



**Positioning Public Child Welfare Guidance**  
**Strengthening Families in the 21st Century**

## **Communications Guidance**

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## *Communications Definition*

The field of public child welfare has formalized strategies for communicating both internally and externally. The strategy addresses proactive and reactive communications; provides for formal and informal interactions; and for developing and maintaining relationships with stakeholders and the children, youth and families served.

## Overview

Public child welfare is frequently an unknown quantity to the general public, or, at worst, painted only by high profile cases that reflect but a small part of a larger, more complicated picture. In all agencies, large or small, the dedicated communications function (Communications), whether lodged in a part of one person's work or centered in a full public affairs office, needs to connect strategically the mission, vision and values of the public child welfare agency and the operations of that agency as reflected in its model of practice. The communications strategy shines a light on that work and makes it understandable, placing public child welfare within the context of a larger human services system. It also positions the agency to become more open and accessible as it establishes, whenever possible, effective two-way communicative channels with those it serves and with its stakeholders. Absent such a clearly articulated, agency-initiated communications strategy, others define the public child welfare agency. In a public agency with solid leadership and a clear vision, an effective communications strategy portrays a confident, reasoned and purposeful agency, secure in its mission, explicit in its operations and ethically working within the legal boundaries of a larger child and family serving system. This attracts both public and private investment that in turn optimizes services to children, youth and families.

A secondary, but important role for Communications is in keeping the agency message in front of the workforce, providing assistance in keeping workers, managers, directors and frontline staff "on message" in the way the agency deals with its stakeholders and most especially with those it serves. Internally, Communications must not become the shield to hide bad practice, but more the mirror that reflects that practice so that it can be examined and continuously improved. This function is intrinsically tied to the research and practice model critical areas and, as above, is highly dependent on and complementary to, the leadership qualities of the executive and the competencies of the workforce. Communications reinforces the values and mission of the agency throughout the workforce. It fosters an environment where staff input is actively solicited and opinions regarding ways to improve agency performance are encouraged. This attracts talent to the agency and supports staff retention that, in turn, improves service delivery.

### Questions the Guidance Will Answer

- Why creating a "master" strategic communications plan is important for a public child welfare organization?
- How to develop a strategic communications plan?
- Why and how to develop a "single issue" communications plan?
- Why and how to develop a "crisis" communications plan?
- Why and how to develop a "disaster" communications plan?
- What are the venues, tools and approaches that will enhance the agency's communications?
- What strategies are used to reach specific audiences?
- How do embed communications in an agency?
- How to craft a message and when and how to communicate that message?

### Why is this Critical Area Important to the Field of Public Child Welfare?

Externally, Communications is a tool to receive public feedback and to respond to inquiries and crises, but also a proactive, continuously evolving effort to mold and inform the public view of the agency. It mobilizes public support and defines the work of the agency as a necessary and essential function in society. Among the ways this is achieved:

- Proactive communication builds support for public child welfare work among various audiences, including youth and families, the general public and policymakers. This

positively influences public opinion of the agency and affects public policy decisions made about the agency.

- Effective communication educates the public and other stakeholders about the roles, responsibilities, values and legal boundaries of public child welfare. This promotes public confidence in the field as a whole and in work of the agency, increasing both attention to the messages from the agency and increasing the willingness of the general public to invest in the agency and refer to it for help. It also increases the appropriateness of referrals made to the agency.
- Communications informs the media and the public during crises, in high profile cases and other situations that become newsworthy. Rather than hiding behind a privacy shield, effective management of these crises is displayed through a ready plan for dealing with the emergency, providing an authoritative and respected voice for explaining what has or is happening and sharing legally permissible information to demonstrate transparency in order to promote confidence.
- Communication supports the leadership of the public child welfare agency in promoting and reporting on strategic goals. This may support the continuity of leadership in public child welfare agencies, or sustain program vision and goals during times of transition.
- As part of the agency's strategic plan, Communications assumes direct responsibilities for the agency' public relations and public awareness efforts. These campaigns may focus on prevention strategies (e.g., safe sleeping tips with infants, child abuse prevention efforts) or recruitment strategies (e.g., for foster care and adoptive parents).
- Where contracted services are used, Communications is also a vehicle for providing context for service providers so that they stay aligned with agency mission and principles and can respond, nimbly, to changing service needs and requirements. Communications can also enhance two-way communications flow between the public agency and service providers, resulting in strengthened relationships and better outcomes for those served.

Internally, Communications can be an important adjunct in aligning the disparate work of the agency under the umbrella of the mission, vision and values. This is especially true where overarching values need to be reinforced (e.g., achieving similar outcomes for all children, regardless of culture, race or ethnicity). In addition, program areas and discrete support functions may not always see areas of common interest. Communications is one vehicle for defining common ground and creating alignment.

- Communications builds morale among those who work in public child welfare. Effective two-way communications strategies keep staff involved and aware of progress the agency is making toward achieving outcomes. This promotes greater engagement in those outcomes and strengthens connections between line staff and leadership.
- Expected and sustained communication positions the agency to better respond to and proactively influence staff opinion about public child welfare. This, in turn, affects staff interaction with clients and may affect public and stakeholder opinion of the public agency.

### **How Will Outcomes be Achieved for and with Children, Youth and Families?**

- The public will be better informed and educated about the needs of children and families, the agency will gain community support, therefore providing better services to children, youth and families.
- Effective communication will increase staff morale and improve the quality of work.
- Effective communication will help build public support and increase resources for children, youth and families.
- Effective communication leads to less child abuse and greater permanency and stability for children.

- Parents, youth and children learn there are resources when they are in trouble.
  - Community members learn to recognize the signs of both abuse and neglect and become more accountable for reporting it. They will recognize the signs of it and know how to seek help.
  - More people step forward to become volunteers, mentors and foster and adoptive parents, providing a safe place for children and youth.
- Communication can even engage the community on an emotional level, clarifying the limits of public authority and responsibility. The community can recognize a range of supportive actions (e.g., donations, volunteer work, etc.) that extend the reach of the agency and enhance community safety and the well-being of children, youth and families in the community.

## Strategy

### Master Strategic Communications Plan

All organizations engage in communications at every level. All organizations are established by and known by their communications. A public child welfare agency does not need Communications in order for the agency to communicate as communication happens naturally in organizations. The staff of public child welfare agencies—as is true for any other agency—engages in communication throughout the course of their practice with other professionals as well as with families, youth and children served and throughout the course of conducting their functions. But a public child welfare agency does need Communications to help the agency communicate more effectively—which is to communicate in a manner that supports the agency in achieving its goals. From an organizational perspective, communicating “effectively” can only be defined relative to the goals of the organization. Effective communication is communication that helps the agency achieve its goals.

The master communications plan is predicated on the agency’s overarching strategic plan. Accordingly, the work of Communications should be an outgrowth of this strategic plan and particularly the goals detailed in that plan set by the agency leadership. The goals of the master communications plan should not be determined solely by Communications but by the entire senior leadership. Communications should make sure that the goals of the agency are fully reflected in the communications plan and that agency leaders are fully aware of and invested in the plan.

The importance of Communications—as guided by the master communications plan—is readily apparent in the context of the agency’s values, purpose, mission and goals. The plan ensures that these values are articulated and that agency communications efforts can be measured, evaluated and modified.

Communications is easily pulled in many directions. Media inquiries, suggestions from other agency leaders and staff and other *ad hoc* activities can become all-consuming. Having a strategic communications plan helps ensure that an appropriate amount of time and resources are expended on communications activities designed to support the agency in attaining its important strategic goals. The strategic communications plan keeps Communications on task and agency leadership aware of Communications’ priority tasks.

This section is devoted to strategic communications planning conducted to assist the public child welfare agency achieve its goals. Not all agencies have a communications office, but all agencies have an administrative capacity that serves in a leadership role, which is exercised through a myriad of communicative actions. Accordingly, this section will refer to the communications function (Communications) as that dedicated resource within the agency administration devoted to assisting in this leadership role.

The elements of a master communications plan include:

- Agency goals that Communications helps to achieve;
- Specific outcomes that Communications can achieve;
- Activities Communications commits to implementing; and
- Measures to evaluate the effectiveness of the communications activities.

### Agency Goals

The master communications plan and supporting communications venues outline the means by which Communications and leadership will disseminate information about goals, objectives or strategies designed to achieve agency outcomes. Communications is responsible for ensuring that communications goals accurately reflect objectives set within the agency’s overarching

strategic plan. For instance, if the strategic plan articulates the goal of addressing disproportionality and treatment disparities, this goal will be fully reflected in the communications plan, with details regarding audience identification, message development, selection of communications channels, selections of approaches and venues, potential partnerships that would enhance efforts and outcomes measures. With input from leadership, Communications often prioritizes the communications goals and activities within a given year or articulated time period so as to focus resources appropriately. Goals also need to reflect achievable communications practices. The following are important considerations to include:

◆ **Ensure that Internal Communications Support the Agency's Strategic Plan.**

The success of an agency's strategic plan is dependent upon embedding its values, goals and activities into the culture of the entire agency and staff. Communications has an essential role in facilitating staff to internalize the plan and make it their own. This should be an important part of any master communications plan. Communications activities that disseminate and reinforce the strategic plan should be plentiful, continuous and multi-faceted. Activities can include traditional communications such as staff memos, staff meetings and visible office signage (posters, banners, etc.) as well more technology-driven formats such as the agency Intranet. External communications to the media and other stakeholders can also reinforce these values internally because staff members are exposed to these messages as well.

◆ **Choose Goals that are Derived from Empirical Evidence and can be Associated with Measurable Outcomes.**

Public child welfare budgets are historically stretched thin, leaving little for purposes other than service provision. It is critical, therefore, to use the funds allotted for agency communications wisely. By basing the choice of communications goals on empirical data and tracking the outcomes of communications efforts in measurable ways, Communications will be better able to claim success and justify continuing the efforts. An example of such a plan would be promoting the Family Group Decision Making (FGDM) process as an alternative to traditional agency placement protocols. FGDM has been proven to result in better outcomes across the board, reduced out-of-home placements and increased (extended) family ownership of the process. A communications goal of educating staff and other key stakeholders as well as the families engaged in this placement alternative, will forward FGDM success and increase usage. Moreover, by producing publications and supporting events that publicize the process, the entire community is made aware.

◆ **Choose Goals that are Specific.**

Because Communications is often expected to be concerned with improving the agency's image in the community, focus on particular, discrete audiences who can readily be identified and with whom direct communications is practical. For instance, if the agency believes key stakeholders are out of alignment with the agency and a survey of these stakeholders indeed determines that they hold consistent misperceptions about the agency, this evidence provides the sound basis for a goal of improving stakeholder perception. Establish a list of stakeholders who are interested in the agency's work including: advocates, judicial branch leaders, contracted service providers, foster parent groups, schools of social work and legislators. Gather e-mail addresses for individuals and create an electronic mailing list or distribution list to support regular communications from the agency. A follow-up survey can be used to measure the success of the outreach.

◆ **Pick Goals that Support the Agency Administration's Relationships with its Governing Authority and other Stakeholders.**

Agency administrators report to others who may be elected officials (Governor or County Executive) or who may sit on a board of directors. Find goals that support relationships with those authorities. Such a strategy promotes agency continuity and stability which, in turn, supports the agency in attaining its other goals. A goal of the communications plan may be to help the administration meet the expectations of those authorities regarding being kept informed of controversial developments or agency achievements.

◆ **Reduce Blind-Siding and Look for Opportunities for Key Stakeholders to Shine.**

Authorities (especially if the authorities are elected officials) may reasonably expect that they not be surprised by learning of negative events through the media. This is one reason why the agency should have a crisis communications plan. The agency also should routinely inform the governing authority of all significant media inquiries as well as efforts at proactive media contacts to highlight accomplishments. In many instances, there may be opportunities for the governing authority to join the agency in the dissemination of good news.

### ***Outcomes***

Identify outcomes that are realistic, i.e., attainable, within the context of communications activities and outcomes that can be measured.

Keeping outcomes reasonable within the scope of Communications means to promise only those things that can be delivered. For example, an agency goal may be to increase the number of licensed foster and adoptive families. While Communications is not responsible for licensing, training and conducting home studies, it can support this agency goal by working on recruitment efforts designed to increase the pool of available prospective foster and adoptive parents.

Moreover, realistic outcomes do not necessarily achieve goals outright, but may help reach objectives that promote the goal. In the example above, a realistic outcome for the communications plan might be to increase the number of people who access information regarding foster care and adoption on the agency web site. Another realistic and measurable goal may be to increase the number of people who call the agency seeking more information who say they were prompted to call after seeing information about the agency on the Internet. Both of these outcomes are measurable if the right systems are put into place.

Finally, measurable outcomes are most meaningful if baseline measurements exist or can be obtained. If an agency can tally the number of people using its web site or who call for more information and cite the Internet as the source for their information, it can measure whether communications initiatives captured in the plan are, indeed, improving those measures.

### ***Activities***

Identify activities that achieve the outcomes in the most direct way possible. Don't assume that when a communications activity - for example, a new web site or webpage - has been implemented that the intended audience has, in fact, been exposed to the communications.

Efforts to obtain good press are customary and expected of agency Communications. While such positive press campaigns can be effective in placing stories - especially when the agency is able to give journalists access to real people who illustrate effective work and programs - there are caveats. First and foremost, just getting a newspaper to publish a story has a limited impact

because the agency cannot be assured who in fact will read it. Second, public opinion surveys confirm the general public - defined as people who have no direct business or dealings with public child welfare - rarely demonstrates significant sustained interest in public child welfare work. So, trying to affect perception among people who have little or no opinion regarding public child welfare work to begin with is a daunting task.

However, positive news coverage can be used to affect perception of key stakeholders with whom the agency has built relationships—including staff, providers, foster parents, advocates and policymakers. Such engaged stakeholders do care and have opinions about public child welfare and their perceptions of the agency can be measured. If the agency compiles an e-mail address mailing list or distribution list of such stakeholders, the agency can then send these stakeholders a link to the good news story on the agency web site. Staff can get the link via internal e-mail praising the good work of their colleagues and the agency.

### ***Measures***

Maintain a running log of activities that allow easy compilation of outcome measures. For example, if an outcome is the number of news stories about foster care and adoption placed in media outlets, keep a list of these story placements that records the date and the media outlet.

## **Single-Issue Communications Plans: Why Have Them and How to Develop Them**

A single-issue communications plan offers a tool to design and execute discrete communications activities. The utilization of such single-issue plans is often the result of an agency initiative, project, awareness campaign, or planned event and should be tied to the planning document attached to that activity. The plan is a road map that sets out what the agency will say, to whom, how and when, as well as the specific individual responsible for each particular activity. With input and buy-in from agency leadership, everyone involved in the communications process has a clear understanding of what they are expected to do.

The issue that forms the subject of the plan could be an announced development of a program, an important practice or service delivery change, or other significant initiative or development that the agency wants to communicate to important stakeholders. The issue also could be a single crisis event (such as death of a child by abuse or neglect in an open case or the arrest of an agency employee for crimes related to a child). The plan, in such an instance, would flow from the agency's standing crisis communications plan.

### ***Key Messages***

Key messages are incorporated into the plan so that those involved in the communications have a set of talking points to direct what they are saying. This promotes consistency of message and clarity for what communicators should and should not say. These should be developed with great care—each word counts.

### ***Audiences***

The various audiences that the agency wants to communicate with should each receive their own consideration by the plan. Different audiences are reached through separate communications activities. For example, the agency may want to communicate a new development to several different audiences, including staff, contracted service providers and policymakers. Staff may receive communications via internal e-mail and through staff meetings. Contracted service providers may receive their communications through a central provider association and through use of electronic mailing lists. Policymakers and elected officials may receive invitations to briefings and a one-page bulletin describing the development. The plan should identify how each audience will be communicated with (meeting, letter, e-mail,

newsletter, etc.), who is responsible for carrying out the communications and when the communications should take place.

Make as few assumptions about your audience as possible. Because a development is the subject of a news story does not mean that the public has heard about it. For example, it does not follow, if a story gets published in the city's only newspaper, that everyone in the intended audience has received the message. Some people may not get the paper. Others who get the paper may not read the story. The more specific an agency can be in identifying the individuals with whom it wants to communicate and the more direct an agency can be in identifying how to reach those individuals via targeted communications venues, the greater the likelihood of success in reaching them.

Not all audiences care about all the same things. Elements of the agency's key messages may be more important to some than to others. Be strategic and stress the message points that are most important to a specific audience.

### ***Action Plan***

A detailed action plan will provide the agency a step-by-step guideline outlining who is told, what they are told, how they will be told, who tells them and when. Give careful consideration to timing. Who is told and in what order, matters. A tiered approach may be developed to assist with staging the communication. Who is included in which tier will vary depending on the reason for the single-issue communications plan. By informing those in the first tier of the salient points of the agency message immediately, the agency will be spared the embarrassing and unfortunate alternative: having the most critical audience—such as the governing authority—hear the information through the media, often based on off-the-record comments from unauthorized individuals.

### **Crisis Communications Plans**

The news is dominated by stories about things that go wrong: murders, deaths, wars and tragedies of all types make up the top news stories regardless of whether the medium is broadcast or print. Generally, the worse something is, the more attention it gets. Further, when a tragic event can be tied to a government entity in some way, the story becomes even bigger. Because tragedy is news and tragedy that can be blamed on government is, unfortunately, often deemed the most newsworthy, public child welfare agencies must be equipped with a well-conceived crisis communications plan and officials must be ready to activate it.

Crisis communications plans prepare agencies for dealing with sentinel events that can impact public confidence through concentrated and prolonged negative media coverage. While no list can be complete, examples would include: a death of a child by abuse or neglect in an open or recently closed case; a child in state care injured or sexually assaulted by a foster parent, licensed provider, or agency employee; and serious regulatory oversights or financial improprieties.

### ***Acknowledgment of the Issue***

It is important to own issues and get out in front of them. When a tragedy or other significant adverse event occurs, the worst thing a public agency can do is to not realize the newsworthiness of the event and do nothing communicatively. Public confidence is shaken when government does not recognize and acknowledge when something has gone significantly wrong. That recognition is a first step in the process toward remedying the problem and the public expects agencies to respond, investigate, acknowledge any errors and initiate remedial efforts to address any errors found. Until an agency makes an expression of acknowledgement and offers specific remedies that respond to any personnel or systems issues that underlie the

event, the story is not likely to complete its normal narrative cycle, which is the point at which a story can be expected to diminish and ultimately go away.

In addition, bad news is best received when the entity that will be held responsible for it is the messenger. Being forthcoming helps maintain public confidence as the agency demonstrates accountability, openness and responsibility. In contrast, the media and the public also are more likely to view a negative incident as being covered up if sources other than the agency bring the incident to public attention. For this reason, it is in the interest of the agency to strongly consider announcing an incident of its own accord if it anticipates the incident will reach the media. This is a difficult decision to make, but it can mitigate the effects of the incident and ultimately allow agency leadership to weather the crisis.

When the agency decides to get out in front of a story, it should do so in a way that maximizes the chances that the story will conclude quickly. That means not leaving out highly controversial elements that would give the story further legs if released to the press later. This also is very challenging and made more complicated by issues of confidentiality and staff and external stakeholder relations, but illuminating as much of the whole story as possible is better than letting it drag out in bits and pieces. The latter keeps the story alive. Also, if additional damaging information comes out later, the press, the public and officials will be more likely to ask what else is not being shared and to question the agency's veracity and response to the incident.

### ***Agency Notification***

It is important to have a notification process. A critical feature of any crisis communications plan is the existence of a process for agency administration to be notified of the sentinel event. Every employee in the agency should understand that certain events trigger the responsibility to notify the administration. This can be arranged in many ways, but having a clear policy that requires notification can be very effective in spreading awareness across the agency. Some agencies may choose to have the notification go to a risk management unit within its quality improvement function and then top administrators, including Communications, can receive information after passing through that filter.

Communications must be in the information loop because it may be the best place to assess the importance of the sentinel event for triggering the full crisis communications plan. For example, a youth running away from a residential program might trigger a notification. But unless something especially significant occurs while the youth is AWOL—such as the commission of a serious crime—the event may not warrant a crisis response. Communications, based on a judgment of the newsworthiness of the incident, should be in the best position to tell what response is dictated. The worse the incident, the bigger the story, so those staff with experience observing the media are usually in the best position to make that judgment and advise agency leaders on the possible repercussions.

Accordingly, in situations that merit a full crisis response, Communications must have ready access to others in top agency administration in order to press leadership to convene the crisis team, core members of whom are already identified and outlined in the crisis communications plan.

### ***Gather and Analyze Data***

It is important to assemble all relevant information quickly. Assessing the situation so that an appropriate response can be made is critical and this requires a quick and thorough gathering of information. On the authority of agency leadership, a crisis team should be convened, responsible for pulling together all relevant, available facts and identifying informational gaps. At a minimum, the team should consist of a top administrator responsible for the relevant program area, the leader of the agency and the person who leads Communications. Other top-

level administrators, including legal, human resources and fiscal, may be required depending upon the nature of the event and the responses that may be appropriate under the circumstances.

### ***Action Plan***

Where the situation seems likely to result in significant media coverage, an action plan can be an important guide, especially in a time when it can be expected that emotions will run high. The plan creates order in what might feel like a chaotic situation and helps maintain confidence among leadership, Communications and other involved staff.

There are many reasons to have a crisis communications plan and an action plan that are appropriately responsive to a specific event. Chief among them are to inform the agency's governing authority about any impending crisis and to gain its support and approval regarding the agency's handling of the crisis. The agency does not want the handling of the crisis to be another reason—in addition to the underlying sentinel event—for the authority to lose confidence in agency leadership. This is why performing at the highest possible level is crucial. Keeping the authority informed and satisfied that the agency leadership is acting appropriately under the circumstances is vital. In this regard, getting the authority to approve and support the response during the decision-making process is critical.

### ***Communication***

In addition to going up the chain of authority, communications likewise should flow down through the agency. During a time of crisis, staff members need to feel that they know what is going on and that leadership is being appropriately exercised. Staff members are among the most important stakeholders of the agency and the agency is best served when staff and other key stakeholders learn about the agency response to a crisis before they see and hear it on the news.

### ***Monitoring***

Monitoring coverage is just as important as keeping a log of media inquiries. Maintain a compilation of clips and tape broadcast coverage. Assess when coverage requires some level of response. It could range from a phone call to a reporter to clarify information, a request for a correction, or even a complaint to an editor. In most cases, the milder response is best under the theory that the agency will have to deal with the same reporter and media outlet in the future.

## **Disaster Communications Plan**

Public child welfare agencies need to be prepared for unexpected events, including disasters such as a flood, earthquake, epidemic, prolonged power failure, or fire that either affects the agency itself, service provider or providers in its network, or the community itself. An agency may even be called upon to assist agencies in contiguous communities with their disaster responses. Agencies should prepare and keep current a flexible Disaster Communication Plan. This plan parallels the overarching Agency Disaster Plan. The communications plan should consider: how the agency will keep lines of communication open with families, staff, providers, media, emergency management personnel and other important stakeholders; staff/volunteer coordination; and communications support for preservation of information systems and service delivery continuity. Disaster drills should be planned as part of the overarching agency disaster preparedness with Communications included as its role is a critical one.

## ***Key Processes***

The following are key processes necessary for developing and executing strategic communications through a master communications plan.

### **Determination of Goals and Key Issues**

Identify and prioritize communications goals and key issues, predicted on overarching agency goals identified in the agency strategic plan.

### **Identification of Key Audiences**

Determine and prioritize audiences: internal and external.

### **Creation of Accessible and Visible Messages**

Key messages leadership communicates are clear, widely disseminated both internally and externally and are integrated into all aspects of practice and policy throughout the agency. Messages are clear, consistent, focused, truthful and credible, culturally appropriate and reflective of public need.

### **Selection of Communicative Venues and Channels**

Identify the most effective ways to reach identified audiences.

### **Selection of Approaches, Activities, Materials and Potential Partners**

Identify the activities, events, and/or materials to be used within the communicative venues to effectively carry messages to intended audiences. Explore partnerships that broaden outreach and message leveraging.

### **Materials Development and Appropriate Pre-testing**

Determine time, budget and staffing needs for each activity including mechanisms for client and stakeholder inclusion.

### **Implementation of Plan**

Launch plan with details on all activities; an outline of steps toward completion; budget and staffing needs identified for each activity; and specific timelines for completion of each activity and key action steps along the way.

### **Evaluation and Modification**

Assess progress; determine strengths, weakness, obstacles, partner, client and stakeholder satisfaction; and, if necessary, craft new approaches to achieve goals.

## *Operations*

Every public agency has an obligation to educate proactively its stakeholders and the children, youth and families served about its role in the community and its responsibilities. An agency should be open, accessible and inclusive and operate as transparently as the law will allow. Effective communications helps build relationships and greater confidence in the agency. Trust and involvement of all segments of the community, in turn, support the agency to meet its mission.

A master communications plan details the techniques and processes Communications employs to convey key messages—aligned with agency mission, vision and values—to all public child welfare audiences and the greater community. The communications plan identifies, based on goals articulated in the agency strategic plan, the messages to be developed, the key audiences who need to hear those messages and the communications channels, approaches and venues that will be employed to reach those audiences.

This section serves as a guide to effective internal and external communications methodologies used to reach audiences, in formal and informal ways. It summarizes specific approaches and tools necessary to communicate well with youth and families and with stakeholders of the agency including: staff, media, foster and adoptive parents, elected officials and policymakers, courts, allied professionals and contracted providers. It also discusses overarching communicative approaches that reach multiple publics including the general public. Whether an agency will employ a particular methodology depends entirely on what approaches are outlined in the agency master communications plan. This section summarizes the many types of approaches that potentially could be used. The agency master communications plan will dictate the specifics of how the key audiences identified in the communications plan are to be reached.

### **Internal Communications**

Good internal communications—that which take place within the public agency—create a stronger mission-focused agency. Informed and involved staff collectively can be one of the largest groups of champions for the organization. Engaged staff, cognizant of mission, guiding principles, goals and the issues confronting the agency are in an excellent position to further the work of Communications. There are a number of ways to improve the flow of communication—from leadership to line staff and line staff to leadership—within an agency. What follows are some examples and guidelines.

#### ***Intranet***

An Intranet is an internal web site available to the staff members of the agency. In some agencies, the intranet can also be accessed by staff employed by contracted providers. A good Intranet will provide staff with tools needed to complete everyday tasks efficiently and effectively. While many of the design guidelines for developing an Internet web site should be followed, content of the Intranet should reflect that the audience is internal and not accessible by the public.

An Intranet allows the most up-to-date information, important to the staff of an agency, to be accessible to all employees and helps to ensure consistent and mission-aligned service delivery to children, youth and families.

- Policies, in particular, are critical to keep current. By including policies on the Intranet, there is one, unimpeachable source for the most current written policies.

Other information supports a high-quality work product.

- Letterhead and forms needed in the execution of job responsibilities can be made available on the Intranet. By requiring that staff access the most up-to-date templates from the site only, no outdated forms or letterhead will be used.

Centrally locating human resources information improves efficiency.

- Posting up-to-date forms related to human resources (e.g., benefit time, expense reimbursement, travel requests, technology resources requests) streamlines the processing of employee paperwork and helps to keep employees' needs met in a timely way.

Still other information keeps staff up-to-date.

- Important announcements involving specific staff members or the entire agency can be included on the home page of the Intranet site. This is a particularly effective means of communicating if the Intranet homepage appears as the default when the Internet is accessed.
- Staff directory information is helpful to have included on any Intranet site. Because of frequent changes in staff, hard copy directories are often outdated soon after they are printed.
- Agency initiatives provide a lens through which the priorities of an agency may be revealed. By including a list of current agency initiatives, staff will be kept abreast of important advances.

The Intranet is also a valuable tool to store disaster, emergency and crisis information.

- Since September 11, 2001, states and counties nationwide have developed Severe Emergency Response Plans (SERP). By including the relevant SERP on the Intranet, staff will have a quickly accessible resource during an emergency.
- Public child welfare agencies are commonly located at multiple sites in the community. Emergency procedures at different sites often vary from each other. The Intranet provides an accessible, common location for all plans needed by any staff member in the case of severe weather emergencies or man-made emergencies.
- Information about devising a "Family Safety Plan" is also a valuable inclusion on an agency Intranet site. Public child welfare agencies work 24/7 and adequate staffing is needed to protect children regardless of the breadth of a disaster. Staff members who have planned for personal needs are better able to shoulder work responsibilities during a disaster or emergency.

An Intranet can also include:

- Employee Blog

Designated staff member(s) might use an Intranet-based employee blog to inform, foster camaraderie and recognize achievements.

- Message Board

Staff members can post questions and answers or exchange information with one another. It also allows seasoned staff to share work experiences with newer staff and offers staff support.

- Chat with the Director at prescheduled times to facilitate two-way communications

Staff can ask the director questions in a more informal venue. It helps the director remain mindful of the needs and concerns of line staff, encourages engagement and increases the understanding of pressing issues at all levels within the organization.

- Online Training Sessions

Allow staff to participate in training sessions off-site (away from training location, including at desk), either lead by instructor (group participates training at a set time and pace) or self guided (staff individually participate at own time and pace).

- Employee Newsletter

Periodic publication that keeps staff informed with current events, announcements and important information.

- Web-Based Applications

Web-based applications can help an agency run smoother by allowing staff to submit work-related and Human Resources documents directly from their computers, both on- and off-site.

- E-mails—Distribution Lists and Electronic Mailing Lists

Hosting an Intranet can be done internally, on servers only accessible through an agency's network, or externally, through a hosting provider using password protection. Before developing and launching an Intranet site, consideration should be given regarding the availability of needed support from an agency's Information Technology or Computer Department to keep it current. An outdated Intranet site can be worse than no Intranet site at all.

### ***E-mail***

E-mail is an easy, free and effective tool to communicate a message to all or selected employees across the agency. Care should be given to the accuracy and quantity of messages sent to staff through e-mail. Too often, people are bombarded with e-mails that do not pertain to their job or are just overwhelmed by the number of e-mails in their inbox. Coding to indicate levels-of-importance for e-mail, for instance 'red' being 'must read', as well as creating targeted distribution lists, will help employees know to take the receipt of a mass e-mail seriously. Staff members should be encouraged to use standard e-mail features such as an 'out of office' message and an e-mail signature providing alternative contact information, including address and telephone number.

### ***Newsletter***

Publishing a periodic agency newsletter is an important way to keep staff—as the primary audience—and external stakeholders informed about what is happening within an agency. New initiatives, noteworthy agency achievements, established programs and practical information to assist staff in accomplishing their jobs are all topics that can be included. It is important to publish regularly and to request the input of staff for article ideas. In so doing, staff is more engaged in the process and more likely to read the document frequently. By posting a link to the newsletter on the agency's web site, all interested individuals will have access to the information while the costs of printing and impact on the environment will be significantly reduced.

## ***Telephone Messages***

Despite its relative low-tech nature, the telephone remains a useful communications tool. It can be an effective way to communicate to staff who do not have access to e-mail or when employees are not at work. Most phone systems allow users to access voicemail remotely, meaning it can be accessed from any phone. In addition, some phone systems have the feature to broadcast a phone message to all employees. For example, if the office is closed due to inclement weather, employees can check for closure on their voicemail prior to coming to work.

Personal voicemail greetings should note when a staff member is on vacation or out of the office for any length of time. The message should include alternate contact information. Communications should ensure that an alternate contact for media is also included in a telephone message.

## ***Brown Bag Lunches***

Organized brown bag lunch gatherings offer not only time to meet and talk with colleagues but can be used to convey messages informally to employees about the agency, for administration to hear opinions from staff or as a continuing education tool.

## ***Agency in the News***

Keeping staff informed when an agency receives media attention helps them stay connected and knowledgeable about issues administration is either dealing with or promoting. Staff members who feel valued and part of a team are more likely to defend an agency and remain loyal. Reports of positive stories can be sent on a regular basis, usually by e-mail with links to the articles. If Communications is aware that coverage of a proactive effort, such as an award or a new initiative, will be featured, information about the publication date or air date and time can be sent to staff in advance. If Communications is knowledgeable about an upcoming negative story, an informational e-mail about the agency's position on the content can provide staff with an alternative view to the media coverage. Public child welfare is fraught with grey areas and while caseworkers work hard to make good decisions, sometimes, disgruntled individuals take complaints to the media. An agency's proactive media efforts may mitigate damage or even prevent these situations from resulting in a news story. Regardless, staff members need to know the agency is supporting them by responding swiftly and appropriately.

## ***Media Education for Staff***

Staff members need to understand why communication with the public through the media is critical to the success of the agency. They also need to know how to recognize situations that should be reported up the line to Communications. If staff members are expected to do interviews, they need to be trained to do it well and comfortably. If invited, journalists may even agree to meet with staff to explain the nature of their business and answer questions.

## External Communications: Strategies to Reach Specific Audiences

External communications methodologies—or those that are established between the agency and the children, youth and families served as well as between the agency and its external stakeholders—are critically important as well. Detailed below are some specific strategies and approaches to establish good lines of communications with those served and with stakeholders including media, foster and adoptive parents, policymakers, the courts, allied professionals and contracted providers. Overarching communicative approaches—those reaching the general public and multiple public child welfare audiences—follow.

### *Families and Youth Served*

Public child welfare agencies have an obligation to establish effective, empowering, two-way communications with the families and youth who are receiving public child welfare services. The field recognizes the value of inclusive and respectful practices with these families and youth. It is important for all practices, service delivery and communications to be easily understood, fully explained and as transparent as possible. Youth and families who are engaged in the public child welfare system need to be heard and be active participants in decision-making. They also need to know that their input, questions, concerns and especially complaints about service delivery are recognized, valued and addressed.

Youth and families are more apt to actively participate in planning and decision-making, be open to assistance and share responsibility in outcomes, if they feel informed. Anxiety and distrust can be alleviated by effectively educating children, youth and families about what to expect and who does what in the system—the policies, practices, legal requirements and timelines.

As much as possible, families and youth should be consulted before developing educational and communications pieces for and about them. They are in the best position to guide the crafting of what messages are important to them and how best to deliver these messages. In addition, through the use of individual interviews, or, where a larger sample or quick turn-around is needed, focus groups, youth and families can provide valuable feedback about the effectiveness of draft communications pieces. Consideration should be given to offering incentives to participate in focus groups, as active participation may require a considerable time commitment. Additionally, such input-gathering sessions should be scheduled at times and in locations that are convenient to the families and youth surveyed.

Written materials for those served should employ good communications standards that would be recommended for any audience: the use of plain language and short sentence structure and the avoidance of jargon. Tone is just as important as readability. Just as more effective case practices are strengths-based rather than deficits-based messages should focus on benefits rather than be couched in punitive or fear-engendering terms. And since illiteracy might be an issue with some individuals, important information may need to be relayed orally as well as in written form.

Racial, ethnic and cultural perception should be taken into account in both oral and written communication. Materials should be developed with input from families and youth to eliminate biases and stereotypes. Written materials may need to be translated into other languages and translators may need to be made available to assist with oral communications. Sensitivity should also be given to those with physical and cognitive disabilities, remembering that agencies need to be compliant with Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) requirements.

While most communications with families and youth take place face-to-face during service delivery and therefore fall outside of Communications, much can be done to improve the quality of these interactions. Professional trainings can improve communications competencies of line staff and employees who interact directly with families and youth. Communications

might also be engaged to review drafts of 'boilerplate' written materials destined for families and youth. For example, standard letters to families, notices of hearings and other such pieces are rarely developed by Communications and yet could benefit from a review so that the pieces are understandable, culturally accessible and are clearly written. In addition, Communications may be able to assist in identifying creative outreach strategies designed to engage families and youth reluctant to participate. Letters are one of the least effective ways to engage youth and families involved in public child welfare. More creative ways can be devised by linking to community events and trusted non-traditional communications venues such as churches, recreation venues and retail establishments.

Families and youth who volunteer to interact with the media on behalf of the agency need to be prepared by Communications for such encounters. The agency must ensure these interviews are done with full and informed consent. Likewise, media need to be sensitized to parameters that may need to be set around such interviews, either by the agency or those interviewed.

#### ◆ **Education about Rights and Responsibilities**

Given how difficult the public child welfare system is to understand - let alone navigate - serious consideration should be given to developing a specific educational publication for families served. Likewise, a separate piece could be developed for youth under the care of the agency. Each publication should provide clear information about the agency, the courts and the larger child-and-family-serving system. It should also outline respective responsibilities of 'all parties' and the rights of children, youth and families served. Care should be given to develop such pieces in collaboration with families, youth and stakeholders—asking for their input prior to draft development and holding focus groups to refine those drafts. It is equally important to survey families and youth prior to reprint and to incorporate suggestions for improvement. A periodic review by the law department is important so that the publication stays abreast of changes in public child welfare law. Furthermore, involving stakeholders in the development process will increase the likelihood that they will assist in distributing such a publication and possibly even underwriting the costs of printing. A number of county and state agencies across the country have developed such 'rights pieces.'

#### ◆ **Complaint/Concern Mechanism**

It is important for an agency to establish a simple mechanism for youth and families to communicate with the agency to voice their concerns, questions or complaints about services provided, inquire about grievance procedures or request dispute resolution. At a minimum, explicit information in the form of written material should be given to all families and youth, outlining 'chains of command' within the organization, contact information for their caseworker and supervisory staff and grievance procedures for agency oversight bodies. The establishment of a well-advertised complaint-resolution telephone line ('Director's Action Line') or Ombudsman should also be considered.

While such complaint mechanisms clearly benefit families and youth, they also assist the agency by pinpointing problem areas and identifying workers or units that need additional training. Aggregate findings can be used ultimately to refine operations. In addition, worker compliance with agency policies, procedures and the law are reinforced with such formal mechanisms in place.

#### ◆ **Strategies for Youth**

Agencies may want to develop specific strategies to engage youth and improve communications efforts with them.

As with adults involved with public child welfare, youth want to feel included and respected. They need affirmation that their input is incorporated. As important individuals in the public child welfare system, their feedback should be given serious consideration and used to make improvements in services. Ways to involve youth include engaging them through focus groups, web sites, online/e-mail surveys and direct mailings. Focus groups can be conducted at places where youth receive services, such as group homes or after school groups, as well as other sites such as the YMCA/YWCA and the Boys and Girls Club.

It is important that youth receiving services are aware of their rights and understand the proper mechanism for making complaints.

Other resources valuable to youth may be accessed best through a web site. These include but are not limited to: education and scholarship information, information about housing, employment and transportation and social networking opportunities. Social networking sites and other e-based communications channels allow youth living outside of the home, including those in foster care, to remain connected with their biological family, including siblings, if appropriate and desired. Youth may value support from other youth involved in public child welfare and benefit from support groups and related web sites.

### ***Foster and Adoptive Parents***

Much of the success of a public child welfare agency relies upon the availability of a culturally diverse pool of high quality, responsible adults who are willing and able to act as temporary or permanent parents for children. Maintaining open and candid communications with foster and adoptive parents benefits the agency in many ways. Two are paramount. First, keeping them apprised of agency news and being responsive to their needs, concerns and complaints mitigates frustration and improves the likelihood that these individuals will continue to offer their homes and families as refuge for children. Second, this group is uniquely qualified to weigh in on any communications strategy, including publications and recruitment campaigns, targeted to prospective foster and adoptive parents. Signs of appreciation for foster parents such as personalized certificates signed by the agency Director, gift bags or recognition events are suggested depending on available funding. Adoptive parents may be thanked by providing the adoptive child with a keepsake associated with their adoption. These thank-you efforts sometimes can be leveraged through relationships built with other agency stakeholders.

### ***Broadcast and Print Media***

While acknowledging the growing preference for new electronic-based media options, traditional news media—radio, television and print—are still extremely important to communications in public child welfare. Mass media are commonly the only way many individuals in the general public ever learn anything about the public child welfare system. And while others such as advisory board members, policymakers, judges, foster parents, professionals in other child and family-serving organizations and law enforcement officials may have first-hand experience with an agency, they are nonetheless influenced by the media as well. Knowing that media coverage will inevitably range from positive to negative and since negative media coverage can diminish public confidence in an agency, it is important to work to limit the amount of purely negative coverage an agency receives. Establishing good media relations proactively will greatly improve an agency's chances of receiving fair media coverage and therefore influence the public's view of the agency in a positive way.

A public child welfare agency has an ethical responsibility to protect the confidentiality of the children, youth and families involved, as well as to inform the media (and therefore public) honestly about a situation. This requires maintaining a careful balance between these often divergent interests.

Below are recommended practices for Communications in an agency.

◆ **Importance of a Written News-Media Policy**

A Director-sanctioned, written, news-media policy outlines who may respond as an agency spokesperson and what specific information can be relayed during a media inquiry. Every public child welfare agency, no matter how small, should have such a policy. All staff members should be familiar with it. The policy should also outline the obligation to report “critical issues” up the line so Communications is quickly apprized of issues. The absence of such a policy leads to confusion and inconsistent responses to media inquiries. It also leaves staff members feeling unsupported and may result in inaccurate and/or negative media coverage. Confidentiality laws and other laws preventing the sharing of information must be taken into consideration when creating this policy.

◆ **Confidentiality and the Media**

Confidentiality law is a reality to which public child welfare agencies must comply. Ironically, despite the fact that media outlets rely heavily on the concept of confidential sources to do their job effectively, they are often less than enthusiastic supporters of confidentiality when it keeps them from getting the details they want about a situation. Since it is nearly inevitable that a situation will arise for which confidentiality will be a real concern, it is strongly suggested that anyone who deals directly with the media be well-versed in what information can and cannot be relayed to the media. Using the phrase “no comment” generally heightens the media’s desire for information. By speaking instead in hypothetical terms or in the context of general agency practice or policy, the media is more likely to accept an inability to provide specifics.

An agency has the responsibility to communicate ethically and to correct any misinformed reporters about errors concerning agency policy and practice. On the other hand, correcting errors about case-specific information is not permissible under many confidentiality laws. Again, it is critical that all individuals authorized to speak directly with the media are well-versed in and adhere to the particulars of their state confidentiality laws. The agency law department should be able to assist with these competencies.

◆ **Standard Media Communications Tools and Techniques**

Planning proactively for interaction with the media, by developing media communications tools, positions the agency to be organized and well prepared to interact more confidently with the media.

*Essential Communications Tools Needed*

- **Communications Plans: Master, Crisis and Disaster**
- **Media Policy standardizes all communications with the news media**
  - Formalized internal and external reporting chain
  - Confidentiality requirements
  - Crisis response (tied to Crisis Plan)
  - Templates and mastheads for News Releases and Requests for Coverage
- **Media information request tracking document**
- **Media outlet contact information (saved as an electronic spread sheet, if possible, for easier updates)**
  - Media outlet general phone and fax numbers and e-mail and street addresses

- Reporter-specific (if specialized by topic) phone and fax numbers and e-mail address
- **Archive of media coverage**
  - Physical location with copies of articles and transcripts of television/radio coverage maintained on site or through an external service
  - On-line record of positive and/or significant coverage made available on the agency web site
- **Prepared information sheets that include commonly requested information**
  - Examples include statistics, definitions, services provided, agency history, practices and procedures.
  - It is preferable to place this information on the agency web site.
- **Press kit**
  - Standard would include general agency information
    - Basic statistics, (number of persons served, budget, services provided, etc.)
    - History of agency
    - Brochures of interest
    - Business card of agency's Communications spokesperson
  - Extra inclusions
    - Statistics related to the reason for the press conference
    - History of the specific event or initiative
    - News Release about the reason for the press conference

Agencies can avail themselves of standard techniques to engage media proactively. Some techniques, such as press conferences, letters to the editor, Op Ed pieces and visits to an editorial board can be invaluable during a crisis as well.

### ***Techniques to Reach Media***

- **Issue a News Release to a broad range of media outlets, about a topic of significance, i.e., newsworthy, to maximize coverage of a story**
  - Include engaging text to describe who, what, why, when and where
  - Should be written so reporters can lift content and place directly into print
  - Include one or two contacts with phone numbers
  - Maintain agency branding
- **Issue a Request for Coverage (RFC) to persuade media outlets to send a reporter to a press conference or other event**
  - Include very basic information written in bullet format - who, what, when, where and why
  - Include contact person and phone numbers (including cell phone)
  - Send two to three days before event
  - Maintain agency branding
  - Follow-up on the morning of event with a phone call to most responsive media outlets

- **Pitch a Story to a Specific Media Outlet**

While this is not always productive, it is a great way to keep the lines of communication open. When selecting the specific media outlet, consider its past interest in the given topic. Carefully consider whether other outlets may consider this exclusivity unfair treatment. Spread the good news around when possible.

- **Call a Press Conference as an efficient way to announce—in one time and in one venue—Detailed Information of Particular Interest to the community**

It allows reporters to ask clarifying questions and the agency to be clear about its intent. It is best to provide as much lead time as possible so interested media outlets can arrange for coverage.

- **Write a well-crafted, timely, Letter to the Editor**

This is a proven method of relaying the agency's point of view to the general public. Letters generally carry more credibility if signed by persons in authority, advocates, or by someone served by the agency. Communications may be called upon to ghost-write or edit the actual letter for the Director, an Advisory Board member or other external stakeholder. Check the media outlet's submission requirements.

- **Submit an Op-Ed Piece**

These offer a more expanded, comprehensive opportunity to highlight a topic of importance to public child welfare. These also may be ghost-written for the Director or external stakeholder by Communications. Op-Ed pieces should be tied to a significant local, state or national event and submittals are guided by media outlet requirements.

- **Visit an Editorial Board**

When done judiciously, a visit can make a lasting impression, especially when agency representatives are accompanied by their stakeholders.

- ◆ **Resources for Media Relations**

There are many excellent resources available to guide proactive, reactive and crisis media relations. Some are global in their approach and others written for agencies with particular needs such as those working within rural areas.

- ◆ **Proactive Measures**

Proactive measures that create mutual respect between the agency and media outlets are at the heart of effective media relations. By instituting a practice of courting the media and reaching out with educational opportunities or requests to cover positive events, an agency is more likely to maintain this positive rapport when a negative issue arises. Such voluntary engagement with the media establishes a greater comfort level for staff dealing with media inquiries as well. Media competence is experiential and Communications can increase these competencies through its own proactive work with the media.

***Establish Positive Relationships with Media Outlets***

Proactive measures depend on establishing positive relationships with individuals who represent the major and minor media outlets in the local community and beyond.

Acquainting the Executive Director, Communications and others in the agency's administrative staff with local editors and reporters is an important first step in establishing a lasting positive relationship. Putting a face and voice to a name increases credibility and rapport. This can be done during a business lunch, where the main objective is to get to know each other, a meeting at the newspaper or broadcast station, or a visit and tour of the agency by the journalists or even the editor

Another way to foster respect with the media outlets is to show the reporter appreciation when a story is written accurately and fairly and shows insight into the agency or public child welfare issues. Encourage continued interest by letting the reporter know well in advance about possible follow-up stories.

Learning how reporters and editors do their jobs can foster rapport. Ask to spend a day or half-day with a reporter or in the newsroom. This will provide insight into how the news is produced and the problems journalists face. It will also establish more personal contacts and may demonstrate to the media that the agency wants to foster an effective relationship.

If time permits, Communications should meet regularly with reporters and editors. These meetings can be formal or informal, always with the intent of keeping the media abreast of the issues the agency is facing. This can also be done with strategic visits to the media outlet's editorial board.

### ***Maintain Relationships with the Media***

The media are clearly key and highly influential stakeholders in an agency's efforts to protect children from abuse and neglect. Since other agency stakeholders and those served by the agency are attentive to the way the media reports on the agency, it is vitally important to maintain a positive relationship with media outlets. Good media coverage can do much to assist an agency in building a positive reputation in the community.

Maintaining a positive, ongoing relationship with the media depends on several important elements:

- **Keep Reporters Informed**

Keep reporters included in the communications loop on an ongoing basis. Information can be dispensed at regular intervals or on an as-need basis, but it must be newsworthy. Do not be discouraged that what may seem critically important to the public child welfare agency may be less so for the media. This may be due to a preponderance of competing news on that particular day. Nevertheless, maintain the flow of information and learn to discriminate between what is deemed newsworthy by media and what goes uncovered. Reporters are generally quite frank about this issue.

In addition to garnering agency coverage, such healthy interaction with media contacts may result in media turning to the agency for public child welfare expertise when a national or international situation benefits from a local opinion or perspective.

It is important to educate reporters early on about any confidentiality law limitations. Initial proactive education about any impediments to the disclosure of information will later prevent a reporter investigating a situation from concluding an agency is stonewalling or engaged in a cover-up.

- **Develop Written Materials**

It is helpful to develop written materials that explain, without using jargon, important aspects of public child welfare law, policies, practices and procedures. These materials should be available to send to the media and if possible, placed on the agency web site so as to maximize their utility and educational reach. Begin with topics that capture repeated media attention, (e.g., the definition of dependency, requirements to be a foster or adoptive parent, the definition of child abuse, what happens when a report of abuse is received by the agency). These materials serve as effective background pieces for media inquiries and will assist Communications to quickly and accurately respond. As this agency-developed information is often used by reporters with few changes, the pieces can help ensure not only that media accounts are accurate but are nuanced and culturally sensitive to those served as well.

- **Develop Graphics to Clearly Explain Statistics**

One way that public child welfare agencies have to gauge their success is through detailed data collection and analysis. Analysis of the data collected can inform administrators, policymakers and the public about how well the goals of protecting children and providing them safe and permanent homes are being accomplished. The challenge for public child welfare agencies is making this information available to the general public in a meaningful and accessible way.

The best presentations of data are comparative graphs; such as comparing data from years past to the current year, the local agency to an agency of similar demographics, children in the local foster care system to children in the local general population. In this way, the information will have meaning that goes beyond statistics. It will allow those reviewing an opportunity to gauge the relative success of the public child welfare system. In addition, by going beyond simple comparisons and taking the next step toward analysis, the public can be educated about the complexity of public child welfare.

A cautionary note: While graphs can be made more appealing by using multiple colors to designate the various data, many in the general public do not have access to color printers. Care should be taken to add texture to the graphs as well so that the lines, bars or wedges are distinguishable in gray scale as well.

### ***Know the Local Media Market***

Every media outlet reaches a different audience and most keep an excellent demographic profile of the people who read, watch or listen to them. Once that is known by the agency, targeting a message to a specific demographic group is easier. Pay special attention to niche newspapers and radio stations—such as those appealing to a particular age group, minority or ethnicity. These niche media outlets are often more interested in positive news stories than larger ones. If your community has a newspaper targeted towards African Americans for instance and your foster parent of the year is African American, that paper might be extremely interested in covering this award through a feature. Likewise, if your award winner lives in a particular neighborhood covered by a local paper, take advantage of the paper's focus.

Learn about the roles and responsibilities of those in a media agency as well. For instance, know the person who is responsible for assigning a story to a reporter. These roles could vary depending on the size and area of the outlet.

## ◆ Reactive Measures

Reactive communications includes all interactions with media that the agency does not initiate proactively. Most media requests are connected to an incident in the community such as underage children left alone at home or an abandoned baby. Some, however, are rooted in a media outlet's interest in researching a topic of particular interest to the community. If Communications follows the suggestion of proactive media relations, in most instances, the agency will be prepared for these inquiries. By preparing written materials in advance and setting up good communication channels, sources of agency information will be readily accessible. Communications will also have established relationships and feel more comfortable handling uninitiated calls from reporters. Sometimes, however, advanced preparation will fall short of what is needed. Some situations will tax even the most prepared agency.

Children and families involved in the public child welfare system are strictly protected by confidentiality laws, which vary from state to state. Unfortunately, media curiosity generally increases as the legality of disclosure decreases. The balancing act of providing media with enough detail to satisfy their needs, while maintaining confidentiality puts Communications in a delicate position. Some suggestions to walk this thin line:

- **Never lie or attempt to lie.**

Nothing is improved by offering a lie. Reporters and the public deserve respect and offering untruths undermines that respect and confidence in the agency. If an answer is not known, say so. Acknowledge the situation has not yet been completely investigated. Offer assurances that, as information becomes available, to the extent that it legally can be revealed, it will. If Communications has built a relationship with reporters, these assurances will carry weight.

- **Be reliable and follow up with reporters.**

Reporters have a job to do and tight deadlines to meet. Good-faith efforts go a long way in keeping media outlets open-minded in situations that could otherwise be easily enflamed. Keep promises to reply in a timely manner and with valid information.

- **Do not use "No comment."**

Nothing connotes a cover-up quicker than using the phrase, "no comment." Instead, comply with confidentiality laws by speaking in hypothetical terms rather than specifics and by discussing what typically happens in such situations according to established agency policy and practice. For instance, a situation like an abandoned baby will capture the hearts and attention of the public. Generally much can be revealed about what the agency typically does under such circumstances. It is an opportunity to educate the public about mission and operations. It is also an opportunity to ask the public to consider fostering or adopting. Stories can be tagged with relevant agency contact information.

## ◆ Investigative Reporting

Less taxing in terms of immediacy but more so in terms of time required is responding to the needs of an investigative reporter. Investigative reporting results in an in-depth story that involves many sources, often including the use of public records, requested via "Right to Know" laws. The agency law department will need to outline to Communications how to handle the request of public documents. Sometimes redaction (elimination) of case-specific information may be required when documents contain confidential information. An investigative report could take days, weeks or, in the case of print media, even months to complete. The press often presents the results of an

investigative report in a series beginning with a piece which identifies the problem followed by additional installments which provide faces and angles to the story. It is important to work closely with these reporters as the investigation proceeds and correct misinterpretations so as to help influence agency-favorable outcomes.

Beware of inquiries in advance of "Sweeps Weeks". During these times the media is often searching for a sensationalized story on which to capitalize.

#### ◆ **Crisis Communication**

It is the nature of public child welfare that crises will happen and the agency will find itself under public scrutiny or even attack. Under such taxing circumstances, Communications and agency leadership should employ the Crisis Communications Plan it had developed for such a circumstance. Public confidence and agency credibility often balance on the response made by the agency. While Communications is often consumed with handling media responses, other stakeholders should not be ignored by the agency. They, too, are keenly interested in whatever situation has come to light and may need targeted messages throughout the continuum of the crisis and into the post crisis phase.

##### • **Initial Response**

When a crisis occurs, there is often an initial lack of concrete, verifiable information and agency leadership is scrambling to piece all of the details together. Reporters arrive on the scene or contact the public child welfare agency directly, often with questions at the ready. It is in these times that the value of proactive media relations is clear. While scoops and deadlines will always push reporters to want to accelerate or even undermine the measured release of information, mutual respect fostered in the past will, in most circumstances, permit an agency to reply initially in all candor, "We're aware of the situation. We are looking into it and addressing it. More information will be available soon." As an added offering, while the agency investigates the incident and formulates a proper response that weighs confidentiality, the agency could provide the media with general background information prepared in advance about the overall issue.

##### • **Mid-Crisis Briefings**

Communications should frequently update media during a crisis. This can be done via press conference, issuance of a statement or by forwarding up-to-the-minute fact sheets to the media. This means of communication is preferable because it provides consistent information to all media outlets. Dedicated answering machines with up-to-the-minute reports and announcements are also an option. A web site with restricted-access pages that can be quickly updated could also be used to convey new information as it becomes available. It is important for the public to know the agency is responsive and credible and that the information relayed is trustworthy and accurate.

##### • **Stakeholder Involvement**

Because the publicity around a crisis may be prolonged, taking a cyclical path with multiple peaks and ebbs, it is often helpful to extend a request to specific agency stakeholders for their concrete support to mitigate the situation. Clarifying letters to the editor in support of the agency and its practices are particularly helpful, adding a reasonable perspective to the controversy. These are particularly meaningful when written by a prominent proponent of public child welfare (e.g., a member of the advisory board or an advocacy group). Even those letters not written specifically

about the crisis issue, but relaying insights into the breadth and scope of the agency's work, can act to diffuse a heated situation.

Stakeholders and youth and families served are less likely to add fuel to the controversial fire if they have a history of engagement and positive involvement with the agency. They may not come out in obvious support of the agency in a time of increased scrutiny, but neither will they add to it.

- **Post-Crisis**

Follow-up with the media, stakeholders and the community after the crisis has been resolved. If there was a policy change or a strengthening of operations as a result of the situation, share the details of that change with the media. Involve the community directly, if appropriate, as well. For instance, if a tragedy occurred in a specific neighborhood, such as in public housing, the agency can hold a town meeting there to relay remedial measures and ask for feedback.

### ***Elected Officials and Policymakers***

Elected officials and public policymakers play a critical role in the public child welfare system. They hold power over the agency and create policies that affect children and families for years. While agencies work with the best of intentions to reduce the number of children in foster care and improve their outcomes while in care, the effects of out-dated public policies, under-funded systems and over-worked employees can undermine best efforts. Effective work cannot be done without the support of political leadership.

Depending on how a particular system is administered, policies might be enacted at either a local, state or federal level. It is important to keep lines of communication open between the agency and elected officials and lawmakers at all levels. These conversations, when conducted with clear intentions and clear language, are likely to lead to good relationships and effective policies for children and youth in foster care. Public child welfare agencies can and should work alongside policymakers to guide policies through practice by communicating their needs effectively.

Communications can assist with educating and enhancing communications with elected officials and policymakers by:

- Establishing personal contact
- Educating elected officials about programs and populations through briefings
- Including the staff of elected officials on newsletters and e-mail distribution lists or electronic mailing lists
- Sharing talking points and messaging with political allies
- Assisting with constituent concerns regarding public child welfare

### ***Courts***

For the sake of the children and families involved, the public child welfare agency and the associated court system that oversees dependency cases need to be aligned. Each shares the same goals: to keep children and youth safe and to secure safe, permanent homes for children. In addition, since research indicates that children exposed to abuse and neglect are at an increased risk of being arrested as juveniles for a delinquent act, the court that oversees such offenses also needs to be included in a public child welfare communications plan.

Open and candid communications between the courts and the public child welfare agency serves two important purposes. Firstly, when responding to media inquiries, it is helpful to have a general knowledge of how the judicial branch of government operates - their constraints

and responsibilities. This allows the agency spokesperson to be more complete in their responses. Secondly, if the judicial system and the public child welfare system have a broad understanding of the other's role and responsibilities, both are better able to work together to achieve their goals, resulting in better service coordination and better outcomes for children, youth and families involved. Communications can assist to strengthen these relationships by:

- Establishing personal contact
  - Encourage public child welfare staff to get to know their peers in the court
  - Invite court personnel to public child welfare staff meetings
  - Set up informal lunch dates
- Providing the courts with brochures and other written materials about public child welfare
- Collaborating with the courts on awareness-building events such as National Adoption Day
- Including court staff and judges on newsletter distribution lists or electronic mailing lists
- Acting as a resource for court staff and judges

### ***Allied Professionals***

Allied professions, both public and private, include other human services entities such as behavioral health providers, schools, law enforcement and medical care professions. Since there is an overlap with public child welfare in terms of population served, it is clear to see why communications between and among allied professionals and the public child welfare system is so important. In fact, many allied professionals are considered mandated reporters of child abuse and neglect as a matter of law.

Targeted communications with allied professionals can assist with enhancing relationships and facilitating greater understanding of the public child welfare agency's mandated role as protector of children, as well as the agency's responsibilities, policies and practices. The development of e-mail distribution lists or offering of electronic mailing lists will assist in sending targeted messages or educational pieces about the agency (including an internal or external newsletter) to such professionals. As previously stated, such messages should be sent judiciously and strategically so as not to inundate the recipient. A change in the mandated reporter law, for instance, could be accurately summarized on the agency web site, with applicable citations to the law and the link e-mailed to allied professionals in addition to the agency's own staff, provider network, media and other relevant stakeholders.

Communications is often in a position to gauge "the correctness of the perception of the public" in media pieces and correct the *misperceptions* of allied professionals. An agency, through Communications, may consider reaching out to an allied group and building better lines of (cross) education and communications if media accounts consistently suggest a disconnect exists. For instance, police, uninformed about agency and/or court practices, may attribute a child's return home from shelter to an inadequate supply of foster homes and thereby provide inaccurate information through the media to the public. Increased knowledge of operations often corrects such potentially damaging perceptions.

Some public-serving organizations such as libraries can greatly assist in furthering the disseminating capacity of agency information, publications and prevention messages. In addition, they are often amenable to holding agency public meetings at their facilities.

Well-engaged allied professionals may also assist an agency in the throes of a media crisis by either defending the agency or bringing a more reasonable discourse to the coverage. Even if no defense is offered, such professionals are generally less likely to contribute to the media negativism by further criticizing a beleaguered agency if good lines of communication already exist.

## ***Contracted Providers***

Contracted providers often take the role of the agency-in-the-field. They may have their own name and their own mission, but they are nonetheless representative of the public child welfare agency and its work in the community. Since private providers are under contract to deliver essential services to children, youth or families, care should be given to establishing good lines of formal communications between the agency and provider.

While such communication often occurs between leadership of both entities, Communications can assist with educating contracted providers and staff members about the agency's mission, guiding principles, goals for the year and new initiatives. Provider distribution lists can be developed to send regular messages to provider leadership who, in turn, can forward them throughout their organization. Often, agency all-staff e-mail messages are relevant to providers as well. Likewise, an agency newsletter can be distributed to providers. Giving staff of contracted provider agencies access to the public child welfare agency's Intranet is another means to keep all those in service to children, youth and families on the same page.

Not only is it important to get information to provider agencies, it is also important to get feedback *from* provider agencies. Communications may consider organizing an annual (or more frequent) Provider Forum to facilitate a collective dialog with agency leadership. Such forums also serve to encourage relationship-building and collaboration among providers. Forums may uncover disconnects and offer creative solutions toward remedying communications issues. For instance, large agencies may consider establishing a dedicated staff member with expertise in local resources, to assist provider staff with identifying available agency resources for families. Surveys are an effective way to gauge provider alignment with agency mission, guiding principles and goals. These can be done through the agency web site and with anonymous participation.

Providers also can be encouraged to extend the brand of the agency via an affiliation and funding acknowledgement on their literature and web site. This serves to broaden the community's understanding of the breadth of agency work and, to a degree, permits the agency to leverage goodwill established by these providers, since they may be viewed in a more positive, family-strengthening, or community-enhancing way than the agency itself.

## **Communications Venues, Tools and Approaches**

In today's world of advanced technology, it is easier than ever to promote a message on a national—or even worldwide—level. Overarching communications tools such as web sites, blogs, electronic bulletin boards, Wikipedia, etc., allow anyone access to a worldwide audience. Unfortunately, these same communications tools often bombard people with an excess of news and information on a daily basis. Using these tools appropriately, especially a web site, can be of great benefit to the agency.

Other overarching methods include educating the public through publications, electronic mailing lists and by awareness and recruitment campaigns; proactively reaching out to the public with town meetings and through a Speakers' Bureau; and by channeling community largesse and encouraging personal public engagement with the agency through volunteerism.

### ***Agency Web Site***

An agency web site is one of the most important communication tools available—it is affordable, easily updated and available to all publics at all times. By using the tool properly, an agency can run more efficiently by eliminating many simple information-seeking phone calls. The size and intricacy of a web site is determined by the size and capabilities of an agency. Minimally, it is suggested that a web site contain basic information, such as contacts and services. A smaller agency may not have a dedicated webmaster and this role may be filled by

someone capable of making basic updates. The web site needs to be planned accordingly, using software a non-designer/developer will be able to use easily, such as a Content Management System. It is important that Communications be involved in, if not responsible for, the content of the agency web site.

Updating the web site is essential—outdated information will be useless and can be damaging to an agency. An assigned person can make regularly scheduled reviews of the site and contact subject matter experts to assist with updates as needed.

Importantly, an agency's web site should include a disclaimer noting that child abuse reports will not be accepted through a site via e-mail. An agency may want to consult its law department to ensure the disclaimer's wording properly conveys this message so as to protect an agency if an allegation is improperly made through the site. This message should include the agency's child abuse reporting hotline.

When creating a web site it is essential to consider the following:

- **Staff**
  - Subject matter experts to help create content
  - Webmaster (or dedicated staff member) to create and update web site
- **Hosting**
  - In-house (in cooperation with information technology/computer department)
  - Hosting service (there are many services available locally and web-based, ranging from basic hosting to full design)
- **Domain name**
  - Should be simple, easy to remember, relate to agency
  - Availability issues
- **Audience**
  - A web site for a public child welfare agency will serve various audiences
    - Families and youth served
    - General public
    - Media
    - Foster and adoptive parents
    - Policymakers
    - Staff
    - Contracted providers
    - Allied professionals
  - Some sections may specifically address one audience, such as a section for contracted providers with forms and manuals, or a section for youth.
- **Software**
  - Web design software
  - Content Management System (CMS) - a system that allows a non-designer/developer to make updates.

## ◆ **Web Site Planning and Development**

The first step in developing a web site is good planning. Subject matter experts, youth and families served, staff and contracted providers should be consulted in this step and every subsequent construction step. This can be achieved through online and/or e-mail surveys, focus groups and interviews. Surveying key audiences allows the agency to determine the needs to be fulfilled by the web site. Periodically consulting the same audiences afterwards helps to keep the site relevant. This will ultimately ensure the web site is complete and well used.

## ◆ **Web Site Organization**

Web site organization is essential to a useful and therefore successful, web site. The size of the agency and services offered will determine how a site is organized. General rules for web site organization are:

- Keep it simple
- Group similar items together
- Forgo fancy web enhancements for a simple, clean, easy-to-use design
- Keep the number of navigational “clicks” to a minimum
- Web Site organizational chart for Child Welfare Agencies

## ◆ **Web Site Design**

Incorporate the agency’s branding design into the web site by using identical colors and fonts and the agency logo. Many hosting companies will offer templates, allowing an agency to choose its own color scheme and logo while using a basic standardized layout. Others will offer full design services. A graphic design company can be used (and is suggested) for a professional customized web site. Important considerations include:

- Accessibility
- Web Site Style Guide
- Branding elements
- Ease of updating
- Budget
- Needs
- Webmaster position

## ◆ **Web Site Content**

Content should initially be written by subject matter experts with editing by Communications. It is important to know the needs and habits of web site users. In general, web site users quickly scan. Web sites should reflect this practice and be written accordingly, using bullets more often than long paragraphs, whenever possible. Consistency is important, especially if several Subject Matter Experts will contribute. The information should be presented in a uniform way with a consistent agency “voice.”

## ***New/Emerging Media (Web 2.0)***

New media emerges every day and offers various new ways to communicate. When considering using a new media communication tool, complete a fair evaluation but proceed with caution since most are replaced within a few years. Waiting for the new tool to become established in the technology arena before investing time or funds is recommended.

## ◆ Social Media

These are ways individuals connect using media online. Agencies can benefit by connecting groups of people online in ways that are not practical in real life.

### • Blogs

Web Logs can be written by anyone for any purpose and are read by those with similar views. Blogs can be beneficial to agencies in a number of ways. A blog can help readers understand the complexities of issues faced by an agency. It can be used to motivate and educate. A blog for employees can also motivate, educate and inform. Here are some specific ways various audiences might use blogs for or about an agency:

- Children, youth or families might use a blog to criticize, praise, or simply describe an experience with an agency.
- Activists might use a blog to motivate, meet and inform.
- Designated staff member(s) might use an Intranet-based blog to inform, create camaraderie and recognize achievements.
- The agency Director might use a blog based on the web and/or Intranet. This can increase accessibility by providing a personal, yet leadership perspective. (The audience determines type of blog - ex: to reach staff, the message would be presented on the Intranet. The web would be used to reach all other publics.)
- Owing to the growing influence blogs have on public opinion, Communications needs to be able to access them.

### • Podcasts

A podcast is audio and video available via the web and can be created by anyone for any purpose. Users often subscribe to podcasts and automatically receive new feeds. An agency can use podcasts to educate, such as for an employee training or explaining a process or situation for external publics, or for advertising an event.

### • Web Video

These are digital videos posted online (a type of podcast). Agencies can use web videos in the same way as podcasts—to educate, inform and advertise.

### • Social Networking Web Sites

Social Networking web sites to be formed by people with similar interests, such as advocates against child abuse, adoptive parents or foster parents. Agencies can use social networking sites to connect with different audiences, particularly youth. Since these sites also allow two-way communication, users can be personally engaged in the conversation. Unfortunately, as these sites can be used by child predators, youth need to be warned of the associated risks.

### • RSS Feeds (Really Simple Syndication)

RSS feeds take information and automatically updates in brief on another site (ex: weather can be added to a web site in RSS format allowing it to be updated automatically by the weather service.). Agencies can use these to enhance their web sites. They can also be used to update users when blogs or other information have been updated automatically, eliminating a user's need to visit the site to check for updates.

- **Wikis**

A wiki is a site where users can contribute, add and edit materials placed on the site. This can be used for sharing information, such as resources with contracted providers, allied professionals and staff.

- **Groups**

This is for like-minded individuals who “meet” on the web, or use the web to organize and meet in real life. Agencies can use this for activists, event planning, or topical groups.

- **Twitter™**

This is a type SMS-blog combination. Agencies can use this to immediately inform subscribers of activities.

- **SMS (Short Message Service)**

Send text messages directly to cell phones. Users need to sign up for this service. This can be used to immediately inform subscribers of events and is especially useful in an emergency situation. For example, since the nature of casework causes employees to be spread out over a large area, in an emergency all caseworkers could be contacted through SMS immediately and simultaneously.

- **Free AMBER Alerts**

Free AMBER alerts to all cell phone users, which immediately notify anyone in the vicinity of an AMBER Alert.

- **Online Communities**

Ideas for online communities, including some mentioned above.

- **Wiki This**

Wiki This is a model for customer support using blogs and wikis

### ***E-mails: Distribution Lists and Electronic Mailing Lists***

E-mail announcements offer a fast, inexpensive way to quickly communicate with a specific or multiple audiences. This approach lowers costs by reducing paper printed, also offering a greener solution to broad communications. Using electronic mailing lists, where users sign up, or distribution lists, where users are added to a list (e.g., school guidance counselors), an agency can communicate with a variety of audiences: staff, contracted providers, children, youth and families served, media, foster and adoptive parents, elected officials and policymakers and allied professions such as schools, libraries and police. A change in the law affecting mandated reporters, for instance, could be disseminated quickly to those who need to know if distribution lists are already prepared by the agency. General rules include:

- Establish an announcement e-mail address that offers legitimacy to the e-mail announcement (such as announcements@agency.com)
- Only send pertinent information—overuse will result in ignored e-mails.
- Brief e-mails that quickly disseminate information are more likely to be read.
- Mark e-mails according to priority if option is available (e.g., Microsoft Outlook allows e-mails to be marked high, moderate or low priority).

- Use branding elements on e-mails to identify and lend credibility.
- Allow users to opt out of e-mails with the exception of staff, media and contracted providers.
- Messages need to be developed to be compatible with all electronic communications tools such as a BlackBerry®. Use simple font and test out receipt of messages through various electronic reading devices for readability.

## ***Publications***

Publications are an important way to convey an agency's message and should be written with a consistent 'voice.' They are often disseminated at agency and provider locations, at community events and at functions hosted by the agency. Agency branding (which can be as basic as a logo and consistent print/paper color choice) should be used on all publications. Publications should be written in plain language and, as is generally recommended for written materials, at a sixth-grade level. An agency should consider accessibility by those with disabilities and those who speak languages other than English, depending on the needs of the region. In addition to subject matter content—often drafted initially by subject matters experts—publications may also include the agency phone number(s), address, Director's (and possibly other administrators') name and web site. Certain agency funders may also require an acknowledgement of their funding included on publications. A review of contractual language may expose that obligation. Publications can be posted on an agency's web site, making them available to a broad audience, thus reducing costs by requiring less printing, which also lessens their environmental impact. Check the requirements of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) to make sure any publications Communications produces comply.

Types of publications include:

- Newsletter: periodically issued with information about the agency and possibly contracted providers and/or allied professionals.
- Brochures: which provide details about services offered
- Reports: annual and outcomes-based
- Consumer-focused pieces that illustrate the positive impact the agency is having on children, youth and families.
- Consumer rights and responsibilities
- Promotional: flyers, posters, postcards, invitations, etc., used for awareness campaigns, initiatives, events, donations, etc.
- Business cards: use the back of cards for important agency phone numbers
- Preventive pieces

### **◆ Awareness Campaigns/Events/Activities**

Awareness campaigns, events and activities offer agencies a unique way to communicate with all stakeholders and with families and youth served. They offer highly effective ways to educate the public about public child welfare issues including the role of the agency and the needs of families and youth served. A single-issue communications plan is often developed and employed depending on the size or complexity of the awareness campaign, event or initiative.

Awareness campaigns target a specific topic, such as child abuse prevention and are diverse in their approaches to public education. Some employ expensive billboard messaging while others may take the form of less expensive but more time-consuming events, such as walks, runs, rallies and marches. The latter may even be used to raise funds for an agency. A creative slogan may be employed such as "Child Protection is a Community Responsibility" and be attached to everything relating to the campaign, such as flyers, banners and public give-aways. Give-aways that are useful and lasting, like electrical outlet covers, water bottles and T-shirts, extend the life of an awareness campaign far beyond the event itself. While it

is not always possible, engaging the public to create a lasting product—a quilt, mural, sculpture or playground—related to the awareness campaign, is a good way to keep the issue ‘alive’ for the public. It also creates an historical record of the efforts of years past.

Awareness campaigns, events and activities are especially enhanced by involving other community partners. Retailers, health care providers, schools, other human services providers all have a role to play in supporting awareness campaigns. Combined participation often sustains alliances and public/private partnerships result. Many agencies co-sponsor community events as a way of increasing impact, reducing costs and leveraging the established goodwill of trusted community organizations.

The main awareness campaigns for public child welfare agencies are:

- Child Abuse Prevention Month: April
- National Foster Care Month: May
- National Adoption Month: November

#### ◆ **Recruitment Campaigns**

Providing safe homes for children and youth in out-of-home placement and for those awaiting adoption is an important function of the public child welfare system. Recruiting adults to take on the role of foster or adoptive parent or mentor and providing them with information that will support their choice to do so is, at least in part, the responsibility of Communications. Communications brings knowledge of appropriate media outlets and other communications techniques to the task. A single-issue communications plan is often employed depending on the breadth of the recruitment campaign.

Current, local foster and adoptive parents are in a unique position to suggest what recruitment techniques work best within any given community. If focus group meetings are employed to provide input, care should be taken to schedule these meetings at a convenient time and location. Compensation, refreshments and child care should also be considered to incentivize the process. When prospective foster and adoptive parents contact an agency, they should be asked how they heard of the agency’s need. In this way, Communications can gauge the most effective recruitment methods employed.

While targeted advertising for foster and adoptive parents is often successful, special events that garner media attention, such as the Heart Gallery and Adoption Day, bring the subject of the need for safe temporary and permanent homes for children to the attention of a wider portion of the public.

Some larger agencies employ the Internet to assist with increasing the pool of prospective foster and adoptive parents by purchasing advertisements on search engines such as Google. Such ads direct the public to the agency web site page where more specific information is presented.

#### ◆ **Town Meetings**

Town meetings can be employed to gather broad public feedback about services offered by an agency and how the agency is performing its mandate. Consideration should be given to inviting specifically those who receive services (family and youth), those who provide services (including contracted providers) as well as foster and adoptive parents. An agency may also consider running an online and/or e-mail survey concurrently, which will reach those who are unable to attend, thereby allowing another avenue for feedback. Having guests sign in at the meeting and asking how they learned about the event helps to gauge the effectiveness of advertising strategies in planning future meetings. Through press releases, media can be engaged to advertise the meetings and may even choose to cover

them. Individual concerns or complaints that may arise can be handled by having an ombudsman or other designated complaint-remediation staff present.

#### ◆ **Donations and Volunteer Opportunities**

While asking the public, through donation drives and volunteerism, to support the agency and the children, youth and families served may not always be viewed as within the purview of Communications, such efforts do serve to increase knowledge and ‘buy in’ from the community, a key goal of agency communications. Community members thus engaged are more apt to be invested in the work of the agency and sensitive to the struggles and needs of those the agency serves.

Altruistic opportunities provided to the general public and targeted audiences (corporations, youth organizations, schools, etc.) accomplish three major goals:

- Meeting the immediate need for financial and/or in-kind support and/or volunteer labor so as to extend the capacity of the agency;
- Raising the awareness level in the community about the needs of less fortunate neighbors; and
- Connecting the community through the giving-receiving process.

By tying donation drives to specific needs rather than engaging in year-round, general-donations drives, the public is more effectively educated about the specific needs of families and youth. This approach also serves to educate the public about the limits of government funding and is more likely to result in media attention. Donors also seem to appreciate responding to a particular need; it engages people on a personal level and helps to make them feel more invested in outcomes of children, youth and families served by the agency. Drives that gather gifts around the winter holidays, formal attire in time for high school proms, school supplies for the beginning of the school year and books for reading programs are just a few examples.

Volunteer opportunities may be in support of a donation drive or related to other services such as mentoring or job shadowing. Again, specificity is important: more involvement is often generated by choosing to support a particular group of individuals or a specific event. Volunteers will often need to complete a confidentiality statement to ensure the privacy of any children and families they may come in contact with. In addition, volunteers who deal directly with children may need to submit to a criminal background check to help ensure the safety of the children.

Volunteers will appreciate recognition of their service. Such recognition can range from a thank you letter written by the Director or public official to an annual volunteer luncheon.

#### ◆ **Speakers’ Bureau**

Speakers’ bureaus are an effective way of educating the public—gathered at venues such as churches, clubs and associations—about a diverse range of public child welfare topics such as: what constitutes child abuse and neglect, the work of the agency, the need for community members to report abuse and the need for foster and adoptive parents, volunteers and donations. Speakers’ bureaus are most effective when they are not seen as providing a “talking head,” but rather a peer who can relate to the audience on a very personal level about the subject matter. A speaker might be a staff member, a board member, or a foster or adoptive parent.

Since speakers will represent the agency, they should be thoroughly prepared, be knowledgeable about the limits of their presentation and have good written materials for supplemental handouts. It is important to be reliable. Organizations often set schedules

well in advance and are not able to make last minute adjustments. Having an alternative on-call is generally advisable.

As with other agency volunteers, consideration should be given to thanking speakers for their service through a recognition plaque, annual luncheon or gift certificate.

## **Disaster Communications**

Agency communications during a disaster such as a flood, earthquake, prolonged power failure, or fire should be guided by a prepared Disaster Communication Plan which is predicated on the agency Overarching Disaster Plan. Obviously, preparedness is critical as disasters are by definition unexpected and whether specific to the agency (a fire at the headquarters) or more global in nature (a regional flood), disasters can and do occur. Important elements to plan for include: keeping lines of communication open with families, staff, providers, media, emergency management personnel and other important stakeholders; backup contingencies for records and information systems; service delivery continuity; and staff/volunteer coordination.

Staff members should be encouraged to develop their own individual family emergency plan so each can continue to work without undue concern for family safety and well-being. Likewise, the agency should prepare and drill for building evacuations and emergency/disaster scenarios with appropriate local, state and federal disaster-response partners; identify critical agency tasks and plan for continuity including the identification of staff with multiple skill sets available to shoulder alternative or additional responsibilities; identify potential alternative work locations and alternative communications channels so that communications flow both to and from the agency; anticipate volunteer help with prepared task lists; and ensure continuity of service delivery by planning for new or alternative service delivery sites and additional services or outreach required by families, providers and others involved.

## ***Implementation***

This section is devoted to assisting a public child welfare agency to successfully embed communications into their agency, providing guidance for the implementation of the communications plan and addressing the basics needed to be successful. It also illustrates the role of communications within an agency and how the agency can foster relationships and engage members of the community to join in efforts that support its mission.

As discussed in the previous sections, effective, two-way communications is vital to the success of any public child welfare agency. Whether communicating with the youth and families receiving services, caregivers, staff, media, policymakers, the courts, allied professionals, contracted providers or other stakeholders, the agency must be able to clearly explain its mission and goals and respond to inquiries in a candid and open way in order to build support and meet its objectives. Because communications is such an important part of the agency's work, it is equally important that at least one person in the agency be charged with the function of coordinating the agency's communications efforts. In addition, every agency, big or small, needs a communications plan (even a simple one) for everyday operations, as well as a plan that will guide the agency through times of crisis.

### **Messaging**

#### ***Crafting the Message***

Good communication starts with crafting cohesive messages developed in conjunction with the agency's senior leadership that align with the goals articulated in the agency's communications plan. An agency may develop many messages. They can be overarching and long lasting such as an agency mission statement or guiding principles. They may be issue-specific and multi-year, such as those regarding Child Abuse Prevention Month or they may be issue specific and relatively time limited such as those resulting from positive or negative media attention. Irrespective of the impetus, it is always helpful to synthesize any message, crafting it into a written statement, sometimes called a "backgrounder," to disseminate. This messaging piece can be distributed to all employees, posted on internal and external web sites so all employees and the public have access to it and sent to key policymakers and other stakeholders. Written messages are easier to reinforce. They also serve to stimulate dialogue and facilitate feedback about the message permitting message refinement.

#### ***Preparing the Message for Dissemination***

Once the key messages are crafted and approved by senior level staff, other materials, such as news releases, articles, signage, flyers and PowerPoint presentations, can be developed based on these key messages. The development of these message vehicles and ensuing activities is a communications function. It is a good idea, if budgetary allowances permit, for a public child welfare agency to have at least one individual reporting directly to the Director and dedicated to the agency's communications function (Communications). If the agency is small and does not have the capacity to employ such an individual, the responsibilities should be delegated to either the agency Director or a member of senior staff. It is important to have at least one person operating in the role of Communications. If a designate has no expertise in communications, per se, formal training should be considered as these responsibilities are not insignificant.

As the primary contact for the media and responsible for formulating strategic communications with all other audiences, Communications must be keenly aware of the details of all issues, positive and negative, affecting the agency. In addition to Communications' direct research, it is expected that the Director and other members of the agency senior staff will keep Communications abreast of all situations that could or should draw the attention of the media or other audiences. Front line staff as well, should be charged with the responsibility of

reporting incidents “up the line.” All media inquiries should go directly to Communications to ensure that the same message goes out each time and to vet what is sent to the media. Communications coordinates the selection of the most appropriate subject matter expert to speak with the media, if details are required. Communications also shoulders responsibility for centralizing all messages, data and statements for dissemination.

### ***Using Data in Messaging***

While pure statistical analysis of public child welfare data is of keen interest to some specific stakeholders such as researchers, policymakers and funders, the remaining audiences are generally more interested in the individuals who are reflected in those statistics. It is therefore advisable to use statistics, presented in the form of graphs, as a supplement to a story about the experiences of a child, youth, family or caregiver who was or is involved with the public child welfare agency. Statistics can also be used to reinforce the needs of the agency such as the need for foster parents, adoptive parents, mentors and donations.

For these purposes, it is important to maintain a reserve of commonly requested statistics in an accessible format. Proactive messaging will be enhanced and Communications will be able to respond more quickly to statistical requests from stakeholders.

### ***Disseminating the Message***

Although, strictly speaking, media relations are handled through Communications, getting an agency message out is the shared responsibility of every agency staff member. From clerical support staff, to direct service workers and managers, everyone in the agency must understand the role he or she plays in reinforcing a message with the public, families, their neighbors, community groups, co-workers and others.

As prominent professionals in the public child welfare field, it is critical to involve the Director of the agency and senior staff in forwarding the key messages of the agency within their professional and personal circles. Their action plans are an integral part in improving morale within the agency and set the tone when it comes to leadership. The Director and senior staff can also build relationships and facilitate mutually respectful two-way communications with peers, staff, policymakers, persons served, media and the community.

Mid-level managers play a key role in disseminating the agency’s key messages to those they supervise, keeping them informed and motivated. Their role is guided by the concrete set of key messages which should be distributed to and understood by everyone in the agency. Managers also have a responsibility to pass accurate information both up and down the agency and to help dispel rumors.

Direct-service staff members are the most obvious ambassadors of the agency. Since they have day-to-day interactions with those served by the agency and people in the community, line staff are in an excellent position to disseminate the agency’s message broadly. It is therefore imperative that they be well informed and frequently briefed on the key messages and goals of the agency. Feedback mechanisms should be in place so they can provide input into message refinement.

As previously stated, selected mid-level and direct service staff members may be called upon by Communications to act as subject matter specialists and spokespeople for the agency. Though supported by Communications throughout and especially during the live or taped interview, additional advanced training for such spokespeople might be appropriate. It will serve to increase their comfort level and ensure they can stay on message while navigating the interview process when the opportunity presents.

External partners such as caregivers, community provider agencies and nonprofit groups who work with the agency can be invaluable when there is a need to advocate for a specific issue or provide first-hand experience. Do not underestimate the value of soliciting them as spokespeople. These stakeholders can also be helpful in assisting to write op-ed pieces and letters to the editor when needed. Often, they can enhance the credibility of the agency itself and add convincing background knowledge to a story. Cultivating these resources by actively building relationships with stakeholders will serve the agency well.

#### ◆ **When to Communicate a Message**

When possible, a proactive approach to communications is always best. Whether alerting the community about the agency's new initiative, highlighting an award winner's achievement or providing the local perspective on a national trend, getting out ahead of the media keeps Communications in better control of how the agency is perceived.

Communicating with elected officials and policymakers and their representatives, either through routine media alert e-mails or phone calls, before a story hits the media is a useful way to control messages and prevent the coverage of a crisis from getting worse. Typically, elected officials do not like to hear about events in the agency from the news media. It is therefore important to directly involve them in working with Communications to continually improve information flow, work on crisis responses together and provide a unified front.

As a proactive approach is not always possible, providing as much information as soon as possible to key stakeholders is a good rule of thumb. The agency should have an internal method for dispelling rumors and inaccurate information portrayed in the media. Such a response could range from a simple written statement from the Director sent to all staff via e-mail to a similar video broadcast message e-mailed or posted on the intranet. Most importantly, craft every message as if it were an external message. Expect that everything disseminated internally could or will be leaked externally, including to the media. Bear this in mind when communicating with staff or external stakeholders with any kind of statement or e-mail.

Any message deemed important should be communicated often, even on a daily basis, through constant positioning and ongoing dialogue. This work is not static. Messaging is meant to be a fluid process and can be refreshed and updated regularly to reflect additional agency goals and needs. Ideally, the vision and messages of the agency should become so ingrained in the minds of staff members and contracted staff that repeating and using them become second nature to everyone. Staff should be invested in the messages and know their input and suggestions are valued.

#### ◆ **Disseminating Messages**

Developing a powerful message is only one part of the public child welfare agency's marketing equation. Disseminating it is the other. Very few public child welfare agencies have the luxury of a marketing and public awareness budget, owing to categorical funding streams. It follows that, historically, public child welfare agencies have been priced out of traditional marketing venues (television, radio and environmental advertising). But there are creative ways to find entry into these exclusive and pricey domains. Expensive, glossy campaigns are enviable, but there are many creative alternatives Communications and the agency can take advantage of with little or no money. Many of these ideas are based on creating partnerships and then leveraging these relationships to create campaigns and implement outreach strategies. Although these ideas do not take much money, they do require time to build relationships with media and other stakeholders.

This section explores ways to have messages seen and heard without ‘breaking the bank,’ or—as is often the case—without having a bank. Some suggestions are predicated on building external relationships. Other inexpensive means of disseminating messages originate within the agency. Both can be accomplished with minimal financial outlay but generate valuable results.

#### ◆ **Partner with Local Media to Create Media Campaigns**

Partnering with local media can be done in any media market, large or small. Ethnic media are particularly receptive to the idea, as they often run many educational and informational news pieces and programs. One idea might be to ask a TV station to sponsor National Foster Care Month or National Adoption Month. The agency could work together with the station to create a Public Service Announcement (PSA) series promoting foster care and adoptions designed to run during the nightly news broadcasts. Such a station will usually produce the PSA in their studio and because of their sponsorship, run it for free during peak viewing times when advertising costs the most.

Likewise, relationship-building with local radio hosts can result in free air time. Start by getting to know local public affairs and public access show producers; they are often looking for ideas and ways to educate the public.

#### ◆ **Fill in the Blanks of Environmental Advertising**

Environmental advertising, also known as billboards, provides great visual impact and should be used by the agency to its advantage when that medium is appropriate. Most outdoor advertising space is owned by a few major companies with representatives in the local community. Since many companies are invested in the community and understand the importance of goodwill, they will often entertain proposals that reinforce positive community themes. Issues that support children are generally viewed in this light.

The secret to being able to afford billboard exposure is to know that not all billboards are rented every month. Any unrented space is often available for free or at reduced rates for non-profits. Contact these companies directly and let them know about the project. Inquire if they have any unsold billboard space anywhere in the city or county for that month. Companies always prefer to donate free ad space rather than have a blank billboard.

It is best to contact companies at the beginning of the month since ad space is usually sold months in advance. Ask for as many spaces as they are willing to donate. Rarely will it be prime space (e.g., main arteries, or freeways), but it’s free and some people in the community are guaranteed to see the ad. It is very likely that this one contact could result in months’ worth of free environmental advertising, since ads generally remain intact until someone purchases the space or another public agency is granted a similar request. While the ad space may be free, it is still the agency’s responsibility to get the artwork prepared and sent to the outdoor advertising company.

#### ◆ **Occupy Print Ad Space**

Contact local newspapers and ask if they can donate ad space for agency foster parent recruitment or adoption efforts. Often, the papers will quote their non-profit discounted rate. Approach the negotiations with full knowledge of the agency’s budget constraints, being candid about the funds available for the ads. Since newspapers are struggling and circulation is on a steady decline, free space is generally out of the questions, but substantially discounted rates are not.

#### ◆ **Take Advantage of Public Service Announcement (PSA) Requirements**

PSAs are another excellent free resource to publicize an event or circulate a message since broadcast stations are required to offer airtime to public benefit. In the case of radio PSAs, the station usually sets parameters of 15 or 30 seconds. The agency provides the script and submits it electronically. Television stations vary on acceptable formats (i.e., Beta or DVD). Check online for the requirements of each television station. Specific instructions should be contained on their web site. If not, contact the person responsible for community affairs.

For agencies that want to run a television PSA but don't have video, most markets have a community/government channel that lists city/county council meetings and other community events. Using this channel is ideal for a scripted PSA.

#### ◆ **Target Audiences with Movie Theater Advertisements**

Agency messages can be placed in movie theaters as well. In addition to the customary film previews, movie theaters are—with increasing frequency - showing advertisements prior to the feature film. This venue option provides an opportunity to reach a truly targeted audience, especially for foster or adoptive parent recruitment or a message focused on youth. Contact local cinema managers for all the necessary information to take advantage of this fairly simple messaging process. The agency scripts out the message and provides the relevant contact information. Since this is a visual medium, be prepared to have a photo in the ad (a good stock photo is fine) especially if the ad is for recruitment.

#### ◆ **Include Your Functions on Calendars of Events**

Most community newspapers and many web sites for newspapers and news stations have community calendars that provide free advertisement of community events with widespread appeal. If the agency is holding a foster parent recruitment event or any such activity, this is a good way to get the event publicized for free. Many publications require a three to four week lead time, while web sites are often refreshed immediately.

#### ◆ **Engage the Energy of Elected Officials and Policymakers**

Elected officials and policymakers who oversee the agency are a valuable and mostly under-used resource for raising public awareness. Most elected officials have extensive ties in their districts to public transit authorities (free bus advertisement); local cable outlets (public service announcements); sports teams (celebrity or team spokesperson and financial support); sports stadium authorities and boards (free stadium advertisement); and county law enforcement (collaborative partner). Consider approaching first an elected official who has made their support of public child welfare issues a priority. However, all officials should be viewed as potential marketing resources.

Elected officials and policymakers can also take on another role for the agency. Ask the chief elected official to set aside a designated time once a month to honor foster youth who are doing extraordinary things by presenting an official certificate of recognition. Not only does this serve as a motivation for the youth, it promotes success within the foster care system through the resulting media coverage.

#### ◆ **Capitalize on the Trend of Social Networking**

Word of mouth is a powerful communications tool that is viable long after the initial contact. Asking foster and adoptive parents to disseminate messages is particularly compelling. Media and the public love human interest features. Inviting adoptive parents to a public hearing or to a media interview to discuss permanency from their unique perspectives, fosters credibility.

It is also helpful to build relationships with local Chambers of Commerce. They are often successful in enlisting aid from the business community to help fund items not covered by government such as scholarships or needed supplies and services for youth. Many of these Chambers have free social networking events. Health fairs and other community events are also a good opportunity to distribute brochures and present a positive face to the agency. Sometimes non profits and government agencies are even able to negotiate for a free booth.

◆ **Partner with Local Nonprofit Organizations**

Seek out and build relationships with local child abuse prevention organizations or child advocacy agencies. Many of these organizations have budgets for advertising and marketing and are looking for new ways to promote themselves. Partnering with these organizations expands an agency's opportunities and impact. Another idea is for the agency to co-sponsor holiday events or fundraisers with non-profits, for example, to raise money for college scholarships for youth aging out of the system.

◆ **Build on the Contacts of Foster and Adoptive Parent Associations**

Foster and adoptive parent organizations are another under-used marketing and public awareness resource. Foster and Adoptive Parent Associations are usually well organized and often politically savvy. In most cases, they are viewed as independent of the public child welfare agency and can be useful advocates, especially during budget debates. Well engaged and invested association members may volunteer to draft editorials in the local newspaper(s) on issues that are relevant to their agency and to the benefit of the agency, as well.

◆ **Put the Celebrity of Local Heroes to Work for the Children**

Local celebrities and sports figures are all possible ambassadors for an agency. However, pursuing them to embrace an agency's cause and serve as spokesperson is not for the faint of heart. It requires a great deal of persistence and perseverance. Determining the right contact person, honing an engaging message and working with the celebrity will require a considerable time commitment.

◆ **Publish an Agency Newsletter**

Producing an agency newsletter is an excellent way to convey important information to internal and external audiences in a controlled manner. An agency staff newsletter can be posted on the agency web site or sent to external stakeholders as well. It is fairly inexpensive to launch an agency newsletter. Most are published and often disseminated electronically. With a nominal initial investment into publishing or graphic software, such as InDesign®, Publisher® or Quark®, an agency can produce a newsletter—targeted to a primary audience but disseminated broadly—in relatively short order. Once a newsletter is established, a section can be designated and slogan developed (e.g., Open Your Heart and Home) that is distinctive and branded to the agency.

◆ **Create a Youth Speakers' Bureau**

No one can be a better spokesperson for a public child welfare agency than a person who has personally, positively benefited from it. Many foster youth who have transitioned remain connected with Independent Living Skills Programs well after they have emancipated. They can be asked to serve as ambassadors carrying the agency message through the creation of a youth speakers' bureau.

Youth who are trained to speak to community groups and the media are credible and often compelling. Their stories can be used to help disseminate the agency message. A youth speakers' bureau can be as small as five youth. When selecting particular youth to speak, make sure they have varying perspectives and offer different viewpoints on various subjects. The need for early permanency for youth or the importance of a consistent adult figure in a child's life could be illustrated by a youth who talks about the challenges of aging out. Youth can also be asked to participate in awareness campaigns promoting adoption or the need for mentors and other caring adults.

Short of organizing a youth speakers' bureau, an agency can garner valuable youth perspective by including a guest youth column in the agency's newsletter.

#### ◆ **Celebrate National "Awareness" Months**

There are a number of awareness months dedicated to public child welfare issues and Communications should capitalize on them. National groups often offer complete toolkits to assist local agencies to run successful campaigns. For instance, during November which is National Adoption Month, consider featuring weekly an adoption success story that is sent out electronically to all agency staff.

#### ◆ **A Note of Caution**

Most advertising and public relations companies do a fair amount of pro-bono work; it's good for their public image and it provides some tax benefits. However, many are bombarded with gratis requests and cannot assist every agency that asks. Before approaching any company, do some homework; find out about the firm and their area of expertise (such as whether it specializes in social marketing, commercial, etc.). Knowing something about the company will personalize the contact and assist in identifying a potentially good fit.

Public child welfare agencies have compelling and heartfelt stories to tell. Children and families benefit greatly from having their message articulated with passion, clarity and conviction. This can be accomplished by tapping into resources within the agency and developing creative strategies to use more traditional marketing and public awareness tools, without the hefty price tag. Know what message is important to convey and identify the best means to properly relay it.

### ***External Factors Influencing Communications***

Controlling the uncontrollable is nothing short of an art form when it comes to managing external factors that can enhance or detract from the image of a public child welfare agency. In a perfect world, an agency's proactive measures of providing the media information that highlights positive public child welfare outcomes would result in a stream of positive news stories that spotlight the important work performed by public child welfare workers, foster and adoptive parents, or biological and extended families. Since most public child welfare agencies do not operate in a perfect world and no agency has that much power, this section is dedicated to managing skillfully external factors that can potentially enhance or hinder communications.

#### ◆ **Internalizing the External**

An integral part of any communications plan is devising a process to manage communications that are not initiated by the agency. While this statement automatically conjures up images of negative news stories, this principle, in fact, holds true for positive communications as well. Not being prepared to take advantage of positive communications opportunities can be just as detrimental as being ill-prepared to respond in potentially

negative situations. Internalizing the external, simply put, is having a plan of action for communications opportunities or challenges as they present themselves.

#### ◆ **Taking Control of Communications Opportunities**

Opportunities to enhance the agency message may present themselves in ways that are completely unexpected. Nonetheless, it is important to be ready to capitalize on these opportunities. It is equally important to be able to anticipate and recognize communications impediments. While not an exhaustive list, the following are some examples of both:

- **National Child Welfare Trends and Statistics**

When national child welfare trends and data receive attention in local media markets, they provide local public child welfare agencies with an excellent opportunity to highlight local trends that support the positive work of the agency or conversely with data that refutes negative trending statistics. Whether local data supports positive trends or refutes negative ones, this is an excellent opportunity to provide a regional perspective to national issues.

- **Designated Days or Months for Special Recognition**

National Adoption Month, National Foster Care Month, Father's Day and Mother's Day, are all excellent opportunities to highlight success stories and to profile positive trends within the system. These are external communications gems that keep on giving, year after year and for which there is ample time to plan.

- **Media Works**

Often, local television stations may contact the local public child welfare agency for information on a story they are developing—for example, foreign adoptions—and they need public child welfare statistics to balance the story. Use this opportunity to take the same story concept and pitch it to print media with a focus on public adoptions. These opportunities are ideal to enhance the agency's adoption efforts.

- **Economic Indicators**

Nothing affects the state of public child welfare more than the stability of government funding. When the threat of budget cuts looms, showcase successes. Partner with community agencies to help communicate the agency message and solicit the help of foster parents who can put a human face and story to the programs supported by the budget.

- **Child Fatalities**

A child fatality or particularly horrific child abuse situation in a contiguous region, or one that receives widespread state or national media coverage inevitably causes local media and other key stakeholders to wonder about the strength of safety net provided by the local public child welfare system. Such a situation affords an agency the opportunity to educate the media and specific interested members of the community about local efforts to prevent such a tragedy and how the community plays a role in keeping children safe. Never pass judgment on other jurisdictions' actions or decision-making. Circumstances can change in an instant.

- **Commendations/Awards**

Any time a staff member or the agency itself is the recipient of a national, state or local award for work on behalf of children and families, Communications is presented with an opportunity to issue a news release or a personal pitch to a media contact. It is

always wise to include staff and/or client contact information (if relevant and with the appropriate court permission) in order to facilitate media contact.

### ***Confidentiality Considerations and Challenges to Transparency***

Public child welfare agencies face many challenges, but perhaps the most challenging obstacle affecting the way agencies disseminate information is the strict child confidentiality laws governing them. These laws vary broadly from state to state. Indeed, many agencies are bound by laws that prevent them from saying anything about the cases they handle or the clients they serve. Although these laws are strict, they are never an excuse for “no comment.”

One of the best ways to handle the issue of confidentiality is to educate the media and other key stakeholders such as elected officials on the actual law in advance of any media attention. It is wise to include information on the agency web site regarding key practices, policies and operating legal parameters, including the state confidentiality law. Once they understand the legal restrictions that bind the agency, reporters tend to be a little more understanding. Instead of writing “the agency refused to comment,” they will often write “the agency could not comment because of strict confidentiality laws.” The latter sends a distinctly different message to the public.

In many states, the media and public are allowed to file petitions in court to open case files. If the agency or workers are being falsely accused of mishandling a case, urging the media to gain access to the details can work to the agency’s advantage. In suggesting reporters open a case file, they are much less likely to think the agency has something to hide. Another strategy is for the agency itself to petition the court to have the case file opened so officials can speak about the case. If a reporter makes it known in advance of their intent to open a case file, make sure that a review is made of the contents and that key messages are developed to address any issues they might find.

As mentioned before, “no comment” is never acceptable. Despite restrictions on commenting on specific cases and clients, every opportunity should be taken to convey the agency’s view through messages. For instance, a response such as “I can’t tell you specifics about this case, but what I can tell you is that we make every effort to keep families safely together,” followed by detailed information regarding the agency programs designed to support unification, is better than saying nothing at all. Seize the opportunity to talk about innovations or agency needs that are related to the situation. For instance, an abandoned baby provides segue into a discussion of agency-funded community supports for parents. Often, reporters will call digging for information about a certain case and become interested in doing an additional story related to the agency that highlights programs to strengthen families and the community. Every media inquiry is an opportunity to relay a positive message about the agency.

### ***Branding and Social Marketing***

Brand identity is how the public views an entity based on everything they see and hear about it. Every organization, including a public child welfare agency, has an inherent brand identity. Sometimes the identity is the result of proactive work on the part of the agency educating stakeholders about its work through crafted messages and selected communications venues and approaches. Such proactive measures recommended and discussed throughout the Communications Guidance is often referred to as social marketing, which simply means the application of best practices in private-sector marketing and communications to social services issues.

More often than not, however, an agency’s brand identity is not the result of its own proactive efforts but exists through default and is the result of an agency not having a communications plan and engaging in strategic communications. If an agency is interested in creating a brand image or in changing or improving the brand identity, a formal branding campaign and

branding policy is needed and will need to be reflected in elements of the communications plan.

When disseminating the agency message, it is a good idea to make sure that everything produced has a cohesive and consistent look. Visual branding can create a look and feel for the agency via its printed materials and electronic media and can be helpful in conveying an image that builds credibility in an organization.

Branding campaigns can be intricate and complex. To do an effective, broad-reaching branding campaign from ground level will take financial and staffing resources. Any successful branding campaign should be implemented with the input and buy-in from all levels of staff, stakeholders and even the public. Otherwise, it may not be fully successful. Staff will not want to use a slogan or logo they do not believe in. The public will not relate to a brand if it does not address their needs.

Research in the branding process is useful to find out what people like or dislike about the agency's current or proposed brand or image. Holding focus groups and interviews with all levels of staff and key stakeholders in order to create the correct message is a way to accomplish this task. A logo and a slogan need to be developed and materials such as letterhead, envelopes and labels need to be printed. But branding far surpasses just printed materials. It is a defined customer service philosophy and the way staff members answer the phone. It involves consistency in messaging, materials, how employees of all levels portray the agency, and, ultimately, how those served and stakeholders perceive the agency.