

# Chapter Thirteen:

## Managing the Media in Crisis Situations

(The following section has been excerpted from NOVA's basic textbook, *Victim Assistance: Frontiers and Fundamentals*. NOVA has also published a manual on victim assistance and the media that can be requested from the Office for Victims of Crime.)

### I. The Media in Crisis

**A. The media's coverage of a crisis situation can cause harm to all concerned.** The victims of the crisis may feel violated and betrayed. Their privacy is invaded, their character or lifestyle questioned, and the facts of the situation distorted.

1. The daughter of a woman who had been murdered told of her shoulder being dislocated when a reporter forced his way into her home to try to get a story.
2. The publication of the name of Patricia Bowman during the William Kennedy Smith rape trial was a violation of her privacy rights, as were the scurrilous stories in the press concerning her background and character.

**B. Victims and their advocates often are frustrated** because the media broadcasts gruesome photographs, inadvertent death notifications and misinformation.

1. A photograph of the body of a victim, still strapped into his seat by a seatbelt, hanging from a tree near Lockerbie after the Pan American Flight 103 explosion in 1988 was widely disseminated by the press.
2. Family members of a victim in the Palm Bay, Florida, mass murder in 1987 found out about the death of their loved one when a television camera-

man videotaped the face of the victim lying on the pavement.

**C. The community suffers** because useful information about available resources or predictable actions and reactions tends to take second place in the media to more sensational descriptions of the event. While some media representatives are conscientious about serving as an educational conduit to inform the public, such information may become a back page story while speculations and rumors occupy primary coverage, causing hours or days of anxiety to families, friends, survivors.

1. In the 1993 disastrous siege of the Branch Davidians' compound in Waco, Texas, many were distressed by rumors surrounding who might have set fire to the Davidian complex.
2. During the same time period, when the prison in Lucasville, Ohio, was beset by a hostage crisis, rumors that ten or twenty may have died in the prison uprising, and that infrared cameras had picked up evidence of hangings and other atrocities, leaked out through media sources – to be disproven when the crisis was over.

**D. Finally, public perception of the media and its role may become increasingly negative.** The questions raised about the coverage of the Stuart murder/suicide case in Boston, Massachusetts, is a recent example of not only the public, but the media, questioning their own response to a crisis situation. From the front page photographs that ran in major newspapers across the country of pregnant Carol Stuart bleeding to death in her car, to the issues of racism, sensationalism, lack of investigative reporting, and trying the case in the press, everyone was left asking, "Why does this need to happen?"

Media coverage of a crisis does not have to leave permanent injury or ill feelings on the part of the victim and the community. If properly managed, the media's coverage of a crisis can have a positive effect on the disaster.

The National Organization for Victim Assistance (NOVA) has learned a great deal about managing the media during a crisis situation. In 1986, NOVA sent its first crisis response team to Edmund, Oklahoma, to help the community respond to a mass murder where twelve postal workers were killed. Since that time, NOVA has responded to over 55 communities in the aftermath of a community trauma. In addition to providing help through conducting planning, training, and group debriefing sessions, NOVA's crisis response teams also assist in managing the media during the chaotic aftermath of a tragedy.

## II. How a Disaster Unfolds: An Overview

Although each crisis is unique, there often is a common pattern to the media's response in the aftermath of any tragedy that affects whole communities. The type of information sought by the media as the trauma unfolds often follows the following pattern.

- A. 0 - 12 hours:** In the immediate aftermath of a community crisis the media is scrambling to get information to answer the question – *What happened?* The media attempts to piece together a story, based on eye-witness accounts, monitoring police radios, and, in many cases, grabbing anyone to talk about what happened. This results in incomplete, conflicting and inaccurate accounts of what actually happened. In the worst case scenario, the media has monitored the police radio frequency and arrives at the scene of the crisis before the police or rescue workers, thus obtaining unrestricted access to the crime or disaster scene.
- B. 12 - 24 hours:** As the crisis unfolds, the next question the media seeks an answer to is *Who?* – who are the victims? There is often a struggle over the timing of the release of the names of injured and killed victims as the authorities try to notify the surviving family members. No one is immune from the media's search for identifying information about the victim.

The media will seek this information from a variety of sources, including hospitals, the police, rescue workers, families, neighbors, schools, passenger lists, co-workers – or through encampments at the crisis scene – all in an effort to identify who has information about the crisis and its victims.

**C. 24 - 36 hours:** The next question the media tries to answer is the question of *Why?* – why did this tragedy happen? It is a normal reaction on the part of many people, including victims, survivors and community members, to try to understand what happened by finding someone or something to blame. Everyone has their own version of who is to blame and the media feeds into this hysteria by speculating on who or what may have caused the crisis well before the actual facts of the situation emerge. In cases of criminal acts of violence, where the obvious person to blame is identified suspect, the media will run stories laying blame on a variety of sources such as lax security, questioning whether the victim in some way contributed, or about those who could have foreseen or prevented this tragic crime. In crises involving natural disasters, where there is no offender to blame, issues of faulty construction, inadequate disaster preparedness capability, or why the victims did not carry adequate insurance coverage often arise.

**D. 36 - 72 hours:** At this point during a community crisis the media continues to speculate on what happened and why, and in addition, often begins to evaluate the rescue efforts as to whether they were effective and timely. Often, this occurs even as the rescue or cleanup operations continue. Ensuring privacy for victims as they are released from the hospital, return to work, or begin to make arrangements for funerals or memorial services is critical at this time.

**E. 72 hours - Forward:** The details of what happened at the crisis site is now old news, and the news story that is current concerns the funeral services of the de-

ceased. In addition, the crisis story is now old news. In order to continue coverage, the media often tries to put a “spin” on a story to keep it in the news. The media looks for twists, or a new angle by which to present the same information. Issues concerning the lifestyle, social and religious pursuits of the victim, stories about victims who have suffered through similar misfortunes as well as any previous doubts about the employer, business, government agency or whoever is currently being blamed for contributing to the crisis, now all surface.

The above time periods are encountered during what might be termed “immediate” crises. When crises occur over extended periods of time, such as in hostage-takings, war, hurricanes and the like, the media has even more opportunity to serve as an educator and also to become more involved in “victim” stories. This was starkly illustrated by the media coverage of the war in the former Yugoslavia. While the victims of war and genocide are dependent upon the media to get the word out about the atrocities that take place and, thus most cooperate willingly with the press, they also are fatigued and beleaguered by the media intrusions. Cover stories with the names and faces of rape victims or child victims are shocking. Some victims tell of being interviewed by various media sources twenty or more times.

### **III. Managing the Media**

The following overview of media management guidelines represents many of the lessons NOVA has learned in responding to communities in crisis.

- A. During a community crisis it is important to designate one person to serve as a spokesperson and media liaison for the team.** This person should be trained in handling the media and able to state psychological issues facing the community in understandable terms. It is critical to have one voice speak for the team so that consistency is established and the public does not receive confusing information.

- B. Advance preparation is the key to being prepared** for managing the media during a crisis. Before crisis strikes, assemble lists of local and state media contacts. Prepare information that can easily be assembled into press kits in an emergency situation, including the following: the impact of a community crisis, the psychological impact on the victims, rescue workers and the community, any publications that the media can use for background on community crisis, as well as the names of victims and experts who can speak about issues relating to a crisis situation.
- C. Hold a press conference as soon as possible** after the announcement of a tragedy. The goal is to take the offensive and get control quickly by inviting the media to attend and giving them a roadmap of what public policy officials, leaders in the community and you will do in response to the crisis. The media liaison for each agency involved should be identified, and the rules for media coverage should be established, including issues dealing with the privacy rights of victims. A victim service professional should be designated as a resource for expert opinion to reduce speculation and misinformation about the psychological issues involved in the crisis. Press conferences should be held daily during the crisis with the intention of focusing the media's attention on factual information about the tragedy. In the chaos of a community crisis, certain basic technical and logistical concerns about the location and timing of a press conference may be overlooked. Do not forget about deadlines of the different media, electrical needs for television, providing an agenda of speakers, and other basic necessities of a press conference.
- D. In managing the media during a crisis it is critical to understand the media's need for information** and to give the media positive, factual information. Offer suggestions on interesting perspectives that the media may want to cover as they search for stories. For example, provide an articulate expert who can

describe a victim's emotional reaction or identify a survivor of a similar crisis who will not be thrown into crisis by speaking to the media.

- E. The more specific and less technical the information, the more likely the media will accurately communicate your message.** Offer prepared statements, if possible, following any press conferences. Develop press releases and one-pagers each day as the trauma unfolds that highlight issues you feel should be brought to the community's attention. Continue to give the media information about resources that are available for help, your role, as well as disaster and trauma specific information.
- F. Although it is impossible to completely protect all victims from the media in the aftermath of a crisis, there are many ways to reduce the trauma,** or what we call the second injury, by the media. Maintaining privacy for the victim is critical. During a crisis, pay close attention to creating a "zone of privacy" whenever and wherever it is possible. Create private waiting areas for family members who may be waiting at hospitals or at the scene of the crisis for information about their loved ones – or worse, waiting for death notification. Create a "zone of safety" around any debriefing sessions so those attending can leave the session without walking straight out into the waiting glare of cameras. This includes making sure there is protection for victims on the way to bathrooms or their parked cars.

Even in a crisis situation, let victims know about their specific rights with respect to the media. Provide victims with the suggested media code of ethics which is published at the end of this chapter. Let victims know the following:

1. they do not have to talk to, pose for pictures or provide photographs to the media;
2. they can choose the time and the place for an interview – it does not have to be immediate or at the media's convenience;

3. they can refuse to answer a question even if they already agreed to discuss the topic;
4. let victims know that they have the right to ask to review a story before it goes to press or on the news although most media during a crisis situation operate on too tight a deadline for this.
5. in addition, quickly teach victims the difference between:
  - a. “on the record” – when everything they say is subject to publication;
  - b. “off the record” – when nothing they say should be subject to publication, although unscrupulous reporters may publish it with impunity; or
  - c. “for background only” – where the information may be used without attribution to the victim.
6. emphasize that victims should make sure which rules they are being interviewed under prior to answering any questions.
  - a. techniques to shield their faces with coats, arms or whatever it takes to prevent the media from filming them;
  - b. an understanding that no reporter is your friend when she or he is after a story.

**G. The media liaison/spokesperson needs to be well versed in handling the media** and, before responding, should always ask the questions outlined earlier in this section – what happened, to who, and why.

**H. Distribute the code of ethics** (appended to this Chapter) for the media with respect to covering issues involving victims of crime and crises.

#### **IV. Conclusion**

Many representatives of the media do a fine job of recognizing the trauma of survivors of victimization. Others focus on sensationalizing the tragedy that victims survived. It brings to mind the words of William Cullen Bryant.

*The press is good or evil according to the character of those who direct it. It is a mill that grinds all that is put into its hopper. Fill the hopper with poisoned grain and it will grind it to meal, but there is death in the bread.*

One could add, fill the hopper with nutritious grain and it will grind it as well, and the bread will give life.

