



CSC Playbook Series:

Active Shooter—Prepare, Respond, & Recover

Tragically, active shooter events on college campuses are something for which every institution must prepare. APLU's [Council on Strategic Communications](#) has developed a series of playbooks, with support and expertise from [Blue Moon Consulting Group](#), to help you begin to think about the work your campus needs to do to prepare for, respond to, and recover from such a tragic event. Our goal is to share with our members best practice and lessons learned from peer institutions with a specific focus on emergency and strategic communications.

This series is comprised of three parts:

Part 1: Prepare

Building for an Effective Response

Part 2: Respond

Meeting the Immediate Information Needs of Your Community

Part 3: Recover

Providing the Emotional, Humanitarian, and Strategic Support Necessary to Move Forward

Part Two: Respond

Meeting the Immediate Information Needs of Your Community

When an active shooter situation unfolds, time is critical. Campus communicators must transition instantly from their normal roles into action – requiring not only the execution of pre-developed communication plans but also the flexibility and agility to adapt in real-time.

During the early stages of such an event, the safety of students, staff, and faculty is paramount. Providing accurate, frequent, and transparent updates is essential to saving lives, calming fears, and stopping the spread of misinformation.

In this moment, your university needs you to be a proactive thought leader helping to guide the decision-making process. By driving the communication strategy, you will help to ensure your stakeholders continue to see the institution as transparent, empathetic, and in control.

TEAM/PERSONAL SAFETY: THE FIRST CONSIDERATION

During an active shooter event, personal safety must come first. Ensure now that you and your team know and fully understand the “run, hide, fight” basics.

Plan a meeting with the team to review your institution’s procedures with a specific focus on your office and other commonly frequented locations. If possible, have police or public safety join the meeting to review both personal safety and expectations once police arrive on scene.

If your school has not produced its own active shooter safety video, watch one of the many that can be accessed online. Two we recommend are the FBI’s, “Run, Hide, Fight” and the UK Counterterrorism Policing’s, “Run, Hide, Tell” which has a slightly softer approach but does not discuss actions to take when trapped.

Discuss specifics around how the team can accomplish immediate communications tasks if campus has not yet been given the “all-clear.”



[FBI: Run, Hide, Fight](#)



[Counter Terrorism Policing: Safety Advice for the Public](#)

STAGE 1: COMMUNITY NOTIFICATIONS

As soon as an event occurs, mass alert notifications become the top priority. At most institutions, sending emergency alerts is the responsibility of the university police, public safety, or emergency operations team.

Pre-approved messages, templates, and protocols should already be in place, ready for immediate dissemination. These messages should cover critical safety instructions, such as whether there is an active threat, where individuals should shelter, and which specific areas the community should avoid.



The central communications office should be prepared to amplify content and understand when and how they will assume responsibility for subsequent alert communications.

Notifications must be frequent and direct:

- Updates should be sent at regular intervals, even when there is no new information.
- The communication must be clear and:
 - Reinforce safety direction (e.g. shelter in place; avoid the area, etc.)
 - Focus on the status of the incident (e.g., suspect still at large)
 - Provide guidance for police engagement (e.g. directing informational tips)
- Fast-moving crises demand quick decisions. Ensure a process exists now that avoids excessive approval layers in the moment.
- Notifications should be repeated across multiple platforms, including the school's home page and other high-traffic websites, email alerts, and social media feeds particularly through verified institutional accounts such as university police.
- Train social media teams to amplify these accounts emphasizing that they should not embellish or add new and/or unverified information.

Rumor Control

In these moments, social media will be abuzz with unverified reports and speculation—at times gleaned from police radio communications—which can heighten fear and confusion. Rumor control will be crucial. Ensure your team works closely with law enforcement through the Public Information Officer (PIO)—a trained member of police or the communications team—to monitor and debunk false information.

As discussed in “Part 1: Prepare—Building for an Effective Response,” meet with other response teams including the police, the Emergency Operations Team (EOT), and leadership-level Crisis Management Team (CMT) to discuss—in detail—the delineation and coordination of communications and rumor response.

STAGE 1: COMMUNITY NOTIFICATIONS (CONTINUED)

Accounting for Community Members

Having a clear plan in place to account for the status and safety of students, staff, faculty and visitors is essential. But internal accounting—missing, injured, hospitalized, dead—is not synonymous with reporting this information externally. Recognize that although there will be an intense effort to confirm the status of individuals, any release of information will require approval from police and the emergency operations center director and likely will be provided only in the aggregate. Plan to discuss protocols in advance with police, the emergency operations director, and the family assistance center.

STAGE 2: IMMEDIATE IMPACTS—TODAY AND TOMORROW

Once the initial chaos subsides and the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) is established, the communications strategy splits into two parallel but mutually supporting streams: operational and strategic communications.

Operational Communications: This stream focuses on fact-based updates about the crime scene, the ongoing investigation, and public safety information and guidance. The responsibility for distributing this messaging lies with the police/public safety, and—as the incident progresses—the Emergency Operations Team or Joint Information Center via the Public Information Officer (PIO) with support from the Crisis Communications Team. Communicators must ensure that only verified facts are shared to prevent misinformation.

Strategic Communications: Alternately, strategic communications involve values-based messaging designed to convey compassion, reassure the community, and provide updates on administrative actions including modified operations, staffing and schedule changes. It is the “what now”—information that the community needs about moving forward, support, and recovery. This messaging is developed by the crisis communications team in partnership with institutional leaders.



STAGE 2: IMMEDIATE IMPACTS—TODAY AND TOMORROW

Communications Team Responsibilities

In the immediate aftermath, prioritize establishing a “single source of truth.” We find that most institutions’ police, emergency, or alert sites are not designed to be agile enough to meet the evolving information needs that your community may have over the days, weeks, and months (and even years) that you will need to communicate on the topic.

Given that, we encourage the communications team to consider developing an emergency dark site—fully functional, pre-populated pages that can be published almost immediately should the need arise. Hidden on a development server or other inaccessible place, a dark site can be launched with little to no preparation to share accurate and timely information. A pre-developed emergency microsite provides a number of benefits, including:

- **Quickly Establishing the Institution as the Authoritative Information Resource:** When there isn’t a clear resource for comprehensive, reliable information, gaps are filled with rumors and misinformation. A well-designed and quickly launched microsite establishes the institution as the “go-to” place for key information and updates.
- **Demonstrating that You Are in Control:** One of the most important things that you will be communicating with a microsite is that you are taking responsibility to “make things right,” rather than simply reacting to a bad situation. You are providing the information that your community needs to move forward.
- **Signaling Transparency:** While the information shared may not always reflect positively on your institution; by providing the facts—the good, the bad, and the ugly—you demonstrate that you are taking the issue seriously. You establish trust through transparency.
- **Providing Frontline Staff Support:** A microsite ensures that you are not dependent on frontline staff or supporters who may have varying levels of expertise and background to share this important information. Instead, provide your representatives a few key talking points and have them redirect stakeholders to this site.

EMERGENCY DARK SITE: ESSENTIAL COMPONENTS

The very process of thinking through a dark site will help your team understand what is already in place, identify gaps, and take the strategic lead on this topic driving your institution to become more prepared. Approach this from a resource coordination philosophy—leverage existing solutions whenever possible. The site should include:

- Event-specific details (fact-checking, verified reports)
- Logistical impacts and resources including: school/building closures, memorial services, charity information, family assistance center details and counseling resources
- Stakeholder-specific information (resources for students, faculty, and staff)
- Clear guidance on how the public can help by giving blood, donating money, or volunteering

Regardless of whether you decide to develop a dark site, it will be essential to obtain access to all available digital communication channels before a crisis and cross-train key personnel on how to deploy these assets in an emergency.

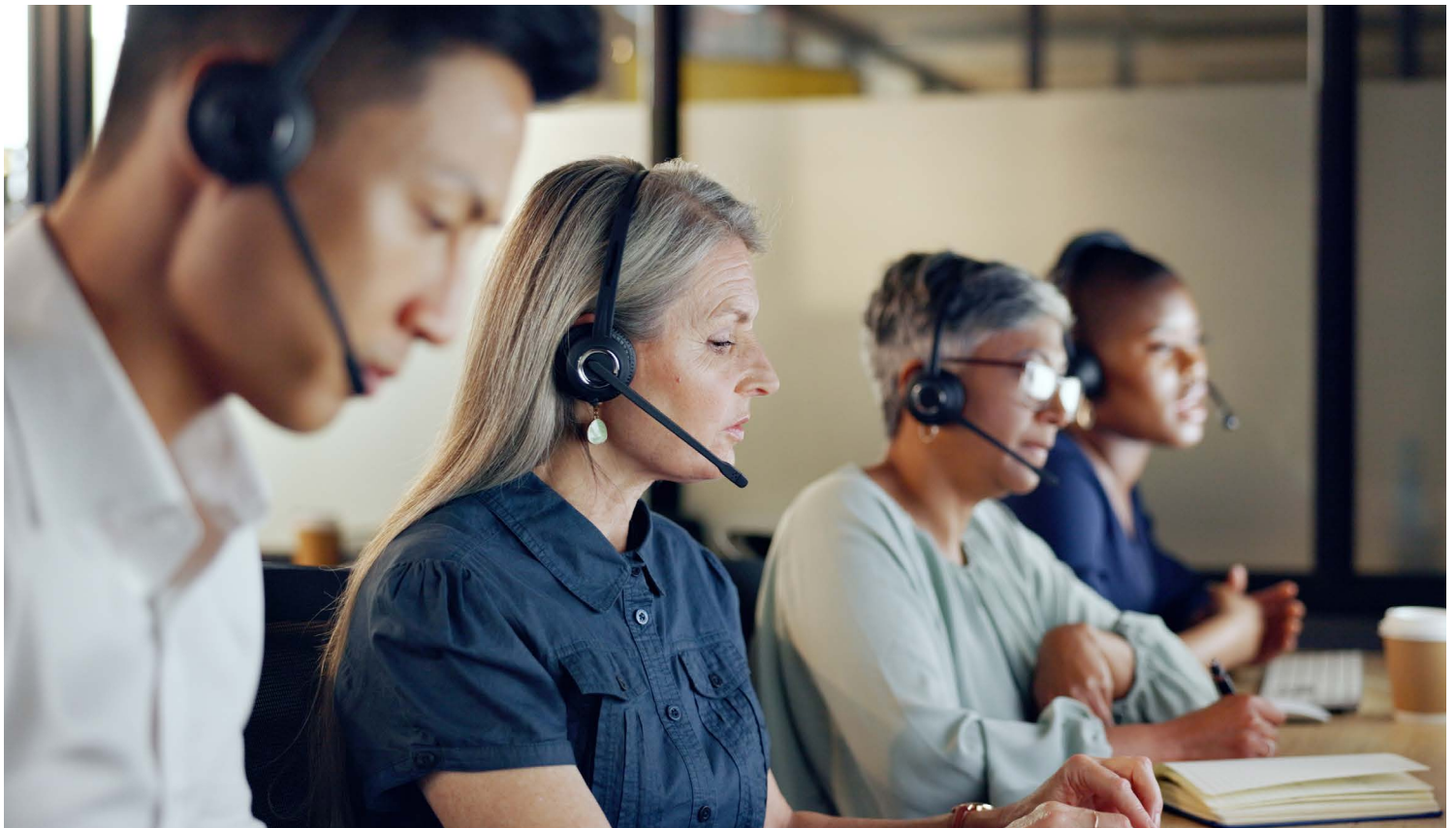
STAGE 2: IMMEDIATE IMPACTS (CONTINUED)

Incoming Inquiries: Cautiously Consider Utilizing a Call Center

Following an active shooter incident, the institution will receive an influx of calls from stakeholders, media, and outside entities unrelated to the school or community. Callers will use any publicly available phone number to reach a contact at the university, regardless of whether that person is qualified or authorized to speak on behalf of the institution.

Frontline staff who typically answer phones should not be tasked with managing the influx of calls in such a volatile situation. Instead, you may consider rerouting calls temporarily to a call center to be logged and managed. While a call center can offer relief from the sheer volume of phone inquiries, Communications teams should be prescriptive in defining the call center's responsibilities. Typically, those should be limited to redirecting callers to resources like the family assistance center, counseling services, and the university's emergency microsite/dark site. Ambiguity about the call center's role and the language it uses to communicate with callers introduces undue reputational risk at a highly sensitive time.

Should you decide against using a call center, communicators must prepare frontline staff to answer, log, and appropriately direct incoming calls. The Communications Team should provide a very short script to staff that acknowledges the emergency and directs callers to the "single source of truth"—the microsite/dark site. Additionally, it will be important to provide them key phrases to manage difficult callers and tools to handle threatening calls and escalate those to the proper authorities. The Communications Team should also provide recommended language for voicemail and auto-reply email messages for key offices and responders. Again, the goal is to avoid having these frontline staff answer questions or extemporize. Leave the FAQ to the emergency dark site or trained leadership.





HOW CAN I HELP?

One of the biggest challenges following any disaster or emergency is addressing the outpouring of offers to help almost from the moment the first warnings go out.

- Speak with police about how outside police forces and individual first responders can be identified by campus stakeholders to help reduce community concern.
- Ensure that the Emergency Operations Team has a plan in place to meet and focus Good Samaritans who arrive on campus; otherwise, you risk parallel responses being established.
- Understand whether Student Affairs has in place a formal plan to offer extended counseling services, including how they may verify and incorporate individuals from throughout the community who spontaneously arrive on campus.
- Develop a thoughtful, proactive, and strategic plan for vigils, memorials, and donations in partnership with Student Affairs, Advancement, Legal and other key leadership.
- Work with your leadership team to reinforce the idea of controlled messaging and programing. Every dean, faculty member, manager, and board member will want to communicate on the topic. Point them to your single source of truth and help them understand what information and communications should be simply a passthrough and where they are welcome to develop targeted messaging.
- Consider your extended team—those beyond the tight-knit circle you will initially turn to. How can they be informed and leveraged in the response? For example, we promise that you do not have enough people ready to handle the traditional and social media volume and demands that you will see. Crosstrain them now. Not including them—or at least keeping them informed—risks hurt and anger in the aftermath.

STAGE 2: IMMEDIATE IMPACTS (CONTINUED)

Managing the Media

As news spreads, the campus will be inundated with news media representatives. A key task will be managing the flow of information and media access while also supporting law enforcement's investigation and respecting the privacy of victims, their families, and your community. Establishing a Media Information Center (MIC), or Joint Information Center (JIC) if law enforcement jurisdiction is shared, should be a priority.

Media Information Center (MIC): Once the campus is secure (and even before), hundreds of reporters will arrive on campus seeking statements, interviews, and constant updates. Establishing a MIC immediately helps the institution accommodate this influx of media, control the dissemination of information, and ensure that all public statements are coordinated and consistent.

Typically established and run by the Media Relations team, this central information hub provides a safe, accessible location away from the ongoing crime scene where briefings can be held at regular intervals, media inquiries can be organized and handled professionally, and vetted authority figures can be made available for statements and interviews. To ensure there is a secure option, identify and stock—in advance—three separate locations across campus. This allows the team to turn to an alternate location should one or more fall within the active hot zone.

Joint Information Center (JIC): At some point the MIC may transition to a JIC, so named because several law enforcement agencies are represented. The JIC helps coordinate communication between the university, law enforcement, and emergency personnel. While still the hosts, the institution's Media Relations team may no longer be the lead but will continue to work closely with other agencies now in the lead (FBI, State Police, government agencies, etc.).

The JIC should handle all media briefings, press conferences, and updates, ensuring that information is consistent and reliable across all agencies involved. Scheduling press briefings at predictable intervals will help reduce speculation and misinformation while providing the media with regular opportunities for updates.

The First Press Conference

The first press conference sets the tone for how the community and media will perceive the institution's response. In the immediate aftermath of an active shooter event, the first press conference should focus on providing factual updates and offering reassurance to a traumatized community. Typically held within two hours of the event's resolution, it's essential for your institution to present accurate information in a calm and steady tone to counteract the chaos and rumors already circulating.

The press conference should open with law enforcement providing clear updates on the situation—focusing on what is known without speculating. The speaker—ideally the police chief—should project calm and transparency, reassuring the community that the situation is being handled responsibly.

Next, the institution's president or a high-ranking official should deliver an empathetic message, acknowledging the pain and grief while avoiding overwhelming details. This speaker should express sympathy for victims and their families assuring the campus that support services are being mobilized.

The First Press Conference (continued)

Details such as the status of campus activities and mental health services should also be addressed, but in a concise manner. It's essential to assure the community that they will be kept informed as more information becomes available.

After the prepared statements, a brief Q&A session can follow, but it's important to set boundaries about how long it will last and who will address specific questions at the outset. Keeping the press conference short, focused, and respectful is key to maintaining public trust.

KEY CONSIDERATIONS, RUN OF SHOW, BEST PRACTICES

Key Considerations

- Focus on what we know and avoid speculation. Police will be the primary source of incident-specific updates.
- Convey empathy for victims and ensure the institution's leadership demonstrates their focus on supporting the community.
- Limit speakers to two or three to avoid overwhelming stakeholders.



First Press Conference Sample Run of Show

1. Opening by Communications Representative:
 - Introduce speakers and agenda.
 - Set ground rules (e.g., limit on time for questions).
2. Police Chief/Public Safety:
 - Deliver fact-based updates, exuding calm and transparency.
 - Say what is known, acknowledging that much information is still unfolding.
3. Institutional Leader (e.g., President):
 - Express empathy and outline support efforts (e.g. family assistance center).
 - Announce decisions (e.g., class cancellations, campus operations, counseling services).
4. Communications Representative:
 - Open for Q&A, directing questions to appropriate speakers.
 - Close the conference at the predetermined time.

Press Conference Best Practices

- Stick to the basics and keep it short.
- Show calm, authentic leadership.
- Address the incident factually. Focus on the steps that have been and are being taken.
- Explain the why behind those steps.
- Reassure the community that more information will be shared as it is confirmed. If possible, indicate a planned cadence for updates or, at least, schedule a time for the next briefing.

STAGE 3: THE MEDIUM TERM—SUBSEQUENT DAYS/WEEKS

After the initial response stage, the focus shifts toward healing and recovery. Perhaps the most difficult aspect is recognizing that responses will run the gamut—from debilitating sadness, anger, or fear to seeming indifference. During this stage, your work will guide the community through the recovery process.

What Went Wrong? The Importance of Continued Transparency

Unfortunately, at this stage, the institution is likely to come under intense scrutiny as stakeholders, from students to parents to media, try to understand exactly what happened. In anger and grief, the community will seek to make sense of the event by exploring whether someone did something wrong or someone missed a red flag.

In these situations, the inclination may be to remain silent and retreat to a place of perceived safety. However, it is imperative for communicators—with police/Emergency Operations Director approval—to continue providing key facts and information building out FAQs as appropriate that address:

- What do we know at this time?
- Who is involved in the criminal investigation?
- Are there any other investigations (legislative, third-party, legal, etc.) and where do they stand?
- What is being done for those directly and indirectly impacted?

FAQs can also be drafted to directly debunk rumors and misinformation. It is highly recommended that law enforcement, without compromising the investigation, provide a timeline of events.

In addition to law enforcement updates, leaders at the institution must continue providing timely updates to the community. These will evolve to different forms—from press conferences to community email to direct stakeholder engagement with key impacted audiences.



Trauma-Informed Communications: Importance and Approach

Trauma-informed communication goes beyond just relaying information—it's about delivering messages with empathy and sensitivity, recognizing that a community impacted by a traumatic event, like an active shooter, will be dealing with a wide range of emotions. By understanding the effects of trauma, your communications can help support recovery rather than risk re-traumatizing individuals.



In the wake of such an event, avoid graphic or sensational language that could exacerbate fear and distress. Instead, use calm, neutral language to convey the facts while validating the emotional toll that the incident has had on the community. Phrases like, “We understand this is a difficult time for everyone,” can help people feel acknowledged without being overwhelmed.

Clear and simple language is essential, as trauma can impair people’s ability to process complex information. Your communications should focus not only on factual updates but on messages of healing and unity, like, “We will get through this together,” which fosters a sense of community and resilience.

Another key element is providing practical support. It is important to outline clearly where people can access mental health resources and offer step-by-step guidance for getting help. Collaborating with mental health professionals can also ensure that your messaging is sensitive to the community’s unique needs.

In the aftermath of trauma, balancing the need for information with the emotional well-being of your community members is essential. Compassionate, trauma-informed communication helps people stay informed while also beginning the process of healing.

TRAUMA INFORMED COMMUNICATIONS

Carefully consider your messaging to ensure that your approach is not only compassionate but presented in a way that helps your community feel safe and informed.

- Avoid adjectives like “horrific” or “senseless.” Instead, use terms like “the violence our community experienced.”
- Balance the need for information with the risk of re-traumatizing the community. Too much communication about the incident can deepen trauma.
- Incorporate messages of hope and community strength while validating the range of emotions people will feel.
- Recognize that different members of your community— students, faculty, staff, parents, and first responders—may need different types of support at different points in time.
- Understand that survivors’ guilt presents in a number of ways, and each should be recognized, valued, and addressed.
- Leverage campus Subject Matter Experts with experience in trauma informed approaches.

NEXT STEPS

- Meet with you team to develop a plan for personal and team safety
 - Review “run, hide, fight” basics.
 - Consider possible scenarios and discuss actions to take individually and collectively—review escape routes, look for places to hide, reframe “fight” as “survive” and talk through options
- Coordinate with law enforcement to ensure a consistent and aligned communications strategy
 - Templatize basic emergency messages. Assign responsibility for initial as well as second and third levels of notifications. Test alert systems regularly.
 - Discuss process to verify tips and debunk rumors—clarify what type of information can be shared without affecting safety or investigations.
- Prepare a rapid response framework
 - Establish a quick message approval processes to avoid delays.
 - Ensure that there are enough social media resources in place to monitor, collect and analyze tips, and correct misinformation.
 - Train your team and communicators across campus on trauma-informed communications.
 - Draft basic emergency talking points/FAQs for frontline staff.
 - Determine criteria, process, training, and scripts for possible activation of call centers
 - Develop emergency communication guidance beyond top leadership—when and how Deans and other managers should communicate with direct reports
 - Identify and stock a minimum of two possible onsite locations for a MIC/JIC. These should be distant from one another to increase likelihood that they would not fall into a “hot” zone.
- Work with other institution leaders to:
 - Develop the content for an emergency dark site including key topics such as information on family assistance center, counseling, operations—meal/housing, class schedules, and definition, designation, and guidance of and for “essential” personnel
 - Establish legal, operational, and reputational parameters to guide emergency funds.
 - Ensure that consideration has been given to organize volunteers.

COMING SOON: PART 3—RECOVER

Providing the Emotional, Humanitarian, Strategic Support Necessary to Move Forward

- Operational Recovery—Reopening Facilities, Resuming Operations, Returning to Classes
- Ongoing Communications & Community Support
- Long-Term Planning—Remembering and Healing



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