



# Communicating to Build Trust

High profile policing incidents require thoughtful communication with the public and media. By having a communications plan, sharing information appropriately, and engaging multiple voices, police agencies can address concerns and enhance community trust. The strategies outlined in this document may apply to the following or other crisis situations:

- Officer-involved shootings
- Pursuits
- Incidents involving use of force
- Police misconduct
- Internal investigations and the accountability process

## What Can You Do?

**Be present immediately.** Make a comment and be available and accessible for questions. If you are not ready to give a detailed statement, give a “holding statement” rather than a “no comment” or ignoring requests. For example, “We are aware of the incident and are actively investigating it at the present time. We will release more information in the near future once we have a chance to gather it.”

**Gather a team and formulate a plan.** As soon as possible, gather the necessary people and quickly discuss a plan for frequency and location of communication updates, as well as anticipated hurdles and sensitive topics. The makeup of this team will depend on your community but may include a public information officer, command staff members, city/county manager, elected officials, general counsel, city/county counsel, investigators, and community representatives. Community representation can take many forms including, but not limited to, civilian oversight groups, chief’s advisory councils, faith-based groups, and community-based service providers. Appropriate representation of the community can speak to the sentiment and pulse of those impacted by the crisis. Everyone will have a different perspective and insight, but the collective wisdom and knowledge can help frame a thoughtful communication plan and articulate response.

**Provide information and be transparent.** Give as much information as you can, as early as possible, as long as you are not compromising the investigation or officer safety. Transparency builds trust. If you cannot provide requested information, explain why it is not available at this time, when it might become available, and if there is a specific process for requesting it. If state law requires release of information within a certain time frame, such as officer-worn camera footage, take that into account as well.

**Empathize and avoid “cop speak.”** Speak in clear language and avoid jargon or legalese. It may take more time, but using colloquial vernacular can help to humanize you and your response. Express empathy. This does not signify ownership of fault or blame, but acknowledges harm and shows concern. An example would be “I see and hear the pain and concern of my community and those involved in this incident.”

**Explain the process.** Be prepared to explain department policy regarding internal and investigative processes. Have subject matter experts available to further explain situation-related details. It is also helpful to circulate this information in the form of handouts to those attending press conferences or online through social media, where misinformation can spread rapidly. Getting out in front and clearly outlining your process allows you to preempt misinformation and confusion. Also be prepared to share this information online, such as having it readily accessible on your website and social media channels.

**Listen.** In the wake of a crisis or critical incident, you may be pressed for time, but it is important to show that you hear the concerns of community members and the media.



# Communicating to Build Trust

**Own mistakes and missteps.** If there is a mistake, whether it is the incident itself or part of your response, admit it, learn from it, implement measures so that it does not happen again, and communicate these changes. “Bad news” will eventually be uncovered, and it is always better for an agency to “break” the “bad news,” frame the message, and get out in front of the story.

**Commit to further discussions and be strategic about community engagement.** During a time of crisis, it can be difficult to organize deeper community discussions. Showing and following through on a commitment to substantive conversations on a regular basis with your community allows for deeper mutual listening and learning to occur. When arranging dialogues, consider the following:

- **Venue** – Use a “neutral” setting like a community center and show up out of uniform to set a comfortable tone for dialogue and alleviate underlying tension.
- **Layout** – Adapt the room setup to facilitate dialogue. For instance, a town hall with many participants may require a lecture-style setup, while smaller ongoing meetings may benefit from a circular seating layout allowing people to face each other as they speak.
- **Timing** – Hold multiple meetings at different times, days, and locations to remove barriers to attendance and create flexibility for people to attend outside of work hours.

- **Facilitation** – Determine with community partners and advisors whether the dialogue should be co-facilitated by law enforcement and community. Depending on the incident, a trauma-informed community facilitator may help ease tensions between law enforcement and community.
- **Outreach** – Ensure that messaging and outreach reflects the focus of the meeting and needs of community members you are trying to reach. Consider multiple methods for communication to reach community members (print media, social media, emails, radio), as well as translation options in communities where English may not be the first language. Partnering with local community-based organizations can help facilitate this outreach.

## IACP Resources

- A. IACP [Community-Police Engagement Page](#)
- B. IACP Model Policy: [Media Relations](#)
- C. [IACP Policy Framework for Improved Community-Police Engagement](#)
- D. IACP [Law Enforcement Policy Resource Center](#)