GRANICUS

Winter Storms Communications Strategy Toolkit

A Snow Emergency is now in effect.

Beginning at 9 p.m. tonight, all NIGHT PLOW ROUTES will be plowed. Do not park on Night Plow Routes, which include all of downtown and streets with signs posted "Night Plow Route."

Vehicles which are not moved by 9 p.m., will be ticketed and towed.

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Staying ahead of the storm

In times of crisis, communication becomes critical. In times of natural disasters, such as extreme weather events, communication becomes even more important. Winter storms can have sudden and meaningful impact on seemingly divergent areas such as business, transit, education, and healthcare, with potentially calamitous effects on the functioning of a community.

In these times when chaos can take over, every text sent, email blasted, or social message posted needs to inspire constituents to take constructive and productive action.

Managing crisis communications is often an all-consuming task that overlays on top of the government team's already-busy workload. During a crisis, daily tasks must stop, and everyone in the organization needs to turn their attention to communications to manage important outcomes such as saving lives and restoring access to services. However, times of crisis offer an opportunity for the communicator to assert themselves as an invaluable bridge-builder between subject matter experts, department leadership, the media, and the community.

This toolkit aims to help communicators operate from a place of calm during winter storm crises by creating a strategy that tackles these events in a step-by-step fashion. While aiding in the uniquely noble purposes such as saving lives, rebuilding communities, and fostering trust in local government, taking a strategic and long-term approach for preparedness can also translate into legislative and operational victories for communicators.

Understanding the scope and goals of winter storm preparedness communications strategy

As with any crisis communications plan, an effective Winter Storm Preparedness Communications Plan seeks to reach the right stakeholders, keep them aware of critical information, and empower them to act if and when needed. By better understanding the motivations and needs of each group to be engaged during this time of crisis, communications departments can help better ensure business continuity, safeguard its credibility, and increase the likelihood of clear and effective communication to the public.

While planning a Winter Storm Preparedness Communications Strategy, consider any operational risks or other factors that might influence the effectiveness or timeliness of an individual communications team's or general organization's communications response based upon their specific goals.

(?) Are there any activities or projects currently taking place within the department that would compete for attention during a crisis?

(?) What is needed to engage with internal and external stakeholders to let them know that this activity or project is on hold during the crisis?

(?) Can tasks that would normally fall between one or two departments or individuals be more clearly assigned to eliminate any ambiguity during crisis?

(?) What is the current approval process for external content or messaging? In what ways could this process be expedited during a crisis?

While these hypothetical questions relate to time constraints and human resources, communicators might also find it useful to consider financial constraints that would pose operational risk. Generally, the idea is to think about non-communications factors and limitations that will influence the executing communications strategy plans.

Knowing teams, allies, and audiences

In times of crisis, searching for the right collaborators and subject matter experts can provide a difficult challenge when communicators seek to deliver timely, accurate, and actionable information to their communities. The knowledge gap that can grow during these critical moments provides fertile ground in which misinformation can take root and negatively impact both the efforts of public services and the wellbeing of the community.

The potential negative impacts on electricity and communications caused by winter storms require a strategy that clearly guides communicators through an understanding of who to reach out to for sourcing information, who to connect community members to for receiving services, and who are the people who will be most impacted. These can be categorized into three groups:

1. The core crisis team

The core crisis team should be a multidisciplinary group whose time is wholly dedicated to managing all crisis scenarios. This generally includes **department leadership, IT, legal, emergency response, and operations:** those who have an immediate role to play in crisis response and also have a direct chain of command within the organization (for accountability purposes). However, the team may also include **collaborators** from other departments or organizations who have a day-to-day role to play in resolution. The team also includes the spokesperson, who will represent the department in front of the public.

For winter storms and other natural disasters, this team would potentially include representatives from:

- ✔ Police
- ✔ EMTs
- ✔ Firefighters
- ✔ Municipal services
- ✔ Housing authorities

2. Allies: experts and contributors

Third-party validators can lend credibility to a department's winter storm response, help to correct misinformation that might circulate from other sources, and reach audiences where in-roads have yet to be created. This group is likely to be consulted behind the scenes and/or introduced to the public as part of the crisis team's response. These individuals can have a platform with significant reach, might have a concentration or expertise in a field related to the crisis event that gives them more credibility with the public, and/or might be able to comment from a neutral standpoint about positive work the governmental department is doing to respond to the crisis.

For winter storms and other natural disasters, this group would potentially include:

✔ NGOs such as the Red Cross

✔ Shelter organizations

✔ NOAA

✔ Meteorologists

✔ Construction companies

✔ Remediation companies

3. Customers and constituents

These are the direct beneficiaries of response team actions and messaging. Simply put, they are the people who the government serves during a winter storm crisis. As a leader during any crisis, communicators must determine how to reach the most people possible and keep them engaged with compelling messaging.

Prior to a crisis is the best time to consider how to build audiences for maximum impact. Potential options available to the communications team might include text subscriptions, pop-ups on web sites, and contact lists shared with other agencies. While building audience segments, consider stated user preferences; though crisis scenarios may override their preferences if loss of life is at stake.

For winter storms and other natural disasters, this group includes:

✔ Residents and business owners impacted before and after the storm.

Once these three groups have been organized, an important part of a successful strategy requires training staff and teams of their expectations during a winter storm crisis.

This falls generally into two categories:

›› Internal processes

Understanding what roles each stakeholder or ally will play during the critical moments of a winter storm crisis will help increase the likelihood of rapid response and distribution of information. Being prepared for a significant increase in the numbers of inquiries and requests during severe weather, while easily expected, requires a level of preparation to ensure timely action.

›› External messaging

Preparing messaging templates and FAQs (examples of which are included later in this toolkit) in coordination with the core crisis team and allies will help manage expectations and prevent the spread of misinformation before, during, and after a winter weather crisis. This also helps ensure that aligned messaging creates a vision of a unified organization looking to serve the public during a time of potential chaos.

Developing key messages and channels

After building a crisis response team, strategizing clear, concise messages and planning the channels in which to deliver them becomes the central focus of the Winter Storm Preparedness Communications Strategy. Regardless of when a crisis-related message is sent (before, during, or after the crisis), all messaging should provide timely, truthful, and actionable information to an audience so individuals can make informed decisions that are in their best interest.

Engaging the community early can help better prepare and reduce negative impact, especially in the case of weather crises such as winter storms where there is time to plan. Communication managers that conduct community awareness campaigns ahead of winter storms can include public service announcements, social media posts, and emails encouraging residents to sign up for emergency notifications, gather supplies, and prepare their homes and property.

One simple way to think about writing messages at any stage of a weather crisis is to think along the lines of "Know, Do, and Feel:"

KNOW

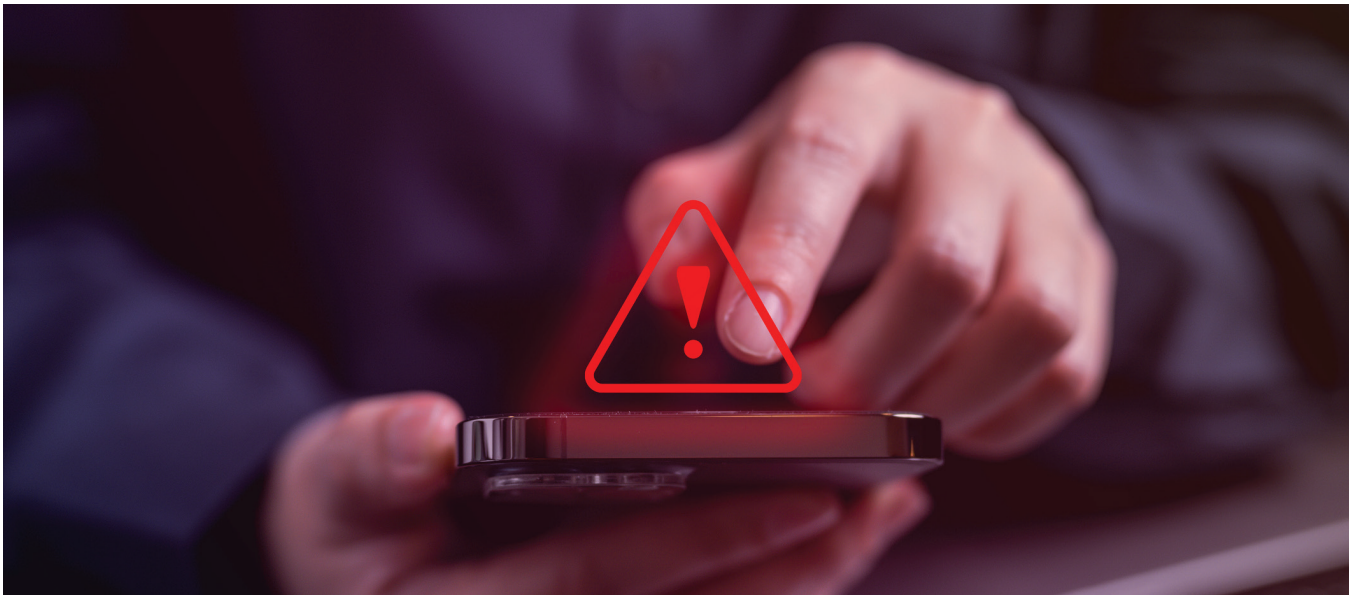What facts, figures, or updates do audiences need to be aware of?

DO

What actions or steps do audiences need to take to help bring the crisis to resolution?

FEEL

In what way should audiences react or feel because of the message?

Effective messaging will have all the following qualities:

》 **They are simple.** Keep language at an eighth-grade reading level to ensure a broad reach.

》 **They have a clear call to action.** Use active verbs such as "do," "sign up," "respond," evacuate," so people understand clearly what is being asked of them.

》 **They avoid confusion and misinformation.** State and repeat what is known, and explicitly state what is not known to help avoid confusion or misinformation. Allies from the crisis team can help validate the information from a third-party perspective.

》 **They are timely.** Tell the public what is known, when it is known. This might also mean being prepared to pivot, delay, or adjust messages (especially those planned for distribution ahead of time) in alignment with priorities and the rapid pace of information during a crisis.

》 **They provide contact information.** Information such as URLs, phone numbers, and alert sign-ups keep the conversation going with the audience after the initial message is sent.

》 **They are tailored to the audience.** Consider that messaging needs to be tailored so that all people can receive the intended message, taking different languages or disabilities into account. Does content need to be translated into various languages? Is it ADA-compliant? Do you have the ability to segment audiences by neighborhood and relationship to the government (e.g., residents, businesses, and visitors)?

Digital technology gives communicators access to powerful ways to broaden their messaging reach to the community, such as:

✓ Automated alerts and notifications

Automated alert systems, such as those provided by Granicus, can quickly reach residents with critical updates triggered by any number of pre-determined events or factors. Common information that can be created ahead of time and sent through these types of alerts include details on power outages, shelter locations, and any potential or ongoing road closures, all of which can be quickly deployed to email, web, or mobile phone channels.

✓ Cross-platform messaging

Because of the impact that winter storms can have on location, having a plan for cross-platform messaging as part of a Winter Storm Preparedness Communications Strategy can have a strong positive impact on outcomes. Synchronizing communication across different platforms — email, text alerts, social media, and public access channels — increases the chance that residents will receive consistent information wherever they might be during the storms. Tailoring messages to different audience segments is especially important here, as winter storms will produce unique challenges for such groups as seniors, people with disabilities, and non-English speaking communities, just to name a few.

The power of perpetual planning and refining

The annual recurrence of winter means that winter storms present a crisis for which governments must frequently be prepared. While proper planning provides the means to effectively guide a community through a winter storm, departments that reflect on their effectiveness during a crisis and use lessons learned to inform their next crisis response stand to more positively serve their communities.

This starts with a formal lessons-learned session, bringing together members of the core crisis team to discuss what went right, what could have benefited from more attention or a different approach, and what steps can be taken before the next crisis happens to capitalize upon the gains made in the team's crisis response.

As a follow-on action, the team should incorporate its findings into its crisis management plans and archive materials. For communicators, this means going back through the steps and resources of this toolkit to add and tweak as required. If a department finds that its crisis response requires a major overhaul, a more complete change management effort might be required as opposed to minor tweaks to existing documents.

An effective Winter Storm Preparedness Communications Strategy can help better prepare an organization for future weather crises, but it can also provide the key strategic elements to better plan for a variety of different sudden challenges that governmental organizations might face. Consider how lessons learned can not only address the "business as usual" in one department, but how it can positively impact communications planning for other divisions of the organization.

When executed properly, a Winter Storm Preparedness Communications Plan can not only reduce the risk of financial loss or life due to severe weather, it can help increase trust with the community, casting the government as a reliable source for timely information not just related to crisis but in other areas of daily life.

Templates and resources

As with any crisis, weather-related events can increase in severity without warning, impacting strategic planning and creating the need to adjust on the fly. To better prepare for those potential changes, these suggested messaging templates offer communicators a way to more quickly respond to crisis needs.

Sample pre-written alerts (for automated systems)

Alert 1: Severe Weather Warning

Message:

Subject Line: *Severe Winter Weather Alert: Prepare Now*

Body: *A severe winter storm is forecasted to impact our area beginning [date/time]. Please prepare by ensuring you have essential supplies, including food, water, and warm clothing. Power outages and hazardous road conditions are likely. For real-time updates, sign up for our emergency alerts at [Link].*

Alert 2: Power Outage Notification

Message:

Subject Line: *Power Outage Alert*

Body: *Due to the ongoing winter storm, power outages have been reported in [areas]. Crews are working to restore service as quickly as possible. If you experience an outage, please report it to [Utility Company Contact]. For shelter information or warming centers, visit [Link].*

Sample Copy for Notification/Email

Headline: *"Winter Storm Advisory: Stay Informed and Prepared"*

Body: *A major winter storm is expected to impact our community. Stay updated on the latest road conditions, emergency alerts, and public service updates by subscribing to our winter weather notifications.*

[Link to sign up for alerts]

[Link to resources about how to prepare]
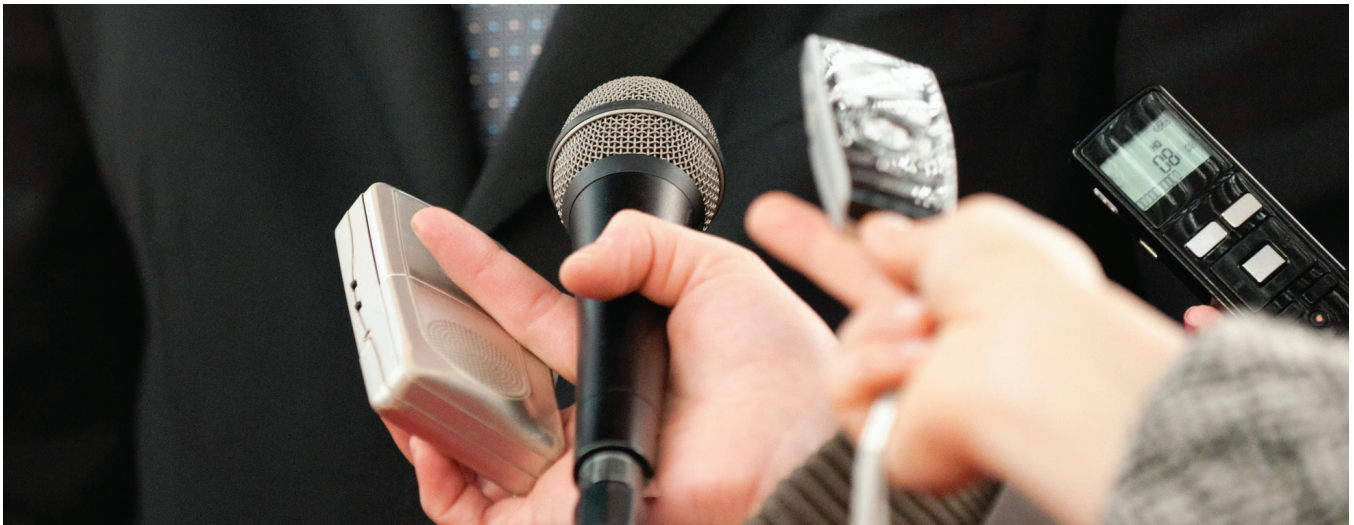
Media briefing template

Objective: *Provide a concise, clear briefing to local media that outlines your preparedness efforts and keeps the public informed through media channels.*

Body: *"Good [morning/afternoon], thank you for joining us. I'm [Your Name], [Your Position] at [Your City/County], and I want to provide you with important updates on our preparations for the upcoming winter storm. Our primary goal is to keep our residents safe, informed, and equipped to handle the weather conditions we expect over the next few days."*

Key messages

Storm overview

"We are anticipating [X] inches of snow and [wind speeds, ice accumulations, etc.]. The storm is expected to begin on [date] at approximately [time] and will likely continue through [expected duration]."

Emergency alerts and notifications

"We encourage all residents to sign up for our emergency alerts through [website or platform], where they will receive real-time updates on road conditions, power outages, and public service availability."

Road closures and snow removal

"Our public works department is prepared to begin snow removal operations as soon as conditions allow. Residents can view snowplow routes and road closures on our [website or app]. We advise avoiding unnecessary travel once the storm begins."

Public safety services

"We have activated our emergency operations team to ensure that public safety services such as police, fire, and medical response remain fully operational during the storm. Emergency shelters and warming centers will be available at [location] for anyone in need."

Power outages and utility support

"In the event of power outages, our utility partners are on standby to restore service as quickly as possible. We recommend residents take precautions now to ensure they have flashlights, extra batteries, and alternative heat sources ready."

Community outreach

"We're especially mindful of our vulnerable populations, such as seniors and residents with disabilities. Our community outreach teams are coordinating efforts to ensure they have the necessary support and resources. If you or someone you know needs assistance, please contact our hotline at [phone number]."

Safety recommendations

"As always, we urge residents to avoid driving unless absolutely necessary, stay indoors, and make sure they have enough food, water, and warmth to last throughout the storm."

Closing statement

"We will continue to provide regular updates to the media and directly to our residents through multiple channels, including email, social media, and our website. We appreciate your cooperation in helping to spread this vital information. Thank you."

Q&A

"We'll now take any questions from the media."

Winter storm preparedness FAQs for communication managers

? How do I ensure that our community receives real-time alerts?

Set up automated alert systems to deliver real-time updates via text, email, and social media. Make sure residents know how to sign up for these alerts by promoting them in pre-storm communication.

? What type of messages should I prioritize during the storm?

Focus on safety-critical information like road closures, shelter availability, power outages, and emergency contact numbers. Prepare pre-written messages for each scenario to deploy quickly.

? How can I reach residents without access to the internet?

Use local radio stations, text alerts, and automated phone calls for residents who might not have internet access. Collaborate with local organizations to distribute flyers or post information in public spaces.

? What should I do if there's misinformation spreading on social media?

Monitor social media closely for misinformation. Respond promptly with accurate updates and refer people to your official channels (website, verified social media pages, or hotline). Correct misinformation in a factual, calm manner.

? How do I ensure my communications are accessible to everyone?

Provide information in multiple languages; use simple, clear language; and make sure your digital content is accessible to residents with disabilities (e.g., ensuring your website meets ADA guidelines). Offer text-to-speech phone call options for key updates.

? What's the best way to collaborate with local media?

Prepare media kits with press releases, key talking points, and contacts for city officials. Schedule regular media briefings before, during, and after the storm to provide updates.

Winter storm preparedness checklist for communication managers

Communication becomes critical in times of natural disaster crisis. Every text sent, email blasted, or social message posted needs to inspire constituents to take life-saving or constructive action.

One of the potentially fastest-developing disasters, flash floods can catch unprepared communicators off-guard. Without an effective crisis strategy in place before disasters strike, managing the response can become an all-consuming task on top of a government team's already busy daily workload. But with proper strategies in place, communicators become an invaluable bridge-builder between subject matter experts, department leadership, the media, and the citizens they serve.

These important tips can help create effective flash flood communications strategy:

Pre-storm

Set up automated alerts

Test systems for email, SMS, and social media notifications.

Prepare pre-written messages

Draft alerts for common scenarios such as power outages, snow removal routes, and road closures.

Coordinate with public safety teams

Ensure alignment on messaging with emergency services, public works, and other critical departments.

Promote emergency alert subscriptions

Send reminders to residents via email, social media, and public signage to subscribe to emergency notifications.
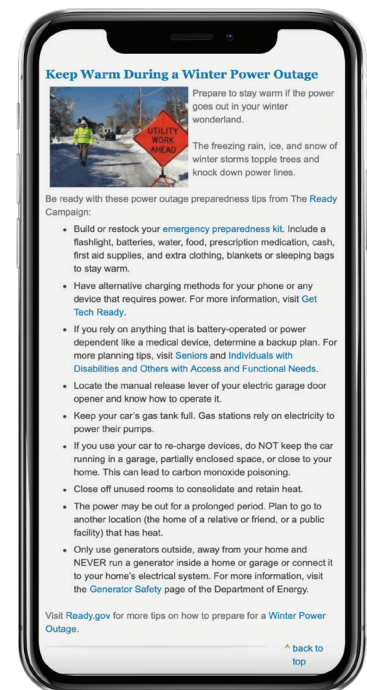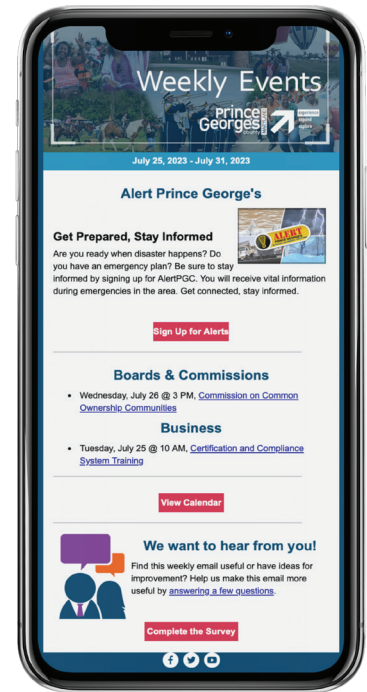
Review vulnerable population lists

Identify seniors, residents with disabilities, and other at-risk groups to ensure they receive targeted communication.departments.

Engage local media

Distribute press releases, media kits, and set up media briefings.

During the storm

Send real-time updates

Push out alerts on snow conditions, road closures, power outages, and available shelters.
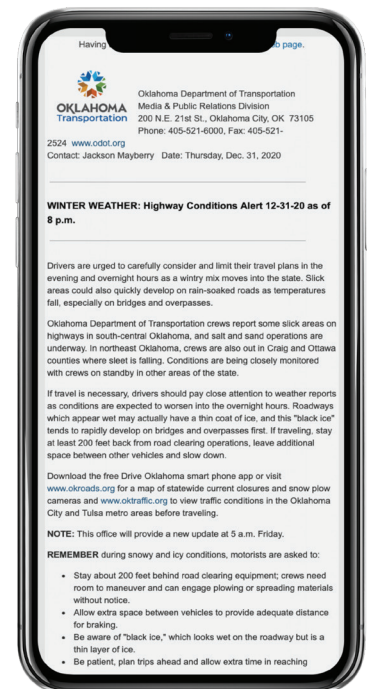
Monitor social media

Address misinformation, answer resident questions, and redirect them to official channels.

Coordinate with media outlets

Provide regular briefings and updates to local news stations.

Keep messaging consistent

Ensure all communications across email, text, social media, and media outlets are synchronized.

Post-storm

Issue safety reminders

Share guidelines for safe snow removal, driving, and staying warm post-storm.

Promote recovery resources

Provide information on utility repairs, cleanup services, and financial assistance for residents affected by the storm.

Update residents on city services

Inform residents of the status of public services, including snowplow routes, waste collection, and reopening of public buildings.
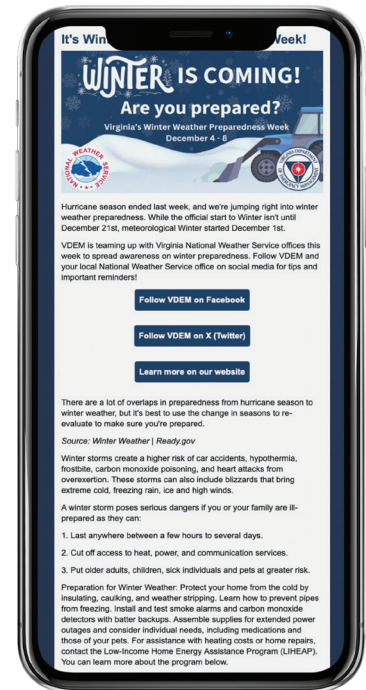
Response to communities before, during, and after natural disasters can make a significant impact on the health and wellbeing of the public. Effective strategies also help build trust in government services and reduce the influence of misinformation.

This comprehensive approach helps you proactively plan, respond, and recover from winter storms, ensuring your communities receive clear, actionable information at every stage.

DOWNLOAD THIS CHECKLIST ⬈

Find out how Granicus tools can help communicators better strategize and execute communications during crises.

Get in touch