

Coping with the Death of a Camper

Communicating with Parents and the Media

In the event of the death of a camper, camp directors must provide support and resources for their campers and staff as together they grieve, learn and support each other. At the same time, they must ensure that they communicate effectively with their families and the media in a way that builds trust and protects the reputation and future viability of the camp.

Preparation

Preparation is the key to communicating properly in the event of a death or other emergency. Among the key areas that should be established are:

Have One Spokesperson

- It is absolutely critical to identify one spokesperson for the camp in the event of an emergency and to define his/her specific responsibilities.
- The spokesperson should be the camp director or, at least someone who clearly represents the camp and is in a position to make decisions.
- If possible, the spokesperson should not be burdened with too many other administrative and operational duties during an emergency.
- Clearly define what the spokesperson can and cannot say. Everything that the spokesperson says must be completely accurate; there can be no speculation.
- The spokesperson should work from a central camp location where fax, email and sufficient phone lines are available for all communication.
- Anyone who travels to an accident scene or hospital must be in contact with the spokesperson at all times.

Prepare Supporting Materials

- Drafts of letters, statements, emails or phone call scripts to report the death of a camper to parents and media.
- List of local media, including phone, fax and email addresses so statements/news releases can be sent out quickly.
- A brief fact sheet for the media that contains basic information about the camp number of campers, counselors, address, phone number, history, accreditation, name of director.
- Phone log to record all incoming and outgoing calls related to the emergency.
- Emergency response checklist to ensure all necessary steps are followed.
- Access to professional public relations/communications resources that can help you respond to the media and families.

Protect Your Property

- Immediately upon learning of a death, have someone assigned to the front gate; no media are permitted on camp property.

The Basics of Emergency Communications

Communicating information about the death of a camper or any emergency with the media and families - before they contact you - is essential. It will give you more control of what is said and help put families at ease.

Remember, when a tragic event occurs, communication inevitably follows, which may include media reports, parent phone calls, camper calls to parents, staff discussions with campers, and more. The media and parents will likely learn the information on their own, so it's always better to come forward first.

First, Evaluate the Situation

- Release information only when the facts are absolutely accurate and the camp's legal position is clear.
- Never speculate.
- When an emergency occurs, it is often difficult to sort out the facts and determine exactly what happened. That's why it is essential that an emergency preparation plan include a clear chain of command for gathering and communicating information.

Second, Plan Your Response

- When you have gathered all your information, you must plan your response, taking into account all of your audiences - campers, staff, families and the media.
- This planning process may take minutes, hours or days, so your communications plan may be implemented in stages as you learn more information.
- In most cases you will respond to media inquiries and not initiate the contact.
- In cases where it is clear that you will receive many media inquiries (death is related to an accident or crime), you can initiate communications by emailing/faxing a media statement to all local media.

Third, Communicate Quickly and Honestly

- It is absolutely essential to communicate the facts of an emergency quickly and honestly.
- A quick, accurate response will put the camp in control of these communications, help prevent miscommunications, build trust and make sure the camp's side of a story is told.
- Make sure all your communications with all your audiences are consistent.

Evaluate Your Response

- Provisions should be made to monitor media broadcasts, family reaction and the actions of the authorities to make sure your response is appropriate and effective.
- Adjust your communications to meet new circumstances.

Speaking With the Media

The death of a camper, and many other emergencies, will generate media coverage. You can't prevent coverage, but you can lessen the negative impact by responding quickly and honestly.

Remember These General Rules

- Respect deadlines. If you can't speak to a reporter, ask what the deadline is and make sure you call back.
- Do not be confrontational. Stay calm and in control at all times.
- Don't arouse media suspicions by saying "no comment" or refusing to return calls.
- Communicate what you know and tell reporters what you don't know.
- When possible, fax, email or read a prepared statement.
- If you do speak to the media, prepare "talking points" ahead of time, so you stay on track with a consistent message. This is most easily accomplished when speaking over the phone.
- Do not speculate. The media may try to get you to draw conclusions. Don't let them. Stick to your key points.
- Do not reveal personal/medical information about campers or staff.
- Keep interviews brief and end a conversation when you need to.

Leave the Details to the Experts

- The cause of death may be related to medical conditions, an accident or crime. Do not try to speak to the media on those details.
- You should only express your sadness and discuss how you are coping with the loss at camp.
- Let the medical, legal and other authorities speak about details related to the death.

Working With Television

- If your camp is on private property and you're in the middle of an emergency, you can ask the media to leave.
- When you ask reporters to leave, remember to calmly explain why and be polite. Plan a time to call them later.
- If you feel forced into an on-camera interview, ask if you can talk to the reporter off camera first. Use that time to explain the situation and try to set parameters for the subsequent on-camera interview.
- Remember that television works in short sound bites, so prepare your key points in short statements that fit this format.

Have an Exit Strategy

- Before you begin an interview, remind the reporter that you are very busy with your families, staff and campers. They are your first priorities.
- If the reporter becomes confrontational, tries to draw you into speculation or goes outside the parameters that you have set, end the interview.
- Always end the interview politely and say you are very busy and must get back to running your camp during this "difficult time."

Communicating with Families

Communicating the death of a camper requires careful, personal and sensitive handling. In addition to how you communicate with the family of the camper who has died, it is also very important how you communicate with all your camp families.

Communicating Quickly

- Be the first to contact families about an emergency. If you contact them first with your message, you gain control over the communications - even if a media report is filled with inaccuracies that are damaging to your camp's reputation.
- Stay calm and in control. Parents take their emotional cues from you.
- If possible, emphasize the positives. These may include heroic rescue attempts by staff, how much a lost camper was loved, etc.
- Be open, concerned and offer your assistance with the camper.

How You Communicate

- Phone calls, letters and email are the primary methods of communications.
- With the death of a camper, your first communication may be telephone calls to all your parents.
- Parents of the other campers in the same group or cabin should be the first ones called. In some cases, they will be the only ones called, while other parents will receive a letter.
- You need to be prepared to make hundreds of phone calls within a short time period.
- Follow-up letters should be carefully written to express your sense of loss, how you are addressing the grieving process and why it is important that you go through this process as a camp community.
- Be careful with email and web site postings. They may seem less personal, are more likely to be passed around and misused, and there is no guarantee that everyone has email or checks it on a regular basis.

Expect Support

- When you communicate openly and honestly, you will find that your camp families will be a tremendous source of support during such a difficult time.