



When crisis hits, communication comes first

How government can quickly establish a
contact center in times of need

A crisis demands communication—fast. When disaster hits—whether it's an earthquake or a pandemic, a military conflict or an economic meltdown—people often turn to government for the information they need to survive. Where can I find shelter? Where can I get medical care? How can I get economic aid to keep food on my family's table?

To answer these questions, government should help to communicate not only to the

public and impacted populations but also to its own workforce about what resources are available and what processes need to be followed. Information—accurate, timely, and broadly available—is critical to successful disaster recovery. There are six pillars of success when government establishes a crisis communication center.

There is more to crisis communication than simply broadcasting messages from the office of a political leader. Government

officials need to make sure that all avenues of communication are reflecting a consistent message, even if the content of that messaging might change from day to day. That means updating websites and social media accounts to reflect accurate, up-to-date information. It also means educating contact center staff (the phone representatives who are dealing directly with calls) about rapidly evolving circumstances.



When disaster hits, government should use a combination of technology plus well-informed phone representatives.



Crisis communication isn't just a flow of information from the top down. Front-line call center interactions can be a vital source of information about the challenges people might be experiencing because of the crisis. If hundreds of people start calling about a lack of drinking water or a heating oil shortage or asking about a set of surprising symptoms, that information should flow quickly back up to decision-makers.

Remember, when disaster strikes, almost everyone is going to be looking for information, quite possibly on multiple fronts.

During the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, states were swamped not only by people with health-related questions but also by folks looking to apply for benefit programs such as renters' assistance. Given the extensive policy changes in all these areas, there was often a great deal of confusion, not only among the public but among program staff as well.

Given the likely surge in calls during a crisis, just answering phone calls is likely not enough. When disaster hits, government should use a combination of technology plus well-informed phone representatives.

So what does government need to do to be successful with a crisis contact center? In our experience, whether government decides to go it alone or work with outside partners, there is a fast-moving "combat cadence" that requires successfully executing on six key pillars.

The six pillars of a successful crisis contact center



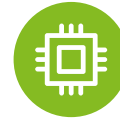
Establish a Command Center

Government should establish a centralized, coordinated authority to oversee all aspects of the contact center, from shaping the central messaging to capturing up-to-the-minute data about contact volumes, wait times, and services delivered. It is the “go-to” source for political leaders to either get information about what is happening or to disseminate information about shifts in policy.



Training and knowledge management

Both existing staff and the newly onboarded will need some form of training on a rapidly shifting situation. In a static environment, well-established routines are embedded in an experienced call center workforce. But in the dynamic reality of a crisis, just-in-time training and access to knowledge management tools are critical. Consider a contact center set up in the days following a massive hurricane. Scripts need to be written and shared as new procedures are established and new information becomes available. The information about where to go for help might be changing hour by hour. Newly onboarded agents may be limited in what they can do, but anything that offloads cycles from the experienced workforce can often be highly valuable.



Technology backbone

The technology platforms that work fine during normal times will often prove inadequate to handle the volumes that come in a crisis. Consider the surge in unemployment insurance new claims, which jumped from fewer than 1 million in February of 2020 to more than 17 million in April of 2020.¹ If your telephony platform can handle only 5,000 incoming calls, and you are experiencing 50,000, you'll need to expand the service lines. Moreover, you'll probably want to revisit your IVR system to ensure that the menu and options are reflective of the new reality.



Crisis communications

This starts with the team that shapes the communications that political leaders want shared and should include a representative of senior leadership. Once the content is crafted, every part of the contact center should be aligned on messaging—from websites to social media, from the interactive voice response (IVR) message to call reps.



Agent deployment

You need to staff up quickly. In a matter of days, additional people need to be brought in. This may mean shifting resources from other agencies, such as reallocating tax agents to assist with unemployment claims. Or it may mean working with an outside staffing agency. Either way, agents will need to be identified, vetted, and onboarded at a crisis pace—sometimes on the scale of 500 in a week. The normal speed of public-sector hiring isn't appropriate for a crisis. One approach is to use an outside firm to temporarily fill a gap while the public hiring process can play itself out.



Service through technology/ Conversational AI

Even with enhanced staffing and training, the demand surge in a crisis often can't be met through staffing alone. Using technology to effectively service the most common, routine issues can free up staff to deal with the more difficult cases. Conversational artificial intelligence is a rapidly improving technology that has the potential to serve the public at scale and reduce the load on an overwhelmed staff.

When disaster strikes, having an effective crisis contact center can save lives. These six pillars form a framework for a successful communications response. Governments know how critical it is to get the right information to the right people at the right time. Whether they choose to go it alone or partner with outside help, making sure these six elements are functioning at a high level will likely be essential to successfully navigating the next crisis.

1. US Department of Labor, “[Unemployment insurance weekly claims data](#),” accessed on January 17, 2023.

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