



Crisis Communications for Race Directors: What to Say When

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Be prepared to communicate effectively and disseminate appropriate public messaging at various points in a crisis situation.

No race director is immune to facing an extreme situation outside of their control, but we can all be well prepared for it. Below are a few best practices for emergency contingency planning with your communications team, as well as sample messaging for several scenarios.

Crisis Communications Best Practices/Reminders

- Establish a chain of reporting for all incident scenarios. For example:
 - Any issues will be reported immediately to the race director.
 - Race director will contact medical and/or police lead (depending if medical, security or weather situation)
 - Medical lead will contact emergency personnel (911), followed by the athlete's emergency contact
 - Race director will notify communications lead
 - Communications lead will notify key communications staff at other involved organizations, including parks & rec, city, hospital, etc. (Note, there should still be a single primary lead who will be the point person on drafting a statement – do not let other involved organizations proactively issue any statements nor contact any local media without your involvement and coordination.)
 - **Race director will contact USA Triathlon (in all cases, race directors are urged to contact USA Triathlon for guidance BEFORE issuing any type of public statement)**
 - The earlier you contact USA Triathlon, the earlier we can assist with public messaging and response. We can provide guidance for managing the immediate onsite response, and post-event you can send all media to us.
- If applicable, work with timing company to remove athlete from the event so athlete does not show up as "DNF"
- If applicable, remove athlete's email from email marketing system and from any lists related to the event to ensure athlete's family does not receive race results and/or race promotions
- Connect with the local hospital's media relations staff in advance of the event. You will be able to defer to them once an athlete has been transported, for inquiries about the patient or their condition.
- Contact local Public Information Officer (PIO) to ensure PIO does not release a public statement independently of you and to coordinate statement/facts.
- It's a good idea to establish key experts in the following areas who will be available for consult during your event, and who can bolster your public statement: medical/safety, public health, weather/meteorologist, etc.
- Establish a protocol for all event staff and volunteers. For example, if questioned by any media, staff and volunteers should always respond: "All questions and inquiries at this time are being handled by the communications team and the race director." Ensure your entire event production team (staff, contractors, volunteers) know who the communications lead is, and how to contact them. If a public statement is provided online in response to an incident, staff and volunteers may direct the inquirer to the website for more information.
- This includes instructing staff, contractors, volunteers, etc., what to say or not say over the radios. For example, all USA Triathlon event production staff carry radios and use the app Blerter. Everyone is primarily listening to the main channel. If an incident occurs, we advise notifying your emergency response team (race director, communications lead, medical lead, etc.) over the main line and then switching to another, more private line to continue the conversation.
 - Role play this in advance. E.g.: "We have a medical incident on course, athlete #XXX, wearing XXX. Medical support is on the scene. Run course lead, please direct athletes to the right side of the course. Emergency response team please switch to channel 2."



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- Establish a single media spokesperson. If a reporter inquires about a crisis before a public statement has been made, the response should be: “We are gathering information at this time and will share a public statement as soon as it is available.” Be sure to take down the reporter’s contact information and respond with the statement as soon as it is finalized.
- **Don’t be reflexive** — ensure you have all of the correct information, and your core team has approved all messaging before you publish anything online or on your social media channels. Just because an athlete, spectator or media member posts something publicly about your incident does not mean you need to respond immediately. You are in control of the narrative.
- Be aware of your tone and use proper judgement on social media. If the incident occurred in a public area where lots of participants and/or spectators witnessed the incident, be cognizant of social media posts that aren’t operational in nature. Posting something that says, “We’re having the best day! What a great event!” when a tragedy has just occurred can be viewed negatively, but an incident/tragedy does not always mean you need to shift your race coverage strategy. If conversations are starting or people are asking questions on your event’s Facebook page, you can post the public/media statement on your social page as well – but that’s it (don’t reply to individual comments or share more detail).
- For medical situations, **do not provide the athlete’s name or identity publicly before speaking to the family and ideally getting written permission to release the identity of the deceased.**
- For crisis scenarios that involve just one or a small group of people — such as a medical issue or fatality — immediate communication to all participants is not recommended.
- Post-event, continue to monitor social media and email closely, and be responsive to all questions from media, athletes and spectators. Provide the approved written statement as the response to all inquiries, unless follow-up questions are asked. For follow-ups, work closely with the communications staff, race director and USA Triathlon to handle on a case-by-case basis. Remember that privacy and HIPAA concerns still apply, and you are not obligated to answer every question a reporter asks if it would constitute a violation of privacy.
- NOTE: If you are ever unsure about what you can/can’t share legally, or how something may be construed in the media, you can always come back to not sharing additional details out of respect for the privacy of the athlete and his/her family.
- Post-event (**USA Triathlon will help**), we can refer back to USA Triathlon Sanctioning standards to demonstrate that appropriate safety measures were in place (number of lifeguards / watercrafts, EMS personnel, etc.) and that there is inherent risk in participating in triathlons.

Scenario 1: Medical Situation Happening Onsite, Media Inquiring

- *Do not make a statement preemptively. It is critical that all those involved in your crisis communications chain of reporting (medical lead, race director, communications director, venue media spokesperson, CEO, etc.) have been informed, are on the same page regarding next steps, and that your information is 100% accurate. The important thing in this situation is that the scene of the emergency remains clear/safe for others, and that no athletes, spectators or media are getting in the way of an emergency response. Prioritize crowd control if needed. Public messaging should simply confirm that you are gathering more information.*
- “We are gathering information at this time.”



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Scenario 2: Athlete Transported, Unsure of Condition / Fatality NOT Confirmed

- *Once a hospital transport has occurred, you can share that information with media (no other detail). You can also defer to the hospital's media spokesperson for inquiries about the patient or their condition. Be sure to identify and connect with these contacts for local hospitals in advance as part of your event preparation. HIPAA applies here, and medical details will not be shared with media.*
- "USA Triathlon can confirm that an athlete was transported to [XXX Hospital]. The hospital's media spokesperson can be reached at [CONTACT INFO]. We are gathering information at this time."

Scenario 3: Fatality Confirmed by Hospital/Emergency Medical Personnel, Media Inquiring, Family Not Yet Notified

- Use this when media and/or other race participants have started to inquire about the event, are going to report on it whether you say something or not, and there is urgency to put out a statement. If the incident is not yet circulating publicly, wait as long as you can for the family to be notified.
- *For medical situations, never provide the athlete's name or identity to the public before speaking to the family and, ideally, getting written permission to do so (recommend from the athlete's emergency contact or immediate family, e.g., parents, siblings, partner, children). If a statement is needed urgently (e.g., media are beginning to report the news and we cannot wait any longer to issue a statement) it can say "a male athlete," for example, and can later be updated with the athlete's name if you feel the need to include specifics.*
- "We are deeply saddened to confirm the death of a [male athlete] who was competing today in the [RACE NAME, DATE] in [LOCATION] The sport of triathlon lost a member of our beloved community today, and we extend our heartfelt condolences to the athlete's family and friends. More information will be made available at the appropriate point, but right now we would like to respect the privacy of the family during this difficult time."
- *You can update your statement (label it "Updated XX:XX time on XX date") if needed once you are able to release the athlete's identity, using the templates/examples below.*

Scenario 4: Fatality Confirmed, Family Notified

- *Use the examples below to draft a statement based on the specific situation. You do not have to include any specifics around the athlete, including name, hometown and age. Use your judgement about whether to include a quote from your race director/CEO and/or more personal information about the athlete. It's not necessary, but can add a personal touch if this athlete was an active member of your local multisport community, a longtime participant at your races, etc. (Do not hold on releasing a statement solely for this purpose, and don't force it if you do not have the information). Err on the side of minimal information about the circumstances of the accident (you can identify that the emergency took place "during the swim portion," for example). Then you should always defer to the hospital's media spokesperson or the county coroner to provide more information about the official cause of death, on a one-off basis for any media members who inquire. Cause of death should never be speculated on and should never be announced by you.*

Fatality (USA Triathlon Age Group National Championships)

USA Triathlon is deeply saddened to confirm the death of [male athlete] or [Jim Hix, 75, from Claremore, Oklahoma,] while competing in / after experiencing a medical emergency during the swim portion of the Olympic- Distance race today at the USA Triathlon Age Group National Championships in Milwaukee, Wis.



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“Our sport lost a member of its beloved community and we extend our heartfelt condolences to Jim’s wife, Ann, his family and friends,” said USA Triathlon CEO Victoria Brumfield. “As one of the nation’s top multisport athletes in his age group, Jim and USA Triathlon shared a close relationship and his passing is particularly difficult.”

Hix was the 2021 USA Triathlon Duathlon National Champion in the men’s 75-79 age group and he has represented the U.S. at the World Triathlon Age Group World Championships as a member of Team USA.

USA Triathlon will make no further comment at this time out of respect for the privacy of Jim’s family.

Fatality (USA Triathlon Clydesdale & Athena National Championships) *

**The race director for the Grand Rapids Triathlon contacted USA Triathlon when the fatality occurred. USA Triathlon assisted in drafting the below public statement, which was shared jointly by the race management company and USA Triathlon.*

USA Triathlon and the Tris4Health Race Management Company are deeply saddened to confirm the passing of [male athlete] or [Gary Grunwald, 61, from Elk Grove, California,] on June 10 while competing on the run portion of the USA Triathlon Clydesdale & Athena National Championships in Grand Rapids, Michigan. The sport lost a member of its beloved community, and we extend our heartfelt condolences to Gary’s family and friends. USA Triathlon is working closely with Tris4Health, organizer of the Grand Rapids Triathlon and host of the Clydesdale & Athena Nationals, to collect more information.

Questions? Please reach out to USA Triathlon staff for assistance.

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