Family TO Family
TOOLS FOR Rebuilding Foster Care

Strategic Communications

Media Relations for Child Welfare

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INTRODUCTION

The Annie E. Casey Foundation's Mission in Child Welfare

The Annie E. Casey Foundation was established in 1948 by Jim Casey, a founder of United Parcel Service, and his sister and brothers, who named the Foundation in honor of their mother. The primary mission of the Foundation is to foster public policies, human service reforms, and community supports that better meet the needs of vulnerable families.

The Foundation s work in child welfare is grounded in two fundamental convictions. First, there is no substitute for strong families to ensure that children grow up to be capable adults. Second, the ability of families to raise children is often inextricably linked to conditions in their communities.

The Foundation s goal in child welfare is to help neighborhoods build effective responses to families and children at risk of abuse or neglect. The Foundation believes that these community-centered responses can better protect children, support families, and strengthen communities.

Helping distressed neighborhoods become environments that foster strong, capable families is a complex challenge that will require transformation in many areas. Family foster care, the mainstay of all public child welfare systems, is in critical need of such transformation.

The Family to Family Initiative

With changes in policy, in the use of resources, and in program implementation, family foster care can respond to children s need for out-of-home placement and be a less expensive and often more appropriate choice than institutions or other group settings.

This reform by itself can yield important benefits for families and children, although it is only one part of a larger effort to address the overall well-being of children and families in need of child protective services.

Family to Family was designed in 1992 in consultation with national experts in child welfare. In keeping with the Annie E. Casey Foundation s guiding principles, the framework for the initiative is grounded in the belief that family foster care must take a more family-centered approach that is: (1) tailored to the individual needs of children and their families, (2) rooted in the child s community or neighborhood, (3) sensitive to cultural differences, and (4) able to serve many of the children now placed in group homes and institutions.

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The ***Family to Family*** Initiative has encouraged states to reconceptualize, redesign, and reconstruct their foster care system to achieve the following new system-wide goals:

- ❒ To develop a network of family foster care that is more neighborhood-based, culturally sensitive, and located primarily in the communities where the children live;
- ❒ To assure that scarce family foster home resources are provided to all those children (and only to those children) who in fact must be removed from their homes;
- ❒ To reduce reliance on institutional or congregate care (in hospitals, psychiatric centers, correctional facilities, residential treatment programs, and group homes) by meeting the needs of many more of the children in those settings through family foster care;
- ❒ To increase the number and quality of foster families to meet projected needs;
- ❒ To reunite children with their families as soon as that can safely be accomplished, based on the family s and children s needs, not the system s time frames;
- ❒ To reduce the lengths of children s stay in out-of-home care; and
- ❒ To decrease the overall number of children coming into out-of-home care.

With these goals in mind, the Foundation selected and funded three states (Alabama, New Mexico, and Ohio) and five Georgia counties in August 1993, and two additional states (Maryland and Pennsylvania) in February 1994. Los Angeles County was awarded a planning grant in August 1996. States and counties funded through this Initiative were asked to develop family-centered, neighborhood-based family foster care systems within one or more local areas.

Communities targeted for the initiative were to be those with a history of placing large numbers of children out of their homes. The sites would then become the first phase of implementation of the newly conceptualized family foster care system throughout the state.

The Tools of *Family to Family*

All of us involved in ***Family to Family*** quickly became aware that new paradigms, policies, and organizational structures were not enough to both make and sustain substantive change in the way society protects children and supports families. New ways of actually doing the work needed to be put in place in the real world. During 1996, therefore, the Foundation and ***Family to Family*** grantees together developed a set of tools that we believe will help others build a neighborhood-based family foster care system. In our minds, such tools are indispensable elements of real change in child welfare.

The tools of ***Family to Family*** include the following:

- ❒ Ways to recruit, train, and support foster families;
- ❒ A decisionmaking model for placement in child protection;
- ❒ A model to recruit and support relative caregivers;
- ❒ New information system approaches and analytic methods;
- ❒ A self-evaluation model;
- ❒ Ways to build partnerships between public child welfare agencies and the communities they serve;
- ❒ New approaches to substance abuse treatment in a public child welfare setting;
- ❒ A model to confront burnout and build resilience among child protection staff;
- ❒ Communications planning in a public child protection environment;
- ❒ A model for partnerships between public and private agencies;
- ❒ Ways to link the world of child welfare agencies and correctional systems to support family resilience; and
- ❒ Proven models that move children home or to other permanent families.

New ways of actually doing the work needed to be put in place in the real world.

We hope that child welfare leaders and practitioners find one or more of these tools of use. We offer them with great respect to those who often receive few rewards for doing this most difficult work.

OVERVIEW

Good media coverage is a prized possession and can be achieved through sophisticated strategies. These include the cultivation of reporters, editors, and other media decisionmakers, and the ability of child welfare agency leaders to get their position across during a critical situation, such as a child fatality or other tragedy.

This tool is about developing active communications strategies as a way to build support for ***Family to Family***, and about learning how best to relate to media so that reform efforts are not crippled, delayed, or halted during times of negative or sensational media coverage, usually during a crisis or scandal.

Understanding Media Trends in Child Welfare

Media outlets have changed dramatically since the early 1990s. Two important trends affect children s service agencies. First, the emergence of a new children and family beat at newspapers and broadcast stations means that more reporters than ever before are covering issues that involve your agency. Just as reporters cover business, sports, and city hall, so too are journalists regularly writing stories about children and their families.

Second, the economics of media has shifted. The expansion of cable television has meant a loss of viewers for the three major television networks. Daily newspapers have suffered a tremendous drop in readers, especially among women. The business side of the media industry is highly competitive, and so attracting audiences is more important to them than ever. Some media have responded by doing stories not just about the problems facing us today, but about solutions as well. *ABC World News Tonight,* for example, has a daily series called Solutions, and the network heavily promotes its philosophy in advertisements featuring anchor Peter Jennings. Other media outlets have decided to build audiences through sensational headlines, sex, violence, and bizarre feature stories.

These two simple trends can have an enormous impact on how the media see child welfare agencies. On the one hand, they know women viewers are interested in stories about children and families and information they can use. On the other hand, media decisionmakers believe sex and violence sell newspapers and bring in viewers.

Thus, most local media divide into two camps: those who sell violence or if it bleeds it leads, and those who are building audiences by promoting solutions and things viewers can do to help through news you can use. Reporters are always looking for ways to tell the story by putting a face on an issue, personalizing it so that the average person can relate personally. Most media companies do surveys of their viewers and readers and monitor the most important issues as expressed by the people in these polls and in small focus (or discussion) groups. Then they build stories around these salient issues.

Studies on public reaction to child welfare stories have turned up some surprising results. Most media consumers say they do expect government to help keep children safe and want to see action that makes children a priority. When asked to choose between working to keep abused children safe in their own homes and removing

them from those homes, they are uneasy with the choice; many responded, It depends.

Media coverage of child welfare issues can work to reinforce the public s common sense about child protection, foster care, and adoption. But when sensational coverage becomes the norm, it can further frustrate an already angry audience. When a tragedy occurs in a child welfare agency, directors can either close the door and hope that the stories go away (which rarely happens) or they can respond to the press and public by holding themselves and the system accountable, taking action, and making changes.

In addition, the days of strict confidentiality rules are almost over in many areas. State legislatures are asking tough questions and passing new laws, such as the Elisa Law in New York state, that provide more options for the release of specific information about cases where children die. The media also have new and better ways of getting information about cases and parents, using investigative teams that deploy quickly to interview police, parents, teachers, neighbors, relatives, and others. Computer-assisted reporting offers journalists bountiful information right at their desks. Reporters and editors understand that these are the kinds of investigations that often win journalism prizes, such as the Pulitzer Prize the Gannett News Service won for disclosing that a considerable number of apparent SIDS (Sudden Infant Death Syndrome) cases were in reality caused by abuse and neglect.

Keep in mind that few journalists are foster parents, were trained as social workers, have ever been in the system as children, or have directly experienced the inner workings of child welfare agencies. Many who are assigned to cover child welfare are frustrated by confidentiality rules that they perceive as helping to cover up mistakes or negative parts of the system. When they are forbidden to use interviews and photographs of families and children who are in the system and may have good stories to tell, many reporters opt to cover child fatalities and other sensational cases, often with the help of local police who would rather draw attention to the child welfare agency than to their own departments. Thus the vicious circle continues and the public is more and more confused about the role and effectiveness of children s services.

Too few child welfare agency staffs include communications and public affairs professionals whose job it is to work regularly with the media. When professionals are employed, it is often only during a crisis that is spiraling out of control and when a media frenzy is already underway.

Family to Family sites have found that agencies must develop crisis management plans to use during and after a tragedy occurs, and proactive plans to promote year-round media attention for prevention programs, family foster care, family preservation and reunification, foster/adopt recruitment, and other positive aspects of children s services. Agency directors must possess top management skills, training in social work and child development, an understanding of financial systems, and political savvy. Today they must also deal effectively with the media and the public in order to survive professionally and to make systemic changes.

As a part of ***Family to Family***, you should take steps to present the child welfare system in a way that educates the public, engages communities, and draws needed attention to the pressing issues of child protection, family foster care and adoption, neighborhood involvement, and community action.

More and better regular coverage of positive reforms, including ***Family to Family***, will require agency directors, social workers, recruitment staff, foster families, neighborhood and church leaders, and others to change the way they work with media. They will need to cultivate relationships with

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reporters, editors, news directors, publishers, and station managers. The media should also be asked to rethink the ways they cover, promote and interact with child welfare and other government agencies that work to help children and their families.

This ***Family to Family*** tool will provide you with information and ideas based on experiences of agencies around the country through examples of successes and challenges they have faced. Remember, the people working in and benefiting from children s services have some great stories to tell, and people need to hear about them.

COMMUNICATING *FAMILY TO FAMILY*

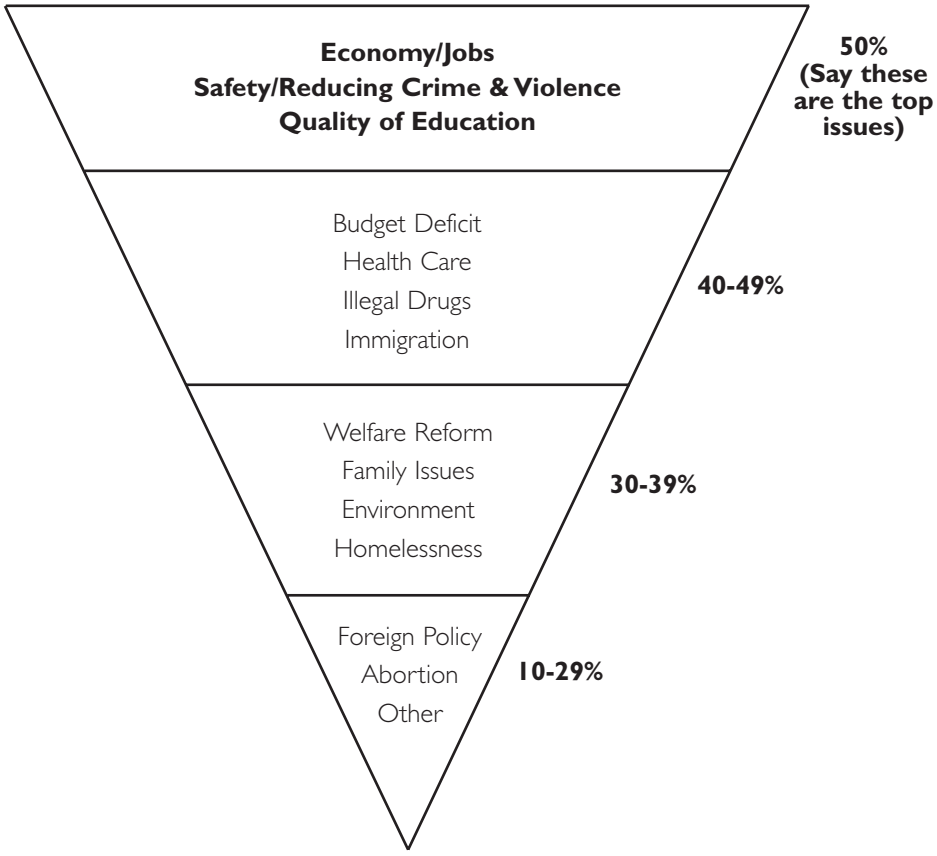
Public perceptions of your agency are critical to a successful reform effort. The American Public Welfare Association and state children s services associations have been working over the past several years to better understand public attitudes about child protective services, family preservation, family foster care and adoption. This and other public opinion research is very important to developing messages that will resonate with the general public and select target audiences.

Framing the Issues

In 1997, opinion polls generally show that the public considers promoting safety and stopping violence to be a top issue. The chart in Table 1 compiles a variety of survey results over the past several years. It summarizes the answers to: What are the top issues facing America today? Children s issues, defined as programs such as child care or foster care, generally do not rank as top concerns. If you can frame children s services as programs that promote safety and prevent violence, a majority of the public (and media) will listen and be supportive. If your spokespeople talk about risk assessments and use social work jargon, the public (and media) will tune out.

In other words, your job is to frame the issues of children s services in terms that the public and media will understand and see as important.

TABLE 1
Ranking of Most Important Issues



In October 1996, an extraordinary research project was completed for the Public Children s Services Association of Ohio by Triad Research Group/Phyllis Dykes & Associates entitled *Communicating with the Public*. The recommendations were based on 17 focus groups convened to determine public perceptions about services for children at risk. Keep in mind that opinion polls are just a snapshot in time of public attitudes. Focus groups can provide more of a motion picture of how people feel and think about an issue, with more depth and context. Here is a brief summary of the Ohio focus group findings:

- ❒ Most people know very little about children s services agencies unless they or a close family member or friend has had some direct experiences with the child welfare system.

- ❒ When engaged in conversation, however, people believe that the main mission of the agencies should be to protect children from abuse and neglect when the children s family is unable or unwilling to do so.

- ❒ The public believes that children should be kept in their homes as long as they are safe. People believe strongly that agencies must do a thorough investigation of each case to determine if alleged child abuse and neglect warrants action.

- ❒ The public wants to know that children are in stable situations, and people s first choice is for the child to stay with the birth parents. Virtually every group member, however, agreed that children who are in life-threatening situations as a result of abuse and/or neglect should be removed from the home.

- ❒ The public begins to diverge in opinion about situations that are not immediately life-threatening. Differences revolve around the importance and appropriateness of maintaining the family unit. Over and over, people responded, It depends.

- ❒ The public regards it as crucial that all foster care parents be thoroughly investigated and trained before they become foster parents.

- ❒ The public wants to know that children are living in a stable situation and not being transferred from one foster home to another. People want children who are in foster care to be able to return home safely after the child welfare agencies have provided services and education for their parents.

- ❒ The most important information to communicate to the general public is the competence of your caseworkers. The public believes an important proof of competence is the number of hours of training that caseworkers receive initially and each year thereafter. Statements about workers years of experience seem to carry little weight in demonstrating competence, because the public does not appear to equate experience with competence.

New ways of actually doing the work needed to be put in place in the real world.

- ❒ Statements about the need for confidentiality will do little to improve public opinion about children s services.

- ❒ On balance, the best choices for spokespeople are the agency director and the caseworker, because they are perceived as those who know the facts. However, the public has reservations about both for a variety of reasons.

The American Public Welfare Association conducted focus groups on the specific issue of child protective services and found similar results. Persons from all walks of life reflected on the condition of children today and reported:

- ❒ Concern and fear for the well-being of those who cannot defend themselves;

- ❒ Sensitivity to specific accounts of child abuse;

- ❒ Reluctance to talk about cases of child abuse and neglect;

- ❒ Because of its name, people see the primary goal of CPS as the safety of the child;

- ❒ Most people do not expect 100 percent success for the agency, but they feel that should be the goal; and

- ❒ Cases involving repeated reports of child abuse, or those in which the child is returned to an abusive family and a tragedy results, are the hardest to explain to the public.

Media outlets have changed dramatically since the early 1990s. Two important trends affect children's service agencies.

Based on a careful review of these and other opinion research reports, ***Family to Family*** leaders in several sites participated in media training sessions that included development of key message points about ***Family to Family***. As a part of the training program, agency directors tested these messages in practice sessions with video cameras and in interviews with their local media. Table 2 on the next page reviews the results from these sessions.

TABLE 2

Message Strategy – Family to Family

Family to Family

If We Help Families, We Help Kids

The current foster care system too often fails those it was designed to serve:

- ❒ Has unclear standards instability and insecurity as children shuttle through four or five placements;
- ❒ Too complicated, fragmented, and slow;
- ❒ Wastes money on temporary solutions;
- ❒ Fails to keep up with family and societal change; and
- ❒ Fails to serve children of color, older children, and those with special needs.

Protecting Children While Supporting Families Makes Sense

- ❒ Encourages collaboration and cooperation among caseworkers, foster families, birth parents, and children.
- ❒ Decreases time in foster care away from home.
- ❒ Reduces numbers in institutions.
- ❒ Reunites children with parents more quickly and safely.
- ❒ Reduces chances for repeated disruptions.
- ❒ Provides more stability and security.
- ❒ Reduces backlogs.

Family-Centered Strategy Based On a Solid Core of Beliefs

- ❒ We know children do better with families.
- ❒ We know kids in foster care have more needs.
- ❒ We know there are families who will care for kids and work with other families.
- ❒ We know that many of those caring families are frequently in the same neighborhoods and provide cultural ties.
- ❒ We know focusing child welfare services more comprehensively is the best use of resources and will save money in the end.

A Worthy Investment in the Future

If We Work Towards Reform...

- ❒ Children will be protected, families will be strengthened.
- ❒ Fewer tragedies will occur.
- ❒ We will maximize our resources.
- ❒ Children will become productive citizens.

If We Don't...

- ❒ Children will suffer, families will be torn apart.
- ❒ More child abuse will occur.
- ❒ We will waste more money.
- ❒ There will be no payoff for society.
- ❒ Children will be a greater burden to society as adults.

Note that the overall messages are based on the values and principles of ***Family to Family***. Other messages are based on what the public feels are the most important issues facing child welfare agencies as described in focus groups, opinion polls, and interviews. It is important to target the audiences you are trying to reach with the messages that will resonate with them.

When talking to the public about your agency and ***Family to Family***, remember that you must first break through the media clutter of competing stories and other messages that people get each day. In today s information society, these bits and pieces of information run as high as 2,000 per day from advertisements, radio spots, newspapers, television, and computers. Second, your message must be important or salient to your audience. If promoting safety, reducing violence, and strengthening families are important issues to the public, you have an audience open to your message. Third, you must repeat the message over and over; and fourth, you need to be very clear on what you want to say.

Write Your Own Headline

Imagine for a moment that you are in a position to write a cover story for *Time* magazine or produce a television newscast on family foster care. What would the article include? How would the story be scripted? What would the headline say? What are the best possible stories, quotes, or news items you want featured? Imagine the very best then go for it.

Do this exercise in reverse. Ask yourself what the worst possible headline could be. If a child dies, or a lawsuit is lost, or a worker sexually abuses a child in care, what are the worst outcomes? Work to avoid negative coverage through a damage control message.

Messages work best when they are 1) simple; 2) clear; 3) focused; and 4) consistent. You will need to articulate responses in 10, 30, and 60-second versions for television and radio interviews. Then develop longer, more substantive analyses for interviews with print reporters. Remember: the shortest ones are the hardest to do right.

When talking to reporters about children s services and ***Family to Family***, start with your values and beliefs. Share your vision of what a top child welfare agency should look like. Explain the challenges to building it. Urge the reporter to look at the system through the eyes of a child, the birth parents, the foster family, or one of your workers.

The bottom line: The most successful coverage usually does not just happen. Know what you want the coverage to be, and work with reporters so that they understand your agency, your mission and values, and ***Family to Family***. In the end, the article or newscast will be the responsibility of the reporter. But the more you know about what you want the piece to be, the better your chances are of achieving it.

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TELLING YOUR STORIES

When *USA Today* hit the newsstands more than a decade ago, its critics said that the crisp storytelling format it used was too imitative of electronic media and would not work as an alternative to serious daily newspapers. Wrong.

Today, an article in almost any daily newspaper describes a national or local problem in human terms. The lead paragraph often includes stories about a victim or beneficiary in order to illustrate the abstracts of the issue or policy under discussion.

Personal stories are essential elements in television and radio news stories as well. Any approach to the media that does not have a good human story to tell is not likely to be of much interest to reporters. More and more reporters say, tell me a good story so that I can produce the spot (or write the story).

Good news stories about ***Family to Family*** can be told through the eyes of foster families, the social worker, the birth parents, the child or teen, a county commissioner, and others working in social services.

Personal Contacts Are Key

The success of your communications strategy will depend upon personal contacts with reporters, assignment desk editors, and other journalists. Never underestimate the importance of maintaining good media contacts.

There is no substitute for picking up the phone, getting through immediately to reporters you already know and pitching a story idea to them. You will soon find that ***Family to Family*** stories about the teamwork of foster families, birth parents and social workers are great features for local television and newspaper reporters.

Rapport with journalists usually does not happen overnight. It must be built. A steady and reliable relationship can only be developed through regular meetings and phone conversations. Often this process takes months, even years, to evolve.

Don t just wait for reporters to call you, because it rarely happens except in times of crisis. A big part of your media strategy includes placing stories, initiating press coverage and getting your agency s spokespeople on reporters rolodexes. As one children s services agency director explains:

> When I was spokesperson for my county on human services, I made a point of contacting once a month a different media person. One month I would call a reporter for an informal lunch and the next month for a meeting in my office. Or, I would pay a visit to the local editorial board of our newspaper. By the end of a year, my rolodex was filled with names of reporters with whom I have face-to-face relationships and lots of good coverage. These relationships were especially helpful when we had a child die in our county because I knew first hand who would give me fair and accurate coverage.

Your media efforts may be as simple and inexpensive as a monthly meeting with journalists. Or your agency may have access to considerable resources from a public affairs and media relations office.

For example, in Hamilton County, Ohio (Cincinnati and its suburbs), the communications office did a ten-minute video on ***Family to Family*** as part of its

local outreach activities. Copies went to local television stations, where the video sparked a special segment on ***Family to Family*** foster care and adoption that included information on recruitment and training. This video in a generic form is available for review by contacting the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

Contacts with reporters can take the following form:

Phone Interviews and contacts are usually brief and to the point. If reporters call you, they are usually on deadline and interested in a quick quote. The journalists may also have an idea of what they expect you to say and will keep asking the question until you answer it in a way that fits their story.

Make sure incoming press calls are screened in advance. Have the person answering the phone (or press staff) find out if the reporters are on deadline and what issues they want to discuss. Your spokesperson should never get on the phone with a reporter without knowing what he/she wants and the tone of the questions. Staff should get as much advance information as possible about the interview.

Review the message points you want to use or the quotes you would most like to see in the piece and make sure you repeat your messages over and over as answers to the various questions.

If you are initiating the call with a story idea about ***Family to Family***, start by asking if the reporter is on deadline or in the middle of a story and if it is a good time to talk. If the person is busy, schedule time for a follow-up call. If the reporter can talk, go over the outline of your story idea and provide background on working in neighborhoods and as teams that include foster families, birth parents, and agency staff, for example. Give the reporter time to react to your suggestion. Print reporters will be looking for a way to personalize it or to put a face on ***Family to Family***, and TV reporters want arresting images on film, so have suggestions ready. Statistics and data are essential to help tell the story with comparisons to other counties and other states, but they are dry without graphic help. Private agencies and academics can validate your message as outside experts on child welfare, so have a list of other people to talk to ready.

Reporters may want you to send them follow-up materials, fact sheets, newsletters, or newspaper articles. Television producers will want to base the story on visuals that might include a neighborhood setting, one-on-one interviews, background (or B-roll) visuals of training programs, etc.

If you pitch the story idea and the reporter decides to do a piece, be prepared to provide the names of people to interview, photos of those involved, facts and statistics, and other important background information.

Face-to-face meetings can be the most successful forerunner of good press coverage. The smaller the meeting, the better. As often as possible, organize one-on-one lunches or breakfasts with your spokesperson and reporters. If a story has already been written that does not accurately reflect your perspective, call the reporter directly, using the story as an opportunity to set up a meeting. If your agency is called for a quick quote or response, end the conversation by saying: Maybe we should get together to go over some of the exciting things we are doing. How about lunch?

Press briefing sessions are another useful technique for contacting reporters. You are in control of the invitation list and the agenda. Reporters can usually get a good story because they have longer and better access to your spokesperson. Start by picking a topic foster care or adoption month or a major national event relating to child welfare, for example. Call reporters and explain that since the issue is in the news, your agency is organizing a background briefing session for a more in-depth discussion. Invite outside

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experts, a county commissioner, or elected officials, or an articulate foster family member. Invite six to eight reporters and ask for yes or no over the phone. Expect several no-shows even after they say yes. Limit your session to no more than one hour. If reporters say, I d love to come but I have something else that day, find out when they can come and schedule another session. Plan at least one session each month or every six weeks. It might be as simple as Breakfast with the Director or scheduled around the release of a report, a recruitment campaign, or the launching of ***Family to Family***.

Press conferences should be called only when you have breaking news. Too often groups think press conferences are the only way to reach reporters, which is no longer true. Groups can spend a week planning a press conference, arranging for speakers, securing a room, mailing releases, and so on and then no reporters show up. All your efforts are wasted, and even worse, the experience can make your leaders feel defeated. The same amount of time, money, and energy could have been spent cultivating one-on-one relationships or holding small group meetings, with better and more lasting results. Press conferences tend to be one-time events that produce only one day in the media. Make it a goal to develop media coverage over time by placing a story in one media outlet the first week, and another the second. You can start a media roll so that one story leads to another.

Editorial board meetings are regularly organized by publishers, editors, and editorial writers with local and national newsmakers. An important part of your agency s efforts should be to make regular visits (at least once a year) to your local editorial board. At the meeting, present the editors with background materials on your agency, facts and data on children in care, and an overview of your mission, goals and progress. Ideally, you should limit the number of people you bring to the meeting to two or three and not overwhelm those attending from the newspaper.

A number of positive things can come from these meetings. If a relevant policy issue is being debated in your state legislature or county commission, the paper should be asked to take a position on the issue. Or you can suggest that the editors do better and more extensive coverage of child welfare issues. In Cuyahoga County, Ohio (Cleveland), Children and Family Services Director Judith Goodhand organized a meeting with the editors of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* in March 1997. At the meeting, the discussion turned to the difficult decision of when to take a child from the home and when the agency can safely use family preservation services without breaking the family apart.

One editor asked if the paper could explore these issues by having a reporter follow several hard cases. The agency and paper worked together on a set of guidelines so that confidentiality rules were not broken and the reporter could have full access to the cases, follow the social worker through decisionmaking and generally be an observer to the process. This became a six-month project and required a considerable commitment from both the agency and the newspaper. The results were impressive. The paper ran a four-part series of three or four full pages each, entitled Judgment Calls: Protecting Children, Preserving Families. As a part of the final piece, Jean Dubail, the author and associate editor, wrote in an essay:

> For me, at least, working on the series has been an eye-opener. I never thought child welfare work was easy, but now I m wondering if there s anything harder. Every day, you see kids beaten, raped, naked, starved, forgotten. Every day, you meet drunks, addicts, perverts, fools, and sadists who don t deserve the title parent. Every day

> you are lied to, and on some you are threatened. Every day, you are asked to make judgments that might mean the difference between life and death. If you judge rightly, you are a hero to no one besides a few co-workers. If you judge wrongly, you are pilloried on the nightly news.

By letting the editors see the inside of a children s services agency, the agency gave the public a realistic, accurate, and more sympathetic view of the real-life stories and people involved in child welfare. Chances are this would never have appeared had the agency director not taken the time to be proactive with the local media.

Communicate regularly with media by sending faxes and releases Send out press statements, kits, fact sheets, speeches, meeting notices, positive press clips, and other useful materials. As a county commissioner from a rural area in Pennsylvania told a ***Family to Family*** training session: I have about 30 reporters in my county who have put all of their fax numbers on my computer. With my fax program, I can send them faxes with a push of the button at about 25 cents apiece. Each time I use the fax, we get calls from local radio stations, weekly newspapers and even the TV stations in another county.

Press lists are vital Update your press lists on a monthly basis. Start by purchasing any local media directories available through press clubs or yellow pages. Watch credits at the end of news shows and call each station for contact names. Review newspaper bylines and magazine mastheads. Your spokesperson or agency head should keep a journal of all press interviews and keep the reporter s name, phone number, business card, e-mail address (if appropriate), and reaction to the interview. Then, keep updating the lists with new names and beats. Expect high turnover with new reporters covering child welfare on a regular basis. Quarterly, call all local media and check whether reporters you don t know personally are still at the outlet. If they have left and have a good track record of covering child welfare, find out where they went and pass their names along to the children s services agency in that area.

Remember, you can also reach media through other media. Reporters regularly get story ideas from the media they read and watch. You may want to give a story idea to one reporter and repackage some of the same themes to another. Often television stations look to the daily newspaper for story ideas, and reporters read trade journals.

In almost all cases, reporters will want real people to tell their real stories. This can be challenging to many agencies because of confidentiality restrictions. You may want to suggest cases that are closed and not covered under such rules. Or if the media agree, you can suggest that they use aliases for the family s names. We have developed a special guide called *Working with Families Working with Media* to help agencies respond to media requests and to make sure that family members who are asked to speak to reporters are given information about possible repercussions.

The public wants to know that children are living in a stable situation and not being transferred from one foster home to another.

WORKING WITH FAMILIES WORKING WITH MEDIA

Working with Families Working with Media is a guide for agency directors, supervisors, caseworkers, and public information officers who regularly work with the media and are often asked to find children and families for press interviews. It has been reprinted in the Child Welfare League of America publication, *Children s Voices*. Copies are available from CCMC by calling 202.326.8700.

The booklet includes advice about briefing families before an interview, what to do during an interview, and the benefits of getting involved.

1. Choosing a Family Choosing the right family for the interview is important, and you should consider the following:

❒ Work with a family whose background and history are familiar to you.

❒ Don t make the decision on your own. Discuss the choice with a team of colleagues, including the communications director or public information officer of your agency.

❒ Choose a family where the parent(s) and the children are comfortable articulating their story.

2. Briefing the Family First, explain to the family why a reporter wants an interview. Once a family agrees to the interview, your communications staff person should brief family members BEFORE the interview occurs.

Give a summary of what the interview will be about, as well as some information about the reporter.

Give the family some sense of the questions that will be asked.

Tell the family the name of the reporter, and show them copies of his or her past stories. Reassure the family that you will be present at all times during the interview, and do your best to ensure that the interview is a positive experience for everyone.

Stress the fact that neither the family nor your organization can control what goes into the final story.

3. The Family's Rights Make sure the family understands that they do not have to do the interview. Even after they have agreed, they still have rights, including the right to stop the interview at any time if they are uncomfortable.

The family can choose what aspects of their lives to talk about. Remind the family not to talk about anything they don t want others to know about. You may want to help the family prepare a list of issues they want to discuss, and share that list with the reporter.

The family has the right to decline to answer any questions they feel are too personal. The family can always tell the reporter, I m not comfortable answering this question, but I will answer your question about Use role-playing to help the family practice saying no and to learn to change the subject.

Stress that until the reporter, photographer, or cameraperson leaves the room and all of the equipment is turned off, the family is on the record and anything they say can be added to the story.

Parents and children can participate in the interview, but children should never do an interview alone.

Some newspapers or magazines will allow the family to review or check their quotes. This is not possible in all cases, but it never hurts to ask.

The family does not have to agree to let their full names or photographs be used. If they do agree to have a photographer or television camera present, the family still does not have to agree to show their full faces. If they do not want to show their faces, the family should take precautions, such as putting away all family photographs, obvious mirrors, plaques, and trophies that may identify the family.

Remind the family that the reporter may have follow-up questions after the interview is completed. And family members, too, can contact the reporter later with additional information.

4. Getting to Know the Reporter Do your homework and find out as much as you can about the reporter and the publication or broadcast outlet. Read the reporter s stories, and call colleagues who may have had experience working with him or her.

Find out what point of view the reporter s newspaper, magazine, or television station has taken on children s and family issues.

Meet with the reporter first before he/she interviews the family to ensure that there is a clear understanding about your state s child welfare system, your program, and the children and families you serve. Let the reporter know what the family will or will not talk about.

Ask the reporter what type of story he/she is doing. Is it, for instance, a profile or an investigative piece? What is the story s focus, and what does the reporter expect to get out of the interview? While you can t always get a list of specific questions in advance, you have the right to know what kinds of facts and figures the reporter needs. Be sure to ask if a photographer or camera-person plans to come to the interview.

Ask who else will be interviewed for the story. Feel free to suggest other people the reporter can contact.

Set parameters for the interview, including the time and location. (Interviews should rarely take more than 30 minutes and almost never more than an hour.)

5. Getting Ready for Your Interview Prepare a list of questions you anticipate. Develop three main points you want to get across and that you hope the family will also talk about. Practice before the interview.

Be prepared to provide basic statistics about your organization.

Read the latest newspapers on the day of the interview in case there is a relevant news story that you may be asked about.

Give examples of stories that illustrate how your programs work and how families strive to better their lives and the lives of their children.

Be prepared for questions about high-profile negative cases. While you do not have to answer these questions, you may want to illustrate what works about your program in the context of a high-profile case that everyone knows about. Try not to say No comment.

6. Do's and Don'ts at Your Interview

Be honest and open with the reporter.

Focus on your three main points throughout the interview, but especially at the beginning and end.

Tell positive stories.

Keep it simple: don t talk in jargon or slang or use big numbers.

Don t speculate about what you don t know.

Know that you are always on the record with a reporter. If you want to provide information without being identified as the source for it, you must PRECEDE your remarks with a statement to that effect. Spell out your own

It is extremely important to let families know that there are some risks involved when doing any interview.

*As **Family to Family** builds successes throughout your agency, you will want to share success stories with the press and public.*

conditions do not assume that your definition of background or not for attribution is the same as the reporter s.

If you are asked questions that require a simple yes or no answer, use them as a springboard to elaborate upon your main points and to give real-life examples.

Make eye contact with the reporter.

Be careful only to talk about those things you want to see in print, hear on the radio, or appear on television.

7. Risks It is extremely important to let families know that there are some risks involved when doing any interview. For example:

- ❒ Children may be teased by classmates at school who hear about the interview.
- ❒ Parents should be asked how they feel about having co-workers, friends, or their children s teachers see or hear about their problems and the services they have received.

8. Benefits Positive coverage can help build support for families and the programs that serve them. A successful interview will:

- ❒ celebrate the family s strengths and victories;
- ❒ reach other families in similar situations who may need help;
- ❒ show that families are eager to help themselves; and
- ❒ help policymakers, reporters, and the public understand how children and families are working hard to improve their lives.

As ***Family to Family*** builds successes throughout your agency, you will want to share success stories with the press and public. But it remains critical that foster families, birth parents, children, and teens are briefed in advance of interviews and are able to change their minds or cancel the interview at any point in the process. These ground rules should be established with the reporter during early conversations about the piece.

MANAGING DURING A CRISIS

If people, systems, and organizations were perfect, we would not need to plan for crises because they would never happen. In reality, people make mistakes, systems break down, and organizations do not always perform according to expectations.

Even when preventive measures are put in place by highly skilled and caring people, things can and do go wrong, with results ranging from unfortunate to tragic. And if the system in question is an agency with the responsibility for the safety and well-being of children, even a slight error can have devastating consequences.

Children are not supposed to come to harm once they are brought to the attention of protective services officials, or so believes the public. The abuse or death of any child in protective custody is going to be treated by the press and public as a scandal and an outrage. As parents and concerned citizens, we would not have it otherwise; as supervisors or caseworkers of the agency to whom the child was entrusted, we may feel helpless to explain how such a thing could have happened and we may feel disempowered in our work.

Yet a crisis can occur at any time, causing long-term damage to reputations and systems. A child may die. An agency may be sued, divided by racial tensions, or accused of mismanaging funds. It is important to understand not only that crises occur in the best-managed and staffed agencies, but that systems can be set up to soften their impact.

This section is designed to help you identify a risk before it turns into a tragedy, and to deal with the crisis when it occurs. It focuses on four areas of crisis communications management: 1) General Procedures; 2) Prevention and Risk Management; 3) Roles and Responsibilities; and, 4) Possible Scenarios.

General Procedures

When dealing with the media, one must be organized, professional and truthful. It is in the dissemination of false or ill-advised statements to the media that an agency is most likely to damage its public image. In such times, a crisis communications plan can be your most valuable resource. A crisis communications plan is one that anticipates the worst, is well thought-out and is ready to be implemented.

The three basic rules of a crisis communications plan are: 1) to prepare for the worst; 2) to remain in control if it happens; and 3) to be proactive after it occurs.

The biggest mistake you can make is to assume that a crisis brings chaos in its wake. To weather a crisis with minimal damage, you can set systems and procedures in place now that will continue to provide a framework for action, even if those in charge are caught completely by surprise.

Steps you can take now – before a crisis happens:

❒ Be prepared to talk about what is happening. You do not treat the press like the enemy when things are fine, and that shouldn t change now.

❒ A no comment will not get you off the hook. It is far better to admit that you were caught by surprise, or even that things look pretty grim than to refuse to answer media questions that will make reporters wonder what you are hiding.

By letting the editors see the inside of a children's services agency, the agency gave the public a realistic, accurate, and more sympathetic view of the real life stories and people involved in child welfare.

Tell your staff that you do not want to be protected from reporters in the event of a crisis.

❒ Invite staff and colleagues to participate in the development of a plan. They will be more supportive of a plan they helped to create, and they won t be paralyzed when a crisis hits.

❒ Form an internal task force. Some people are better than others at keeping calm and focused on what needs to be done when those around them are distraught. Meet with these people regularly as a group to discuss strategies for dealing with upsets.

❒ Make sure everyone knows what to do if a crisis occurs. If you act now to put efficient systems in place, things won t fall apart when something goes wrong. At those times, it is more important than ever to:

1. Stay in control.
2. Keep your target audience in focus.
3. Have clearly developed messages.
4. Have clearly defined roles.
5. Decide who will speak with the media.
6. Monitor media coverage.
7. Maintain internal communications.
8. Provide a quick analysis of the situation and its impact.
9. Be truthful and honest.
10. Prepare background documents in advance.

Prevention & Risk Management

Because every organization faces difficult, volatile, or controversial situations that may turn into crises, your crisis communications plan should be carefully thought out, covering all foreseeable situations. The best approach is to identify potential risks and manage them before they get out of control.

The key to managing a crisis is prevention. When a crisis occurs, the organization must be prepared to act not react. The speed, forthrightness, and skill with which managers and designated spokespersons meet these imperatives will have direct bearing on public and employee opinion about the organization. While crises can damage an organization s image, they also present opportunities to represent an organization as honest, professional, and incorruptible under fire.

The following exercise may help you recognize and address potential risks:

Divide a sheet of paper into two columns. On the left side, list the operations within your organization that are likely to present problems during a crisis. On the right side suggest preventive measures to address those vulnerabilities.

Managing a crisis entails knowing what to do when a crisis happens, what to do afterwards, and how to work with the media throughout. You cannot afford to neglect any aspect of a crisis. Here are some general rules to remember:

❒ Develop a crisis management plan before a crisis happens.

❒ Define basic operating principles early (for example: never lie to the media) and stage a crisis drill to be sure that each staff member understands what is expected of him or her.

❒ Be prepared at all times to get a call from the local media about a tragedy. Develop a standard reply in advance that does not put you in the position of saying no comment. The reply should be developed collectively with your crisis communications team.

❒ Develop clear messages that focus on people, not programs. Acknowledge that a tragedy has occurred, and show compassion for the family members involved. The initial statement should not assign blame, but rather assure the public that

you recognize the seriousness of the situation. It should indicate that not all of the facts are known and that a full investigation will begin immediately to prevent the situation from recurring.

❒ Identify a spokesperson with good media skills. Refer all media requests to this person. Develop a written message or talking points memo for responding to crisis-related phone calls. Keep a log of all media calls.

❒ Monitor local media coverage as the situation unfolds. Make videotapes of television news coverage and track print coverage by reading and clipping the early as well as subsequent editions of local publications.

❒ Form a proactive media team to correct inaccurate information that appears in the media. Request retractions if necessary.

❒ Be available on a 24-hour-per-day basis. Position yourself as helping the media get accurate information. Under no circumstances should you or the agency appear to be covering up or trying to spin the facts.

❒ Assume that reporters have numerous sources of information, including police records, neighbors, teachers, classmates, and other eyewitnesses. Also assume that they are calling other government agencies that might be involved in the situation, such as the departments of Social Services, Mental Health, Child Protection, or Education. Contact the communications specialists for these agencies to develop a coordinated plan for working with the media.

❒ Immediately identify adversaries who regularly talk to the media and are likely to be critical of the situation in order to anticipate what responses may be needed.

Roles & Responsibilities

As a part of the crisis team, the agency director and senior communications staff must work effectively together. The agency director, assistant director, and communications director have the primary responsibility for investigating and managing any internal situation that could develop into a crisis. They also serve as the spokespeople for the organization during a crisis.

In a crisis, the agency director should:

❒ Assemble the crisis team and make or delegate staff assignments and policy decisions related to the situation.

❒ Ensure that current case management is meeting all standards and, if applicable, shielding siblings from media attention.

❒ Review potential liability issues, obtain legal counsel, and implement appropriate actions.

❒ Contact and brief the county administrator and other officials as needed.

❒ Formally request review of any suspicious death or injury by the internal investigations unit.

❒ Personally involve the caseworker(s) and supervisor(s) who worked on the case to ensure active support of the agency for the duration of the crisis.

In a crisis, the director of communications should:

❒ Respond to all media inquiries and communicate strategic messages.

❒ If necessary, ask for media cooperation in withholding identifying details until the next of kin are notified.

❒ Meet with designated spokespeople to reevaluate the communication strategy as the situation progresses.

Reporters will want real people to tell their real stories.

❒ Try to determine what reporters already know, what angles they are working, and if possible where they are getting their information.

❒ Monitor media coverage of the crisis.

Possible Scenarios

Ask your crisis team to identify high-risk scenarios that have been or might be faced in the future. For each real-life scenario, examine or try to determine the following:

❒ **Scenario:** What would constitute a bona fide crisis in your agency, and how might such a situation unfold?

❒ **Assumptions:** What are the assumptions the press, the public, and the staff could be expected to hold in this situation?

❒ **Crisis team:** Who should be on the crisis management team? Who will make the assignments?

❒ **When to act:** When should the crisis management team be activated?

❒ **Strategic objectives:** What do you hope to accomplish with your statements and/or actions?

❒ **Strategic message:** What is the message you most urgently need to convey?

❒ **Actions:** What concrete actions are you taking to contain the crisis and prevent a recurrence? What evidence, if any, do you have that this will work?

Set parameters for the interview, including the time and location.

The following is an example of such a scenario:

Scenario: Death of a child with current agency involvement.
Description: Child with whom the agency is involved dies as a result of abuse, neglect, illness, or accident.

Example: Children s Services placed a child in foster care following unsuccessful family preservation efforts, in which it was disclosed that the father killed her infant brother. Infant dies while under the care of Children s Services, and a coroner rules that she has died of natural causes.

Assumptions:

❒ The community standard is that no child should die when your agency is involved. Unless the cause of death is quickly ascertained to be natural, the agency will face a long, bitter siege from an outraged press and public.

❒ If the police are involved, they may provide the media with extensive information about the situation, including your agency s involvement.

❒ If police charge a member of the family, the family name and address may become public. This can lead to media contact with relatives who will report your agency s involvement.

❒ All local media will rapidly approach your agency to ask 1) whether the agency was at fault in the child s death, and 2) what your agency is doing to protect other children in the family. Media also can be expected to contact county officials for comment.

Information from your agency may be limited by confidentiality laws.

Crisis Team Composition:
Permanent Crisis Team Members

❒ Agency Director

❒ Assistant Director of Children s Services Division

❒ Director of Communications

Situational Crisis Team Members:

❒ Section Chiefs

❒ Unit Supervisors

❒ Caseworkers

❒ Legal Counsel

❒ Out-of-Home Care Coordinator

When to Activate the Crisis Team:
Immediately following the first report of a child s death to any permanent crisis team member.

Strategic Objectives:

❒ If necessary, to ensure that the child s next-of-kin are immediately and properly notified; to provide support for the family in dealing with the tragedy.

❒ If applicable, to ensure that siblings are shielded from harm, including excessive media attention.

❒ If necessary, to cooperate fully with law enforcement officials to bring an alleged perpetrator to justice.

❒ To provide appropriate support for the caseworker(s) and supervisor(s) involved.

❒ To review the situation for potential liability issues and implement strategies for addressing them.

❒ To ensure that current case management is meeting all standards.

❒ To minimize damage to the agency s operations and reform efforts.

Strategic Messages:

❒ The death of any child is a terrible tragedy. The atmosphere at Children s Services is very somber today.

❒ Confidentiality laws do not permit us to disclose any information about this particular case at this time, but the public needs to know the agency is conducting a full investigation. However, it is agency policy that whenever there is a child death due to abuse, the safety of siblings is our top concern.

❒ If applicable: This agency will cooperate with law enforcement officials to bring the alleged perpetrator to justice.

Actions:
The actions to be taken will be determined by the nature of the crisis, and the context in which it occurs. Was this the first suspicious death of a child in protective custody or the latest in a harrowing series? What actions were taken the last time you were confronted with such a tragedy? What other public officials or agencies can be approached for assistance in preventing a recurrence?

An action that seemed necessary and appropriate the first time you dealt with a scandal involving misuse of funds or the abuse of a child may not be appropriate in this instance.

The most important thing, in your communications with internal staff, as well as with the press and public, is to remain in control and to speak as candidly as possible about what has happened and what your next steps will be.

If your next step is to notify the next of kin, say so. If you don t know how the scandal will affect agency operations, say that as well.

Do not attempt to gloss over a full-blown crisis. No amount of stonewalling will get you off the hook, and if it appears that you are trying to avoid meeting with the press or answering their questions, you may invite suspicions that you are trying to hide an even worse scandal.

Difficult as it may be to deal with even the slightest error when children s lives are at stake, and outraged as the press and public may be, remember that they will not judge

Keep it simple: don't talk in jargon or slang or use big numbers.

you ultimately by how often you are called upon to respond to crises, but by how well you do it.

As a short-term communications strategy, follow three basic steps when responding to a child fatality:

Accountability

❒ Feel the pain. Acknowledge that this is bad. Show the emotions anyone would feel shock, grief, remorse, condolence.

❒ Don t appear to be covering up. Accept responsibility.

❒ Be accountable and don t scapegoat.

Action

❒ Take action. Saying we tried is not enough. Talking about lack of resources in the short term is not recommended, as it will sound like whining. Describe a plan. Report back on it.

❒ Involve the community, but don t use community factors as an excuse.

❒ People want investigations, and they are a strategic tool for the agency. However, people will raise the question of why an investigation is being conducted only after a tragedy.

Change

❒ The hardest question is, Why wasn t something done before?

❒ The best answer is to accept responsibility, show remorse and say that changes will be made to make it harder for this situation to happen again.

Develop a crisis management plan before a crisis happens.

Other things to keep in mind when developing responses:

❒ Set the record straight.

❒ Meet emotion with emotion.

❒ Talk from the top: leaders of the agency are responsible.

A longer-term communication strategy should include you and others:

❒ Show follow-up and accountability.

❒ Highlight staffing and training issues.

❒ Acknowledge that the public expects government to work for kids.

❒ If needed, express your position that changes are overdue.

❒ Share your successes, but not in the middle of a crisis. Leave some room for a cooling off period.

If your agency faces tragedies often, make it a point of watching closely how other organizations manage during a crisis. During a plane crash, for example, it is very important that the airlines show special considerations to family members. In political scandals, it is critical how information is handled after the fact, so that cover-up or obstruction of justice claims cannot be made. If people get sick or die from eating contaminated food, focus on the response of company spokespeople. Were they convincing and sincere, or did they appear cold and uncaring? Apply what you learn from these cases of damage control to your agency.

NOTE: Also review the October 1996 report by Triad Research Group/Phyllis Dykes & Associates, Inc. entitled *Communicating with the Public: A Report prepared for the Public Children s Services Association of Ohio,* discussed above. It contains useful recommendations on statements to the public about critical incidents and tragedies.

MEDIA PARTNERSHIPS

Public service advertisements, donated billboards, and community service programming on local cable access stations are all examples of media partnerships that your agency can pursue with local businesses and media outlets.

Here are some specific examples:

Recruitment and Other Public Service Spots

Many local media markets have waiting child segments during television news or in newspaper columns as a service to the community. While the number of children actually placed through these efforts may be limited, the features are one way of providing visibility for your agency. These recruitment spots and other forms of public service advertising or PSAs are effective ways of using free space to raise public awareness around an issue, recruit volunteers or inform the public about an upcoming event. Here are a few simple steps to follow:

Watch, read and listen to local media. Become a media consumer of public service advertisements (PSAs). Watch for PSAs on your local television and cable stations and in your newspapers, and listen for them on the radio. Knowing what types of spots your local media use gives you an opening when working to place PSAs.

Recycle existing spots or produce your own. Several excellent recruitment spots on foster care and adoption have been produced for the National Adoption Center in Philadelphia and by companies including Wendy s International. These existing spots can be edited to include a local phone number for your agency s recruitment line.

Local stations may be willing to produce a spot for your agency with the help of a *pro bono* ad agency in your community. Contact your local advertising association to see if they have a *pro bono* program for local agencies or nonprofits.

Make a call or surf the Internet. To ensure that PSAs receive regular airtime and print space in your community, make personal contact with the public service manager responsible for PSA placement. Call the station or newspaper and ask who you should contact about placing a PSA. Another good place to start is the Internet. Television and radio stations usually post PSA placement information on their Web sites.

Identify the key decisionmakers. Knowing the right person to contact is important, as these people act as media gatekeepers and make decisions on which PSAs will be awarded time and space, as well as when they will appear.

Personal contact is the key to success. After you have found the person in charge of PSAs, set up a meeting with that person. Personal contact is the best way to have PSAs placed because it gives public service managers a local connection to your issue. Competition for public service time and space is very intense. Each month, stations receive a dozen to a hundred local and national PSAs. Although neither radio nor television stations are now required to donate a specific amount of time to PSAs, stations are obligated (as a condition of their Federal Communications Commission (FCC) license) to determine local needs and respond to the community they serve.

Be clear on the target audiences you are trying to reach.

There is no such legal incentive for print media.

Start by asking if this is a good time to talk. If it isn t, find out when the person can best be reached. Talk briefly about your ideas and ask to meet to discuss the situation further, preferably at the station or newspaper.

Be prepared: Preparation for a face-to-face meeting can mean the difference between success or having your PSA sit on the shelf. Here s a basic list of questions you should ask yourself before every meeting:

❒ What are the key points you want to make?

❒ What specific action do you want to get from the outlet?

❒ Have you identified the right decision-maker?

❒ Do you have enough material to show that the PSAs respond to a community need?

❒ Should you bring along a community leader to the meeting to show support?

During your meeting make sure to do the following:

❒ Discuss the issues of child abuse, neglect, foster care, and adoption recruitment. Give the facts using local, state, and national data.

❒ Highlight programs going on in your area and show how support could reinforce the station s favorable public image.

❒ Explain that the issue is a priority in your community. Personalize the issue as much as possible. Being able to tell stories as you share facts will help you communicate with public service managers. But be clear that your interest is in raising awareness of the larger issue, not just in one case.

❒ Highlight the relevance of the ads for area residents the audience that both you and your media partners want to reach. Talk to them about the difference that running the PSAs will make in your community.

❒ Remember to bring along pertinent material to leave behind. These include samples of fulfillment pieces, brochures, and lists of people and programs in your community.

❒ Determine if any follow-up is needed, particularly if questions arise that cannot be fully resolved during the meeting.

Next steps: Verify your next steps. If the media outlet agrees to run the PSA, ask the manager to send you a list of air or print times. Confirm that the outlet will run a local tagline with your agency name and phone number.

If the station has agreed to produce an original spot, work to develop a script that highlights the basic values of ***Family to Family*** join a team to help families and children in your area, become a foster family, for example. Your message should not highlight rescuing a child from an abusive home, since neighborhood-based services and families working together will be a theme of your agency in all aspects of training, recruitment, and support efforts.

Don't take no for an answer: If you cannot get a commitment to run the PSA, find out why. Is the outlet committed to another program area? Ask what you can do to help the station do a better public affairs job for itself and its community. Many stations may not flat-out refuse, but may have other reasons why they are unable to commit.

If they currently have too many PSAs running, ask if you can wait in line until they rotate some of the existing PSAs off of their schedule. You may also want to consider contacting an advertiser in your area to see if they are willing to barter spots with local

buys. This means that a major corporation makes a significant ad space buy and barters or trades time for PSAs.

If you are having problems setting up a meeting, you may want to send a letter outlining your ideas.

After any meeting, don t forget to express your appreciation for the time that the station has taken by sending a thank-you note.

Tracking your success: Continue to stay in contact with public service managers and continue to monitor PSA placements. Make sure they know about adoption month in November, child abuse month in April, and foster care month in May, if applicable.

Billboards and Transit Advertising

In addition to television and print ads, local outdoor advertisers will provide free space if your agency pays for the cost of the artwork and installation. The same is true for transit ads. For additional information, contact your public transportation public affairs office or the community affairs offices of the local outdoor advertising company that is listed on the billboard.

Family Photo Albums

Many states are investing in the development of a Family Photo Album as a way for potential and newly certified foster/adopt families to have profiles available of children in their system who are legally free for adoption. Local newspapers can be important partners in this effort by providing services of their photographers and helping to write top-quality profiles of the children. (See the ***Family to Family*** tool on Recruitment, Training, and Support for specific details on how best to write profiles.) If your local newspaper is unionized, the local Newspaper Guild may be willing to adopt Children s Services marketing efforts as a special project. They can also identify possible volunteers including former journalists who can help develop media partnerships.

Local Businesses

If there are companies in your community that regularly advertise on television and newspapers, you can ask them if your agency s ads can be included in a barter arrangement in their media placements. Wendy s International, for example, buys hundreds of thousands of dollars of local advertising. They may be willing to ask local media to run PSAs for foster care/adoption parents as a part of their overall purchase. A local grocery store may be willing to put your recruitment phone number on their bags or pass out information at check-out counters. Restaurants may put your information on tray inserts. Be creative.

Be aware of how other government agencies and nonprofits partner with local businesses and media. Take away ideas on how these could apply to children s services.

NEXT STEPS

Appendix A includes a Strategic Communications Planning Guide that lists many of the activities discussed in this tool. We strongly encourage you to develop a *written* plan to share with managers and others who will be needed to implement the plan.

You will notice that the first section of the planning guide advises listing your overall communications goals and your basic beliefs and values. It is essential that a communications strategy evolve from basic values. These will be the foundation for overall messages about your agency, including how you talk about ***Family to Family***.

Be clear on the target audiences you are trying to reach, including internal audiences of agency staff and supervisors. The techniques we have discussed about reaching media can be applied to reaching staff. Newsletters, e-mails, posters, and flyers are effective means of communicating about ***Family to Family***. But as with reporters, nothing substitutes for reaching staff through personal contacts in training sessions, small group meetings, and one-on-one conversations.

Research on everything, from public opinion to hard data about your agency s progress, is an important tool for telling your stories and developing messages.

Materials should be developed that look somewhere between slick and tacky. You do not want to appear to be wasting public funds, but you must compete with other institutions trying to get reporters attention. With desktop publishing programs and a savvy computer whiz, your agency can have a fresh new look on limited funds.

Your community offers many volunteer and *pro bono* services you can find if you spend time networking among media professionals. Local foundations may be willing to make a special communications grant specifically for outreach activities.

Develop a workplan that includes timetables and deadlines and assigns responsibilities to staff. Hold people accountable for their tasks. Once a communications plan is in place, implementation is key. Think about media coverage as a water faucet. When the systems are turned on and monitored, clean water pours through the faucet. When the systems are down or left dormant, the water stops. If pipes are rusty and unkempt, the water can turn brown. Likewise, if your agency aggressively works at getting news coverage, if it routinely sends out press releases or media kits and establishes media contacts, then good press coverage will become routine. Waiting passively for the media to call you may mean that your agency stays invisible to the outside world, except when the news is bad. If the leaders of your agency decide that media is an important priority, then they must be prepared to allocate resources accordingly.

Your agency director must devote time and resources to developing and planning media strategies. Your main spokesperson must make time to learn and understand every detail of the agency operation, and implement the media strategies. They must both schedule appointments during the day with reporters, appear on talk shows, and conduct press interviews.

Keep at it. Don t stop. When your media effort takes off, record successful techniques for future events. Analyze what you did and figure out why it worked or, just as importantly, why it did not. Remember, review, revise, and repeat.

APPENDIX

Strategic Communications Planning Guide

Family to Family as developed by Communications Consortium Media Center

Sample Communications Plan

Overall Communications Goals

❒ Strategic cultivation of media to advance the goals of Children s Services and *Family to Family*

❒ Development and implementation of a communications plan for Children s Services, including crisis management

❒ Generation of support from the public and policymakers for foster care reform and child welfare in communities across your state

Basic Beliefs and Values

❒ Children do best with families.

❒ We need to put maximum resources into helping children stay safely with their own families when that is possible.

❒ Children who must enter the foster care system have many more needs than the current system has been meeting.

❒ Families exist who can and will nurture foster children and who will work with children s birth families to better care for them.

❒ Only if we do a better job recruiting, training, and supporting families will they join and stay with the family foster care system.

❒ Many of these families are living in the very neighborhoods from which the foster children come. If we reach out to them in new ways, they will come forward.

Target Audiences

- ❒ Social workers and internal staff at Children s Services
- ❒ The departments of Health, Mental Health, Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities, Human Services, Youth Services, Education, and Alcohol and Drug Addiction Services, and the Rehabilitation Services Commission
- ❒ Governor and state legislature
- ❒ Senate and House legislators
- ❒ County commissioners
- ❒ Private agency providers
- ❒ Church groups
- ❒ Current and future foster and adoptive families
- ❒ Judges and the family law community
- ❒ Journalists and media organizations
- ❒ The general public, including segments of the business community, existing community partnerships and communities of color

Research

- ❒ Public opinion polls and focus group analysis
  - Focus group research for Public Children Services Association of Ohio (PCSAO)
  - Message-testing focus groups by APWA
  - Public opinion polls on children and family issues
- ❒ Analysis of local and state media coverage
- ❒ Coordination of data and statistics, including:
  - Out-of-home placements
  - Reunification
  - Institutional care and group homes
  - Years in the system
  - Foster care families
  - Adoption placements

Message Development

❒ Review message points.

❒ Develop initial press lines memo.

❒ Review, revise, repeat.

Materials

❒ One-page fact sheet

❒ Press kit(s)

❒ Brochures

❒ Case studies on foster and birth families, children and youth, and social workers

❒ Videos, slides and overheads

Resources

❒ Assess staff time, in-house services, and existing media technologies.

❒ Designate or hire a communications director.

❒ Develop a budget plan for outside contracts and services.

❒ Access funding sources for expanded activities.

Local foundations

Additional state funds

Executive loan programs

Pro-bono support from private firms

Workplan

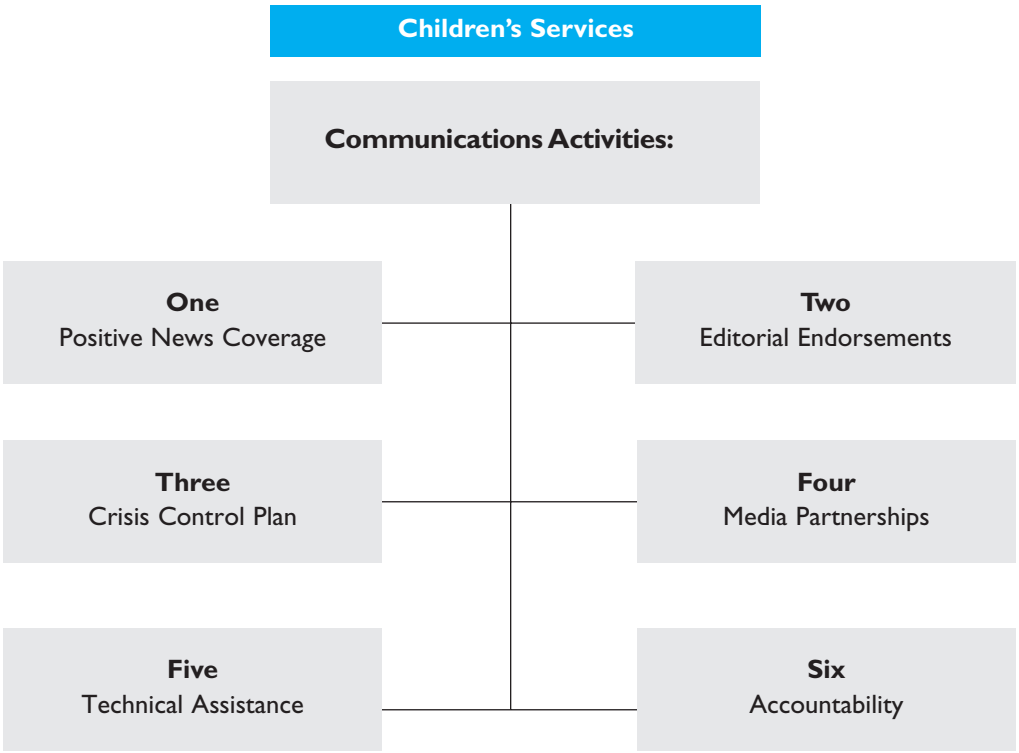
❒ Develop timelines, calendars, and priorities.

❒ Assign responsibilities with lead and support staff.

❒ Review progress.

❒ Hold people responsible.

❒ Reassign as needed.



Positive News Coverage

❒ Develop a calendar of events on key issues.

❒ Initiate and plan additional events and activities to expand news opportunities.

❒ Coordinate and develop written materials.

❒ Schedule news conferences and briefings only when warranted.

❒ Distribute news releases on significant developments by fax, mail, or hand delivery.

Feature Story Development

❒ Arrange personal stories and visits with families, social workers, policy experts, and stakeholders.

❒ Develop sidebar stories to national coverage of welfare reform, new adoption legislation, and other local/state initiatives.

❒ Facilitate stories on major developments in the state.

Media Placements

❒ Write and place bylined opinion articles or op-eds.

❒ Coordinate timely, sharp, and relevant letters to editors.

❒ Reach out to columnists with story ideas.

❒ Schedule regular appearances on radio talk and TV public affairs programs.

Editorial Endorsements

❒ Request meetings with editorial boards.

Dailies

Weeklies

Neighborhood publications

❒ Send follow-up mailings and faxes with clips, fact sheets, and requests for support.

Crisis Control Plans

❒ Name a crisis coordinating team.

❒ Develop a communications plan to assure a timely and appropriate response.

❒ Conduct internal briefings and rehearsals for implementation of damage-control procedures.

Media Partnerships

❒ Public Service Announcements (PSAs) for events, recruitment, training, and image.

❒ Family photo albums.

❒ Billboards and transit campaigns.

❒ Businesses that will advertise in media as marketing partners.

Technical Assistance

❒ Hold media-readiness and message-point training sessions.

❒ Review and establish procedures for working with families.

❒ Distribute message memo to staff and spokespeople.

Accountability

❒ Review the volume and content of media coverage.

❒ Record events including media briefings, editorial board appearances, TV news placements, and radio/TV talk show bookings.

❒ Assess the reactions of policymakers, agency reps, and stakeholders to communications initiatives.

❒ Enhance the communications skills of key staff members and other stakeholders.

For more information, contact:

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