



FEMA

2024 FEMA RISK COMMUNICATIONS, CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS + COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SUMMIT REPORT

AUGUST 2024



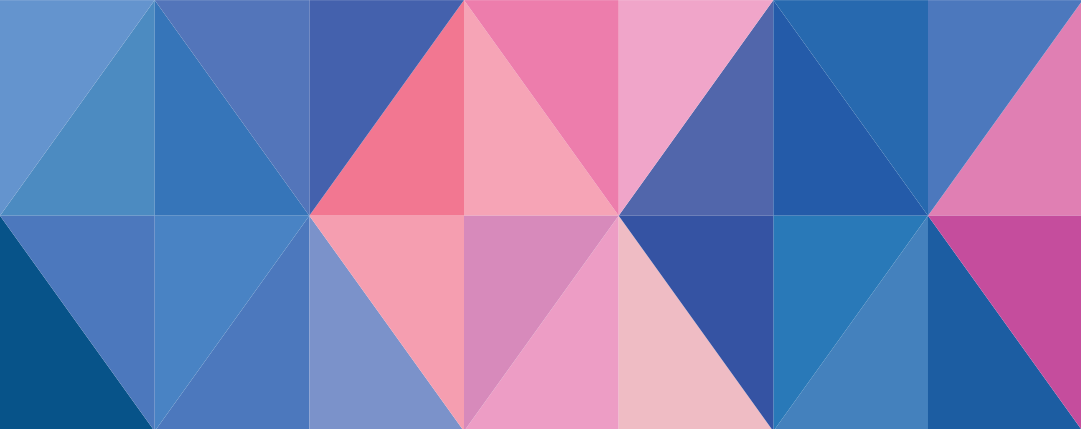


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“I want you to ask yourselves, how do we make sure we’re leading through crises, instead of being driven by them?”

FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell



Building Communicator Connections and Collaboration

It started with a question. What opportunities exist for cross-sector communicators who work on the frontlines of the climate crisis and all hazards that threaten our communities to learn, share and connect?

Our answer resulted in a national convening of more than 1,200 communicators virtually and in-person from across the federal family, the private sector and academia. The inaugural Summit on Risk Communications, Crisis Communications and Community Engagement was hosted by FEMA's Office of External Affairs in collaboration with esteemed and expert organizations who shaped the gathering:

- FEMA's Office of National Continuity Programs
- FEMA's Integrated Public Alert and Warning System
- Department of Homeland Security Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships
- United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
- Climate Group
- Historically Black Colleges and Universities Emergency Management Workforce Consortium
- Howard University
- Georgetown University
- National Voluntary Organizations Active in Disaster
- New America
- Public Relations Society of America

From emergency alert and warning tools, like FEMA's Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS), to U.S.-wide discussion around effective messaging to increase public responsiveness to evacuation orders, the summit provided opportunities to learn about solutions that address urgent challenges of sharing information in today's fast-paced and ever-changing environment.

Our growing community of communicators will continuously improve as we learn from one another. We encourage you to join the *FEMA National Communicators Collective* to learn about best practices, events and opportunities for collaboration.

What follows is a report summarizing the key learnings and takeaways from our summit that can be incorporated into your day-to-day work.

Sincerely,

Justin Knighten *Michael S. George*



FEMA, Office of External Affairs Associate Administrator
Justin Ángel Knighten



FEMA, Office of National Continuity Programs Associate Administrator
Michael S. George

Community Engagement and Communications as Pillars of Resilience

“Risk communications, crisis communications and community engagement are not just inextricably intertwined; they are the pillars upon which we build our collective resilience.”

FEMA, Office of External Affairs Associate Administrator Justin Ángel Knighten



FEMA, Office of External Affairs Associate Administrator Justin Ángel Knighten delivering opening remarks.

FEMA held the inaugural Summit on [Risk Communications, Crisis Communications and Community Engagement](#) on June 10, 2024, at the National Academy of Sciences in Washington, D.C. and virtually. The event included 10 co-sponsor organizations, [26 presentations and panels](#), [41 speakers](#) and more than 1,200 virtual and in-person attendees.

The opening remarks highlighted the interconnected disciplines of community engagement, risk communications and crisis communications and their roles in supporting communities as they navigate new and existing hazards.

- **Community engagement** involves a variety of outreach activities to collaborate with community-based organizations, partners and stakeholders to carry out planning, policies, programs and services. FEMA engages with communities to understand their experience, concerns, values and decision-making process so communicators can create accessible messaging. Engagement is shaped by a community’s preferences; historic, social and political dynamics; availability of resources; and the capacity of community members and leaders.
- **Risk communications** help bridge the gap between threat awareness and action by identifying and resolving barriers to understanding and taking action on a risk before a crisis. Utilizing messaging that is relevant to a community will build trust with the community, ensure they understand their disaster risks, and support preparedness action. FEMA’s [Ready campaign](#) focuses on creating culturally competent preparedness and risk messaging to help communities understand how to prepare for hazards, make evacuation plans, and plan to shelter at home.

- **Crisis communications** raise awareness of threats and share safety instructions with the public in times of crisis. Disseminating clear and accessible communication during a disaster protects lives, mitigates disaster impacts and supports efficient recovery efforts. FEMA's [Emergency Support Function #15](#) coordinates accurate, timely and accessible information to affected audiences, including governments, media, the private sector and the local populace.



Artist Tré Borden shares examples of art as climate messaging.



The Undivide Project Founder Monica Sanders provides examples of the power of hope in rebuilding with communities after disasters.



The Climate Group's Executive Director for North America, Angela Barranco, demonstrates the power of collaboration in addressing climate change.

Community Engagement

“The very core of effective community engagement requires an ongoing commitment. Actively listening and learning, to be present, to invest now in authentic and locally-driven practices including cultural awareness, sensitivity, humility and building strong networks of community partners to lay the groundwork for that successful collaboration to occur in the time of crisis.”

USFA, U.S. Fire Administrator Dr. Lori Moore-Merrell



USFA, U.S. Fire Administrator Dr. Lori Moore-Merrell sharing her insights on community engagement.

The [morning opened with experts](#) discussing their perspectives on how to best engage communities before, during and after disasters. All disasters are local, and every community is comprised of individuals with both shared and unique needs. Speakers emphasized the importance of recognizing that there is no monolithic audience.

Although community engagement can be thought of as one-directional outreach, the community should have access to partners as well. Two-way engagement allows both the sharer and the receiver to actively participate in dialogue and invites

broader and more robust community partnerships. It can be strengthened by building community understanding, trust and capacity, and engaging communities to co-create effective messaging.

Build community understanding, trust and capacity by:

- Connecting with communities before a crisis occurs.
- Listening to diverse partners to learn about how their community's culture influences their communications and the resources their communities need.
- Analyzing an institution's history in communities to understand how its history may lower trust and be a barrier to successful communication, despite the communicator's intentions.

- Acknowledging that no single organization can truly represent the entirety of a community and ensure all parts of a community are heard.
- Sharing stories from the field up the chain of command. When combined with data, these anecdotes can put a human face on facts and figures to inform decision making.
- Centering support efforts on the community needs and actions that rebuild the social infrastructure of a community. Making communities integral to their recovery ensures that community sovereignty is respected, and recovery is owned by the community.



Community Engagement Panel seated left to right: Maricela Rodriguez, Senior Advisor for Civic Engagement and Strategic Partnerships, Office of California Governor Newsom; Dr. Atyia Martin, CEO and Founder, All Aces, Inc.; Marcus Coleman, Director, DHS Center for Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships; and moderator Summer Sylva, detailed as FEMA's Maui Wildfires Cultural Protocol Task Force Lead and Senior Advisor for Native Hawaiian Affairs, Department of Interior

Engage communities to create effective messaging by:

- Listening and learning. Good communication is not one size fits all and requires that communicators consider the listener. Communicators must know their audience to ensure messages are clearly and effectively received.
- Building messaging around a community's unique needs, priorities and understanding.
- Creating messages that are human-centered, equity-centered, community-informed and data-informed.
- Engaging non-traditional partners as trusted community messengers, such as artists, in decision-making. Often, communities trust local organizations, like nonprofits and local news outlets, more than national-level institutions.

Risk Communications

“We have seen what happens when a wildfire rips through a community, burning infrastructure faster than messages can get out; when moments are lost due to decision paralysis; when poor planning leads to inconsistent messaging and confusion; or when a call to act falls flat because of the lack of understanding or appreciation of the intended audience and community that we’re speaking to.”

FEMA, Office of National Continuity Programs Associate Administrator Michael S. George



FEMA, Office of National Continuity Programs Associate Administrator Michael S. George provides remarks on national continuity strategies and innovations.

In the afternoon, the summit focused on risk and crisis communications. Presenters shared the challenges of developing communications when there are numerous sources and vehicles for receiving information. Communicators across sectors agreed that the current information environment makes it difficult for the public to filter out the noise and make informed choices.

Successful risk communications depend on utilizing multiple available methods of communicating and engaging with partners who can help cascade important information into their communities. In this

way, communicators are helping sustain resilient communities by giving them information often and enlisting partners in the message development and communication methods.

Speakers recognized that not everyone experiences or perceives risk in the same way, meaning the message and messenger may need to be customized for these biases. Some barriers, such as language access, can be easily identified and must be addressed for the message to be received. Lessons learned from COVID-19 and other public health emergencies have helped shape approaches that inform the public when information evolves in real time.

Strategies to share inclusive and actionable risk messaging across audiences include:

- Ensuring communicators have a seat at the table to influence data collection and other decisions that will inform their communications to the public.

- Selecting words intentionally to utilize plain language and eliminate jargon.
- Helping people visualize the consequences of a disaster to better understand their risk.
- Working with trusted community messengers.
- Honoring word-of-mouth as a form of risk communications.
- Advancing digital communications, social media and other technology to impart messages.
- Providing timely and complete information to give people time to act.
- Developing language access systems that meet audience needs and support understanding of a hazard more than translation alone.
- Utilizing visual media, imagery and art to depict hazards and risks in ways that connect with audiences differently than words and text. Art can inspire hope in recovery as well.
- Making resources more easily available to the public by posting or sharing in commonly accessed locations, so audiences do not need to search for information.
- Creating warning messages that include the information source, hazard, time period, location and protective action.
- Ensuring translated messages go beyond a word-for-word equivalent and capture the correct meaning and context for the intended audience. The need for culturally competent translation is urgent because language is complex, and word-for-word translations can distort the meaning of the original message or fail to consider the needs and cultural context for the message in the target language. This is true across all languages and within immigrant communities; in the Spanish language, words in one country of origin can carry different meanings in another.



Risk Communications Panel seated left to right: Dr. Ceeon Quiett Smith, Executive Vice President, Student Success and Operations, Dillard University; Vivi Siegel, Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication Lead, National Center for Environmental Health/Agency for Toxic Substances and Disease Registry, Centers for Disease Control; Dr. Micki Olson, Senior Researcher, Emergency and Risk Communication Message Testing Laboratory, University of Albany; Dr. Vincent Covello, Founder and Director, Center for Risk Communications; Moderator Jessica Wieder, Director of Incident Communications Planning, Office of External Affairs, FEMA



FEMA Office of External Affairs, Digital Engagement and Analytics Branch Chief Gloria Huang shares key qualities of successful digital communicators.

Finding the Right Digital Communicators

Finding communicators who can navigate the digital divide and use technology to communicate effectively is important.

Qualities of good digital communicators include:

- **Persistent curiosity:** *A willingness to understand how cultural, demographic and historical factors influence public reaction.*
- **Imaginative empathy:** *The ability to consider different mindsets even when you have little information about the person on the other side of the screen. Trust starts with acknowledging someone else's situation and finding a way to relate to it.*
- **Purposeful clarity:** *A skill in developing clear, accurate and brief communications that can be distinguished from other sources of information.*
- **Comfort with ambiguity:** *The ability to organize and effectively communicate information that is unclear and frequently changing.*
- **Optimistic problem solving:** *A mindset that appreciates continuous and relentless problem solving, often requiring rethinking and reworking messages in real-time.*

“Risk communications is all about communicating in a way that empowers people to make informed decisions, which is more challenging in the noise of information in which we live today.”

FEMA Office of External Affairs, Director, Incident Communications Planning Jessica Wieder

Crisis Communications

“The currency of communication is trust. If you don’t have trust, you don’t have anything.”

White House, Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre



White House, Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre delivering the keynote address.

Crisis communications differ from risk communications in the urgency for action. Often, the need for action is immediate because of the nature of the threat or the event, and the communications must be quickly disseminated to reduce catastrophic risk. Crisis communications change as fast as the escalating threat environment, which requires communicators adapt their messaging and strategies while maintaining accuracy.

Best practices for crisis communications to ensure timely and successful messaging to the public include:

- Be prepared to overcommunicate and adjust or correct when necessary. More communication builds trust.
- Don’t wait to have a perfect plan or all the information to communicate.
- Offer comfort and reassurance in crisis messaging. Expressing empathy creates a psychological connection with the public.
- Consider the messenger. How the messenger presents themselves has a big impact on how the message is received and whether action is taken.
- Be authentic and, when possible, establish trust beforehand. Be available after an event to continue to answer questions and speak to the public.
- Include state and local officials when communicating during a disaster.
- Unify the message at all stages of an event or disaster and with all coordinating officials.
- Be prepared to detect and counter false and misleading information by using all available channels and messengers in your communities.



FEMA Office of External Affairs, Disaster Operations Director Marty Bahamonde describes the importance of connecting a person's individual needs during a crisis.

Emergency Support Function #15

The summit included remarks on the framework that is used across the federal government to ensure effective external affairs during response to all hazard events. This external affairs approach is part of the [National Response Framework](#) (NRF) that provides a guide for federal agencies and organizations to coordinate emergency response activities—including crisis communications.

Under the NRF, Emergency Support Function (ESF) #15 provides the structure

for delivering accurate, timely and accessible information to affected audiences. This function is particularly critical for ensuring a well-coordinated and accurate delivery of essential messaging for the public, stakeholders, and those directly impacted by the incident.

ESF #15 coordinates federal actions to provide the required external affairs support to local, state, Tribal, territorial and federal incident response entities.

While FEMA is the primary coordinating agency for ESF #15, many entities including government authorities and community organizations share a responsibility to assist with disseminating information to the public. ESF #15 provides a model for coordinated incident communications to ensure consistent messaging with impacted communities.



United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction, Deputy Chief Saskia Carusi discusses successful risk communications methods.



White House Office of Digital Strategy, Director Christian Tom shares how his team used innovative digital communications to share the 2024 State of the Union and engage an online audience.



Crisis Communications Panel seated left to right: Daniel Watson, Assistant Secretary for Public Affairs, Department of Homeland Security; Yasamie Richardson, Deputy External Affairs Officer, National Incident Management Assistance Team IMAT Blue, FEMA; Mahina Martin, Director of Public Affairs, County of Maui, Hawaii; Noah Gray, Chief Communications Officer, Fire and Emergency Medical Services, District of Columbia



Manny Centeno, IPAWS Director, discusses innovations in warning alerts and messaging.

FEMA's Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS)

In addition to the ESF-15 crisis communications presentation, IPAWS Director Manny Centeno discussed how FEMA's IPAWS program puts risk and crisis communications into action. The program leverages coordination across federal, state, Tribal, territorial, and local governments to share trustworthy and lifesaving messaging with the public. Trust is a necessary element of this essential emergency tool.

Clear governance and messaging establish trust. To support this work, IPAWS created:

- The [IPAWS Program Planning Toolkit](#) to help alerting programs tailored to community needs and engage leaders across multiple levels in the process.
- The [Message Design Dashboard](#) which automatically generates draft alerts based on best practices in crisis psychology to enhance the efficacy and clarity of emergency alerts.

Strengthening Engagement to Shape Communications

“As leaders, it is on us to put people first and to listen to what they need, especially as we look to a more challenging future.”

FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell



FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell's Flagship Address describes the importance of listening in emergency management.

The summit showcased the science, lived experiences, gaps and opportunities in communications and community engagement that unite all risk and crisis communicators. Communicators identified best practices, exchanged knowledge and formed new networks that will enhance our collective ability to help people before, during and after disasters.

Several overarching themes bridged the morning and afternoon sessions and laid the foundation for future collaboration and engagement to support the nation's communities.

- Radical collaboration increases momentum and impact.
- There is power in bringing together influential individuals across the climate change and disaster response landscape to ensure action is taking place rather than just being talked about.
- It is important to understand where your work can make the most impact.
- Building connections and collaborations between communities, government agencies and academia will ensure that research findings get into the hands of practitioners who can use it to create better outcomes.
- Our communications community is a support system to help one another in this important and lifesaving work.

The summit built a foundation of resilience for a field of practice at the forefront of helping to foster healthy, safe and forward-leaning communities. We must continue to advance the intentional work communicators are doing to improve the information landscape, so it is reliable, actionable and intentional.



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RISK COMMUNICATIONS, CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS + COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT SUMMIT

JUNE 10, 2024 · NATIONAL ACADEMY OF SCIENCES · WASHINGTON, DC



SPEAKERS DEANNE CRISWELL · KARINE JEAN-PIERRE · NATHAN TEK · MONICA SANDERS · ANGELA BARRANCO · LORI MOORE-MERRELL · SUMMER SYLVA · MARCUS COLEMAN · ATYIA MARTIN · MARICELA RODRIGUEZ · MICHAEL S. GEORGE · CHRISTIAN L. TOM · TRÉ BORDEN · KELBIE KENNEDY · LUCY BEADNELL · DZU BUI · LINDA THOMAS BROOKS · MATTHEW BEHNKE · SARA SMITH · RASHIDAH BILLUPS · LUCAS HITT · MARGARITA VARELA ROSA · SASKIA CARUSI · GLORIA HUANG · RUPALI LIMAYE · JOSEPH TRUJILLO-FALCÓN · GRETCHEN MICHAEL · JESSICA WIEDER · VINCENT COVELLO · CEEON QUIETT SMITH · MICKI OLSON · VIVI SIEGEL · HAN NGUYEN · TIM ROBUSTELLI · APRIL WOOD · MANNY CENTENO · TIM FRAZIER · MARTY BAHAMONDE · MARK PETERSON · YASAMIE RICHARDSON · NOAH GRAY · MAHINA MARTIN · DANIEL WATSON · JUSTIN ÁNGEL KNIGHTEN



CLIMATE GROUP



Learn More About the Summit

These summit resources share additional details about the summit agenda, speakers, and takeaways, as well as pictures and videos from the event.

- Read the FEMA Summit Press Release: [FEMA to Host First-Ever Summit on Risk Communications, Crisis Communications and Community Engagement](#).
- Watch highlights from the summit, including pictures of speakers, participants and behind-the-scenes staff: [Risk Communications, Crisis Communications, and Community Engagement Summit 2024](#).
- Listen to FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell, White House Press Secretary Karine Jean-Pierre and U.S. Fire Administration Administrator Dr. Lori Moore-Merrell deliver remarks in this C-SPAN recording from the summit: [FEMA Crisis Communications Summit | C-SPAN.org](#).
- Tune into the FEMA Podcast Episode 136 to hear experts Discussing Crisis and Risk Communications: [Episode 136 Before, During & After Podcast](#).
- Learn more about the timing, format and presentations that made up the summit: [Summit agenda](#).
- Read the summit speaker biographies and learn more about their work and experiences: [Summit speaker list](#).

Join the new FEMA National Communicators Collective

Given the impact of the summit and interest among cross-sector communicators nationwide who attended, we've decided to establish a new collective for FEMA to engage risk and crisis communicators and community engagement leaders. Through email updates, events and beyond, we hope this collective serves as a platform to maintain connection between FEMA and our nation's growing network of communicators.

[Sign up for the FEMA National Communicators Collective.](#)



The audience filled the auditorium at the National Academy of Sciences, listening as FEMA Administrator Deanne Criswell delivered the flagship address.



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