Crisis Communications Case Study
U.S. Dept. of Homeland Security
Operation Vaccinate Our Workforce

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The Rundown

• What is crisis communications?
• What was the crisis?
• What was the mission?
• Who was the team?
• What was the landscape?
• How did we turn challenges into wins?
• How can does this apply to you?
• What does it take to lead during a crisis?
What is Crisis Communications?

Crisis: An unstable or crucial time or state of affairs in which a decisive change is impending

Communications: A verbal or written message

Reference: https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/communications
The Crisis: COVID-19

  

- **July 10, 2020**: the United States reached 68,000 new cases for the first time, setting a single-day record for the seventh time in 11 days.
  

- **Dec. 11, 2020**: FDA authorizes EUA for Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 Vaccine.
  

- **Dec. 14, 2020**: The coronavirus death toll in the United States surpassed 300,000.
On January 25, 2021, then-Acting DHS Secretary, David Pekoske, introduced a new vaccination task force, Operation Vaccinate Our Workforce (O-VOW) to quickly provide 166,000 frontline DHS personnel with access to COVID-19 vaccine.

“Realizing the need to accelerate the vaccination program, DHS engaged FEMA to recruit and activate a full-time team to ensure success of ensuing vaccination efforts.”


“…enlisted FEMA, the DHS component best-equipped to respond to the demand for a rapid response infrastructure.”

Demobilized: March 13th, 2021
My Team: 0-VOW Interagency Communications Group

Caitlin + Danielle
The Landscape Before Us

• Uphill battle from day 1
• 100% virtual
• Double duty
• Lack of cross-talk between IT systems
• Frequent churn of detailed staff, constant training
• Distilling and translating medical jargon for the masses
Find the Wins

Challenges
- 100% virtual
- Lack of cross talk between component systems
- No prior established relationships
- Diverse backgrounds, some with minimal comms experience
- Rotating two-week deployments

Wins
- Tech savvy team
- Dedicated IT support
- Team rapport quickly established
- Quick learners
- Fresh eyes, new perspectives
- Various component reps, various connections
The Result: Lives Saved

January 6, 2021: 8 Veterans Administration Medical Centers providing vaccines to DHS employees.

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January 25, 2021: Operation Vaccinate Our Workforce established

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April 5, 2021: More than 58,000 DHS mission-critical 1A and 1B employees—up from 5,074 employees at the beginning of February. 163 participating VAMC centers online.
Leading in Crisis

- Team first
- Row in the same direction
- Prepare to pivot when necessary
- Remember it’s always about people
- Focus on the finish line
Thank you!

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