



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 Three: Recover

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

The aftermath of an active shooter event leaves a campus grappling with profound grief, fear, and uncertainty. But unlike the plans that may exist for the immediate response, it is unlikely that your institution has much in place to address the weeks, months, and years that lie ahead. Recovery is a long-term process. This is where communications professionals truly demonstrate their value by shaping how the institution supports the emotional and humanitarian needs of its community, while also managing operational and strategic priorities.

As the community begins to process the trauma, it's essential that the communications team steps forward not just as messengers but as strategic thought leaders. Your role is to drive the recovery process by ensuring that communications are clear, compassionate, and consistent, offering a roadmap for healing. Effective communication in this phase helps build trust, manage expectations, and support the collective healing process.

OPERATIONAL RECOVERY: LAYING THE FOUNDATION

Once the immediate crisis has passed, the focus shifts to getting the institution back on its feet. Operational recovery involves reopening facilities, resuming classes, ensuring a safe environment, and evaluating programmatic services and support. Your role as a communicator is to provide regular updates on these processes in a way that feels accessible and reassuring to the campus community.

Resuming Operations

Students, faculty, and staff will be anxious to know when and how campus operations will resume. Clear and consistent communication is key to managing expectations. Provide updates about campus safety enhancements, facility repairs, and any policy changes aimed at preventing future incidents.



Work closely with facilities management and campus security to communicate timelines for reopening buildings (including the recovery of personal effects), the status of any damaged areas, and any new security measures that have been implemented. Reinforce the message that the institution is prioritizing safety while balancing the need to restore normalcy. It is crucial for communications to be clear that leaders are aware of the challenge that teaching and learning in an impacted facility presents and that resources are being made available.

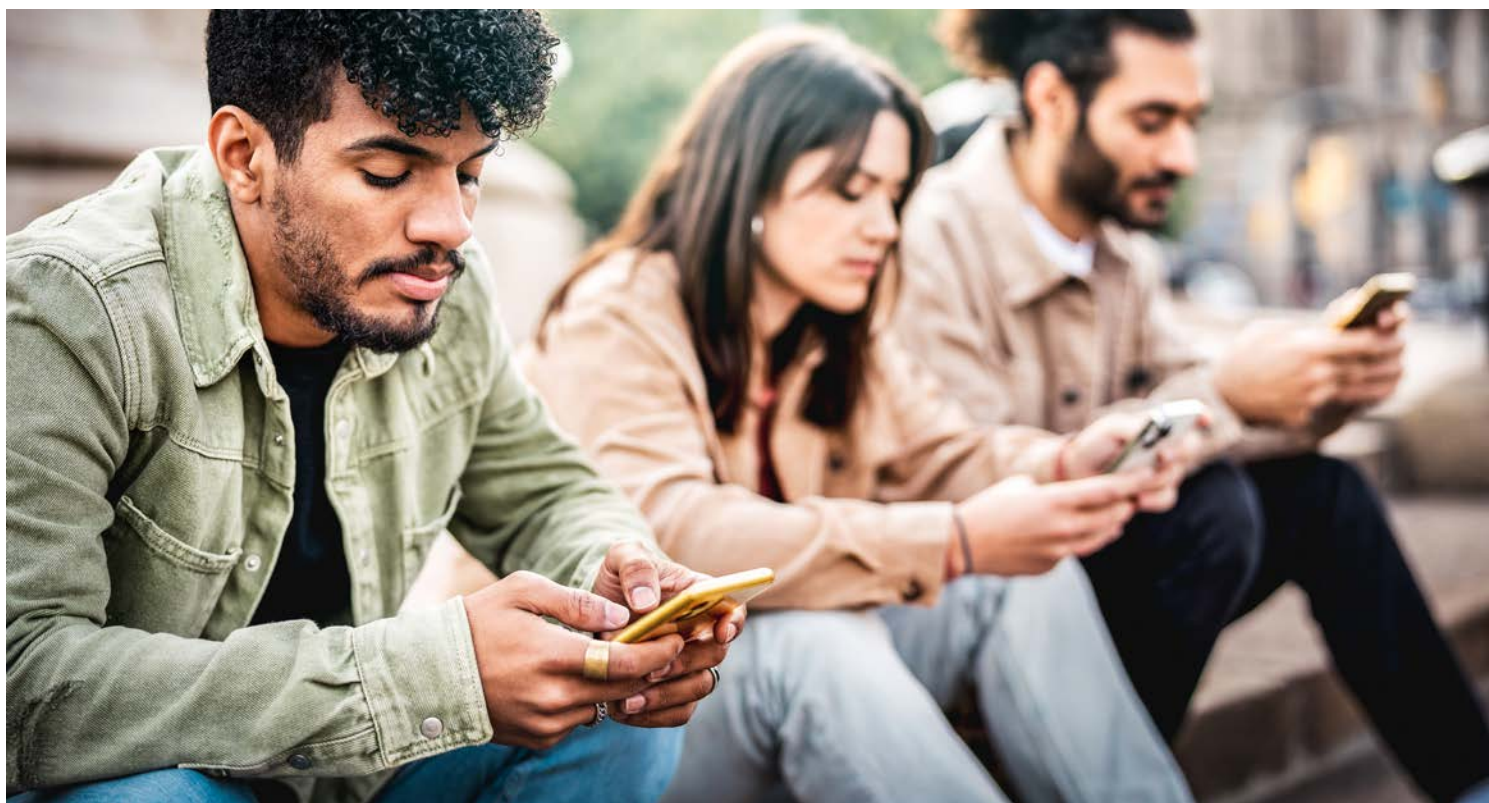
Returning to Classes

While resuming classes is essential, it's important to acknowledge that returning to "normal" will take time. Some students may feel ready to get back to routine, while others may need more support before they can return. Communicating flexibility and support, such as counseling services or alternative academic options, will be key. Recognize that different students will have different needs from an academic perspective—the needs of undergraduates will not be the same as graduate or Ph.D. students.

Be sure to update students and faculty regularly on any changes to the academic schedule and policies to ensure they feel supported during this transition. It is also important to provide guidance and resources to faculty as classes resume so that they feel prepared. Share information with them about trauma-informed communication techniques and how their own messaging can fold into or amplify the institution's approach. Resources—including webinars and trainings—are available through federal groups experienced in mass violence response.



“Reinforce the message that the institution is prioritizing safety while balancing the need to restore normalcy.”



STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS: LEADING THOUGHTFUL, PROACTIVE COMMUNICATIONS

Beyond operational recovery, strategic communications are vital for maintaining the institution's long-term reputation and trust. Your team needs to anticipate challenges and plan for community needs well beyond the immediate aftermath.

Social Media Monitoring & Info Sharing

In the days and weeks following a traumatic event, social media will be flooded with conversations, rumors, and reactions. Monitor social channels closely, not only for misinformation but to help understanding the emotional pulse of the community. Doing so will help you respond in a timely, sensitive manner.

Establish a clear and consistent cadence for sharing updates and use social media to share resources for emotional and practical support. Monitor hashtags and keywords associated with the event to track discussions and respond when necessary. However, avoid engaging with inflammatory or sensational content that could escalate tensions. It is also important to remember that each campus member will be on their own recovery journey and may express themselves in very different ways, particularly on social media.

Clear, Expedited Approval Process

Similar to the respond phase, the recovery phase also often involves making swift decisions while ensuring that communications remain accurate and thoughtful. Set up an expedited approval process for communications to ensure key updates are shared in a timely fashion without unnecessary delays that could render your messages insensitive or even obsolete.



STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS (CONT.)

Ensure Role of President (and Board) in Communications

Your institution's leadership plays a crucial role in demonstrating empathy and resolve. Ensure that the president and other senior leaders are aligned with the communications strategy, particularly in delivering messages of solidarity and support to the campus community and the broader local community. It's essential that leadership communicates with compassion, acknowledges the grief and trauma experienced by the community, recognizes the contributions of first responders and support of the local community, and provides a vision for moving forward.



Community Support: Charities and Giving

In the wake of tragedy, the community will seek ways to help. Charities and fundraising efforts will spring up almost immediately, driven by the desire to offer support to victims and their families. Work with advancement, legal, and other key leadership to develop a proactive, thoughtful, and strategic approach while treading carefully to ensure that the institution's involvement is respectful and appropriate. When possible, we encourage coordination—or at minimum communication with—the individuals and families directly impacted. Incorporate their feedback as appropriate.

Although well-intentioned, many unofficial fundraising efforts can lead to confusion or even exploitation. The institution should not be directly involved in these third-party efforts. Instead, it's best to partner with an established, reputable charity or create a new initiative specifically designed to support the victims and their families.

If a new charity fund is established, clear objectives must be communicated, including how funds will be used—whether for covering healthcare costs, supporting families, or providing mental health resources. The institution should also provide guidance on how the community can contribute and ensure transparency about where the funds are going. In particular, take care if your institution would like to use donations for campus safety initiatives as some donors will consider that the institution's responsibility and not an appropriate use of donated funds. Unfortunately, it will also be important to communicate the risk of fraudulent charities that may appear in the wake of tragedy. Remind the community to verify the legitimacy of any organization before donating.



PARTNERING WITH EXTERNAL CHARITIES

- **Assess Reputation:** Ensure the charity has a well-established, trustworthy background. Research their financial records, prior work, and community involvement.
- **Clarify Purpose:** Clearly define the specific goals of the partnership, whether it's supporting victims, families, or broader mental health initiatives.
- **Involve Key Stakeholders:** As appropriate, include families, survivors, and impacted groups in conversations about how the charity will be involved.
- **Secure Long-Term Commitment:** Ensure the partnership can provide ongoing support beyond the initial aftermath, addressing long-term community needs.
- **Prevent Scams:** Actively communicate with the public about legitimate channels for donations, using the institution's platforms to endorse trusted options. Encourage the community to be wary of GoFundMe campaigns. Your state attorney general can be a valuable ally in providing scam alerts and tips.
- **Initiate Legal and Financial Oversight:** Collaborate with your legal team to review how funds are managed, ensuring transparency and accountability.
- **Recognize That Saying "No" Is Sometimes the Right Choice:** Your institution will receive more offers of help than it can realistically handle and feasibly engage. Consider strategic fit and community impact when choosing partner charities.

STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS (CONT.)

Memorials and Vigils: Honoring Lives Lost

In the days immediately following an event, it's common for community-led vigils to emerge as a way to grieve and find solidarity. The institution's role should be supportive but not overbearing. Advise senior leadership to attend these events but refrain from taking an active role unless specifically requested. The focus should remain on those affected, and your communications should help guide people toward mental health services and resources as part of the healing process.

Impromptu memorials—often makeshift gatherings of flowers, photos, and mementos—will also likely appear near the scene of the tragedy. These can provide a powerful emotional outlet, but can grow quickly and create logistical challenges especially when symbolic campus locations are used. It's important to respect these memorials while also ensuring they don't block access to buildings or roadways. Establish a process to preserve signs, letters, candles, stuffed animals and various personal mementos in a central repository and communicate early about how and when these memorials will be respectfully removed, and what will be done with the items left behind.

Finally, a formal university-led vigil organized by the institution provides an opportunity for the entire campus community to come together and grieve. This doesn't need to happen immediately—it's often held a week or two after the event, allowing space for funerals and other personal memorials.

Planning this event requires particular sensitivity—especially toward the victims' families who may not want to be involved or even have their family member included as part of the ceremony. Leadership participation should be by invitation only, with the focus on honoring the victims. Trusted community figures and voices, rather than institutional leaders, should take center stage. Your communications should clearly convey the purpose of the vigil while also providing logistical details about location, timing, and what attendees can expect.

As time passes, the institution must continue supporting the community while also preparing for long-term remembrance initiatives. This includes planning for key milestones like the one-year anniversary or potentially building a permanent memorial.



LONG-TERM: REMEMBERING AND HEALING

One-Year Remembrance

The one-year mark is a significant emotional milestone for the community. Planning for this remembrance requires thoughtful, inclusive communication. Work closely with campus stakeholders, families of the victims, and community leaders to ensure that the event is respectful and meets the needs of all involved. Develop a clear communications plan for the event, including objectives, key messages, and potential risks.

Permanent Memorial

A permanent memorial can be another important step in helping the community heal. The planning process for this memorial should begin early, and it should involve those most directly impacted by the event. Communications professionals will play a key role in ensuring that the project is managed sensitively, with regular updates to the community and a clear vision for what the memorial represents. Communicators will also play a role in gathering community input for the memorial process.

PLANNING THE ONE-YEAR REMEMBRANCE EVENT

- **Plan Early:** Begin planning the event at least six months in advance, considering key dates, such as the academic calendar and personal milestones for the affected families.
- **Engage the Community:** Hold listening sessions with students, staff, and victims' families to gather input on the tone and format of the remembrance.
- **Vary the Event Format:** Consider a mix of formal and informal elements—vigils, speeches, service events, and quiet reflection spaces. Digital remembrances (like virtual walls of remembrance) can also engage those unable to attend. Meet your community where they are—allow them to engage if and how they choose through opt-in versus required events.
- **Develop Key Messaging:** Honor those lost while focusing on healing and moving forward. Empathy and sensitivity are crucial in framing the tone.
- **Recognize Media Impacts:** Consider limiting media presence or designate specific areas for press to avoid disrupting the solemn nature of the event.
- **Create Commemorative Material:** Plan for a lasting physical or digital memorial that attendees can contribute to, such as plaques, a garden, or an online memory book.
- **Focus on Mental Health:** Ensure mental health services are highly visible and accessible during and after the event, with trained counselors on hand. Counselors from outside the campus community can provide internal employees needed space to grieve.
- **Consider Context:** There may be scheduled events outside of the purview of the institution (athletic, performances, etc.) that may impact the perceived solemnity of the remembrance. Coordinate with organizers to the degree possible to move or reschedule those events.

RECOVERY COMMUNICATIONS

Throughout the response, clear, transparent, and predictable communications will be critical to building a sense of trust and safety. As with the press conference, the recovery team will want to focus on:



What: Decisions made and steps that have been taken

Why: The reasoning behind those decisions and actions

What Next: What the community can expect both in the short and long-term

Continue to use the centralized microsite established to share key updates with the community, to reinforce and build upon the existing messaging, and to responding as necessary to concerns without overreacting.



COORDINATION OF RESOURCES AND SUPPORT

In the same way most institutions quickly established a COVID response taskforce, the response to an event as impactful as an active shooter would benefit by having a similar team established to provide centralized coordination of resources and information. In fact, two months after the February 13, 2023, violence on their campus, Michigan State University established its own Office for Resource and Support Coordination (ORSC) with available federal resources.

This team or office would be responsible for:

- Supporting and connecting those directly impacted to campus counseling and resources
- Providing trauma-informed guidance to the institution as well as individual departments and units on policies, practices, communications, programs, events, and related decisions
- Promoting campus healing and resilience with long-term structures and programs
- Coordinating efforts with local, state, and federal recovery entities and funding

NEXT STEPS:

Recovery is not a quick or simple process. It requires thoughtful, strategic planning from communications professionals, who must continue to lead with empathy and foresight. Below is a list of key next steps to consider in the months and years following an event:

- ❑ **Monitor social media:** Continue tracking community sentiment and misinformation.
- ❑ **Expedite communications processes:** Maintain clear approval paths for timely updates.
- ❑ **Coordinate leadership messaging:** Ensure senior leaders' communications are aligned and supportive.
- ❑ **Support fundraising efforts:** Guide the community to legitimate charity options.
- ❑ **Plan memorials and vigils:** Support community efforts while planning institution-led remembrances including anniversaries and permanent memorials.
- ❑ **Regularly communicate** mental health and counseling resources.
- ❑ **Facilitate third-party reviews** to assess and improve future responses.
- ❑ **Consider creating a dedicated office** for handling aftermath-related communications and resources for victims, their families, and the broader community.
- ❑ **Recognize that as time passes, it will be important to acknowledge that part of the healing process is for individuals and the institution to move forward.** Plan accordingly. After the first year, subsequent remembrances may focus less on grieving and more on learning and growth through meaningful engagement rooted in the mission of academics, research, and community.

As you lead the recovery communications efforts, remember that the process will take much longer than expected and face many challenges not the least of which will be ongoing and long-term litigation. With thoughtful, strategic leadership—that delineates the path between the institution's response to the tragedy and its legal strategy—communications professionals can help the community find a path forward—one marked by compassion, resilience, and hope.



“Regularly communicate mental health and counseling resources.”



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Thank you to the members of the APLU Council on Strategic Communications who contributed to the development of this playbook and to [Blue Moon Consulting Group](#) for their expertise and insights in shaping and writing it.

