was the 2017 USA Triathlon Duathlon National Champion in the men’s 75-79 age group and he has represented the U.S. at the ITU Age Group World Championships as a member of Team USA.

USA Triathlon will make no further comment at this time out of respect for the privacy of Jim’s family.

Fatality (2018 USA Triathlon Clydesdale & Athena National Championships) *



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**The race director for the Grand Rapids Triathlon contacted USA Triathlon when the fatality occurred. USA Triathlon assisted in drafting the below public statement, which was shared jointly by the race management company and USA Triathlon.*

USA Triathlon and the Tris4Health Race Management Company are deeply saddened to confirm the passing of Gary Grunwald, 61, from Elk Grove, California, on June 10 while competing on the run portion of the USA Triathlon Clydesdale & Athena National Championships in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The sport lost a member of its beloved community, and we extend our heartfelt condolences to Gary's family and friends. USA Triathlon is working closely with Tris4Health, organizer of the Grand Rapids Triathlon and host of the Clydesdale & Athena Nationals, to collect more information.

Questions? Please reach out to Caryn Maconi, USA Triathlon Communications Manager, at caryn.maconi@usatriathlon.org.