

# Southern Regional Children's Advocacy Center



A PROGRAM OF THE  
NATIONAL CHILDREN'S ADVOCACY CENTER

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## **Critical Incident Preparation and Response**

*A Guide for Children's Advocacy Centers*

# Critical Incident Preparation and Response

Prepared by the  
***Southern Regional Children's Advocacy Center***

A program of the  
National Children's Advocacy Center

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***Training and Technical Assistance for Communities  
ESTABLISHING and STRENGTHENING  
Children's Advocacy Centers***

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# INTRODUCTION

Preparing for a critical incident can be a bit more complex than preparing for a natural disaster. It is possible to identify most potential natural disasters for an area; tornados, floods, fire, etc. Defining a public relations disaster is much more difficult. Public relations events tend to be manmade and just when you think you have heard it all; somebody will come up with a story that confounds everyone!

Examples of critical incidents may include:

- ❖ An Executive Director who mishandles agency funds.
- ❖ A crisis within a partner agency such as breaches of confidentiality, criminal allegations, poor job performance, etc.
- ❖ A MDT member charged with a crime.
- ❖ A volunteer, board member or MDT member who is charged with child molestation.
- ❖ Employee misconduct, whether job related or personal.
- ❖ Conflict between agencies.

Believe it or not, the events listed above have actually happened in CACs across the country.

In 2007, the Southern Regional Children's Advocacy Center developed a Disaster Preparedness Manual to help CACs prepare for, respond to and recover from a natural disaster. The original plan included a follow up guide to prepare for and recover from critical incidences. In July, 2008, we invited several people from across the country to meet in Houston, TX for a 2<sup>nd</sup> Disaster Summit. It quickly became evident that the process of preparing for a critical incident was not necessarily a linear process.

For the purposes of this project, the participants at the Disaster Summit developed a working definition to guide our brainstorming. We defined a critical incident as ***a manmade incident which has the potential to negatively impact your credibility or appearance of integrity.*** Whether or not the incident evolves into a full blown disaster may depend on your response up front.

As we began our brainstorming sessions, it became apparent that preparing for a critical incident or event involved putting good basic business policies and procedures in place. So the preparedness section will mention several things that are considered sound business practices, with some special consideration given to public relations and media relations.

Special thanks go to the Houston Children's Assessment Center which hosted the 2<sup>nd</sup> Disaster Summit and to the wonderful participants who gave of their time to provide wisdom, expertise and lessons learned.

We hope this manual will help guide you so that if you find your CAC involved in an incident with the potential to impact your credibility in your community, you will have the information and skills to prevent it becoming a disaster.

## DISASTER SUMMIT PARTICIPANTS

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# CRITICAL INCIDENT PREPAREDNESS

## Human Resources

Personnel policies are a very important for any organization. This is especially true when putting policies in place to manage a critical incident. Some important things to consider are:

- Include someone with human resource management and public relations expertise on your board of directors.

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- Conduct background checks on all employees, volunteers and board members.

Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_

- Define hiring practices. Check to see what state laws apply and what funders may require.

Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_

- Items that should be in your policies and procedures include:

- ◆ Policies that articulate plans for handling employees under investigation for any reason regarding leave, payment, and under what circumstances they may or may not be allowed on the premises.
- ◆ Drug and alcohol policies; for example, what is the agency's stance on an employee who might be charged with driving under the influence?
- ◆ Include infractions which might be grounds for dismissal.
- ◆ Decide what should happen if an employee is arrested or charged with any criminal act.
- ◆ What are the expectations for employees to disclose information to their supervisor or ED?

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- Think about policies relating to social networking websites and/or blogs. Is there any information that an employee could post on their personal websites which could impact the CAC?

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- Controlling the flow of information is critical during an incident. Things to consider relating to human resources:

- ◆ Choose who will help make decisions regarding dissemination of information, i.e., legal representation, executive management team, board president, clients, etc.

- ◆ Decide how much and when information will be communicated with your board of directors, MDT member agencies, donors, community partners, and funders.
- ◆ Stopping the “buzz”. Think about what information should be shared with employees and when it should be shared. Ask employees to understand that there will be some information that cannot be shared.
- ◆ Employees need to know exactly what can be shared and what cannot be shared outside of the office.
- ◆ Discuss expectations and timeframes with MDT agencies.

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- Define the CAC’s responsibility for responding to allegations against an employee or volunteer, depending on whether the allegation is work related or not.

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- Look for someone outside the agency that the Executive Director can trust to help provide support and perspective.

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- Establish a safety plan for your employees in case of a critical incident, such as an angry family member threatening an employee. Clearly articulate emergency procedures and follow up with practice drills. Include what should happen if an employee is approached away from the office.

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- Draft a statement of autonomy which explains that CACs are locally controlled in case you are asked to comment on an incident at a sister CAC. Provide training so that all employees and board members know and understand this statement.

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## **Facilities**

Some incidences may involve media on your property. Other situations may involve upset parents or perpetrators. The following can provide ideas on how to minimize the impact on your day to day operations, services to children and their families and provide for the safety and security of your staff and clients.

- Prepare a procedure for locking down your facilities in case of emergency. Consider having panic buttons installed. Be sure to include these procedures in your new employee training and orientation. Conduct practice drills.

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- Have a plan in place to deal with escalating parents, relatives or other people in your building.

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- Have a copy of the layout of your building. Be able to provide a copy to law enforcement if needed.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Establish where you will allow the media to wait for interviews, keeping in mind the need to protect the identity of your clients and to provide a child-focused environment.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Know what you can enforce with the media and what you can request. For example, can you keep them off your property or can you request that they set up off your property.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Consider appointing a “media wrangler”; a staff member responsible for monitoring the press if they are on your property.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Make a plan for what/when and how you will tell clients about an event being covered by the media.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Establish schedules to accommodate the media while not impacting client schedules.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Consider security needs.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_

## **Media**

Careful thought should be given to how to interface with the media. As previously stated, whether or not an event evolves into a disaster may be determined by how the situation is handled, this is especially true with the media. Below are some additional ideas to consider.

- Designate a spokesperson. This person should be chosen based on a certain skill set. Some specific skills needed are:
  - ◆ Knowledge of CAC and current situation
  - ◆ Good public speaking skills
  - ◆ Understanding of how to refer questions to appropriate people
  - ◆ Media training
 Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Plan for assessing the situation. Think! Is a response required? Depending on the situation, a response may or may not be in the best interest of the CAC.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Make prepared statements and practice them.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_

- Develop a list of media contacts and establish good working relationships with them during good times. Remember that positive situations also require thought about how to disseminate to enhance the image and presence of your CAC in the community.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Be prepared to counter misinformation, if it is in your best interest to do so.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Create guidelines for the press that will help to protect clients. Can you keep media from filming clients coming and going from your campus?  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Develop a communication plan for sharing information with people who need to know, including employees, board members, funders, clients, volunteers, MDT partners, etc. Who needs to be notified before something is released in the media?  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_

## **Information Technology**

- Establish agency policies regarding handling portable media, such as flash drives, CDs, DVDs, etc. Include policies regarding the disposal of laptops.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Include in your IT policies process for reporting lost data, such as laptops.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Develop policies relating to access of information. Who has access to passwords, etc.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Give consideration of what can be communicated electronically within and outside of the agency.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Seek outside expertise regarding the security of your IT systems.  
Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_

## Finances

The most important way to avoid a financial critical incident is to have good sound finance practices and policies in place, with good checks and balances. Some other things to consider are:

- Create policies to govern petty cash accounts. Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Have clear written policies regarding use of company credit cards. Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Purchase bonds for employees. Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Provide training in financial management for executive director. Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Plan for diversified funding, so if one funding stream ends or decreases, the CAC can continue services. Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Have a person with expertise in finance on the board. Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Conduct annual independent audits. Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Establish sound checks and balances. Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Institute internal oversight with board review. Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_
- Provide training for the board of directors so they understand their role in the financial oversight of the agency. Date Completed \_\_\_\_\_

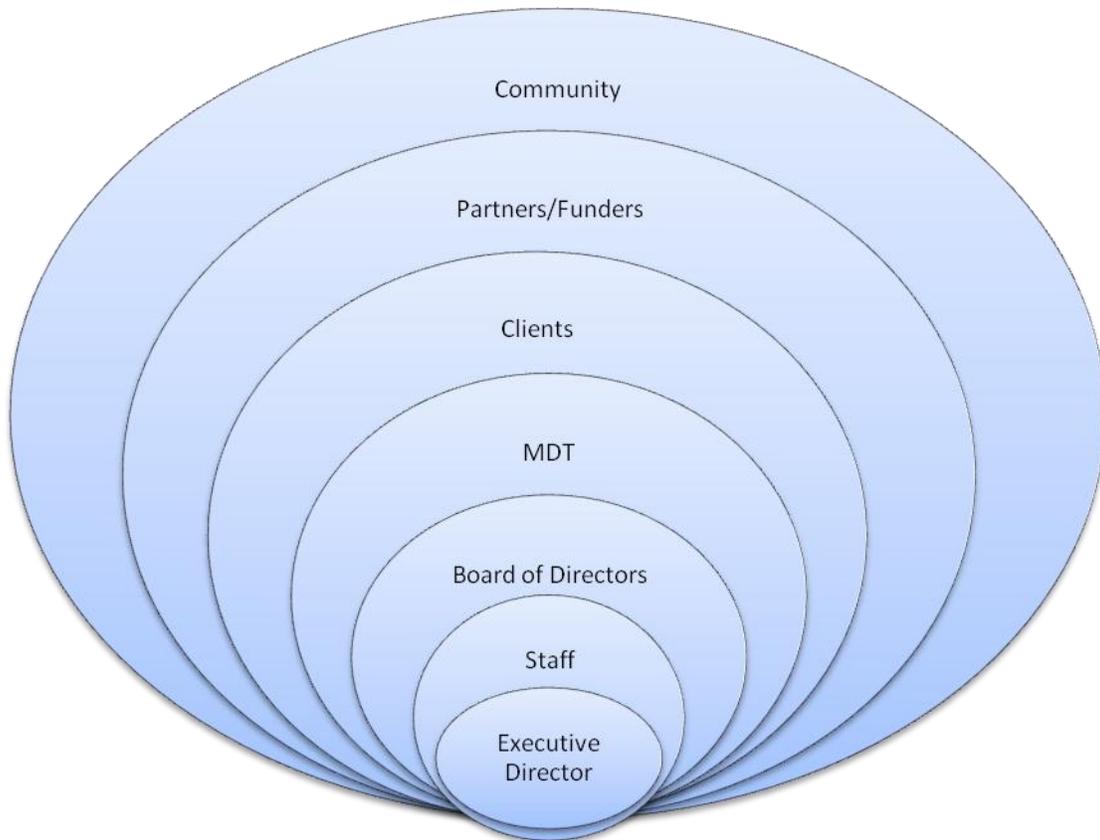
### Critical Incident Reporting Requirements

The National Children's Alliance requires its members to notify NCA of certain critical incidents occurring at or involving local CACs or State Chapters. Please see Attachment A for NCA's policy.

# RESPONSE

## Assessment

- ❑ Critically assess the current situation and begin to develop a strategy for recovery. Some things to consider:
  - Who needs to be contacted immediately? Some people to consider are, board chair, legal representation, key staff.
  - What are going to be your guiding principles as you address the situation?
  - Is there someone you trust outside the agency who can help you look at the situation from every perspective and help formulate a plan?
  - Your strategy should include a plan for each system:



- ❑ Assess the level of impact and decide who needs to be at the table to deal with the incident.
- ❑ Before communicating with anyone, write out what you intend to say. Create bullet points that will be easy to follow. This ensures that your message is consistent with all board members, employees and the media.

- Debrief the situation with key staff. Give them specific instructions about what can and cannot be said to employees, board, and clients. Consider providing bullet points in writing so there is not confusion on what can be shared.
- Designate a public spokesperson that will be the voice for the agency and get them up to speed on your plan. This person should have the following skill set:
  - Knowledge of CAC and current situation
  - Good public speaking skills
  - Understanding of how to refer questions to appropriate people
  - Media training
- Be sure everyone, board members, staff, partners, etc. understands the process for referring the media to the designated spokesperson.
- Create a running document of events, conversations, actions taken and what needs to be done. Do not assume you are going to remember every conversation you have in the midst of a crisis. Keep clear records for yourself. **However, be aware that records can be subpoenaed.**
- Expect that it will take a long time to truly resolve.
- Draw from other agencies; sister CAC, your regional CAC, NCA, State Chapter, etc. for support and help.

## INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

### Human Resources Staff, Board, MDT, Clients, Partners and Funders

- Have an open door policy so staff can share concerns.
- Remember: Transparency, Transparency, Transparency! Transparency is important. As much as possible, have open communication with staff, partners and donors. Be up front with people that there is information that you are not at liberty to share.
- Assess the need for debriefing and/or crisis counseling for your staff.
- Share with your staff offers of support the agency might receive from other agencies.
- Get input from staff about what they see as challenges and what they need in order to move past the event.

- At the appropriate time, communicate to the staff that the agency will move forward. Do not stay mired in the crisis.
- Refocus staff on their job. . . not on the past crisis.
- Keep reiterating the mission of the agency to staff. Be sure that everyone still agrees with the mission.
- Provide opportunities for teambuilding among the staff.
- Anticipate a long process of healing for the staff. Depending on the situation, it could take a couple of years to get past an incident.
- Contact funders and apprise them of the situation. Address the needs of the funders. Reestablish relationships and credibility.
- Expect other agencies to enter the picture. Establish a solid working relationship and make sure you are at the table and included in conversations. Understand your role and how you can assist them.
- Inform clients of status. Make sure they get a consistent message from staff, board, MDT, etc. Create prepared statements with bullet points so that staff knows exactly what can be said. This also ensures a consistent message.

## EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS

### Media

- Before responding to an incident in the media, stop and think. Is a response required? Does it benefit the agency?
- Compose a written media statement, giving precise information without adding speculation. Practice your statement.
- Anticipate what questions may be asked and formulate written responses.
- When responding to questions in an interview:
  - Answer with “just the facts.”
  - Do not give your personal opinion. It does not matter.
  - Do not assume that anything is “off the record.”
  - Always assume that the cameras are rolling.

- Avoid “No comment.” Frame a statement such as, “We are not able to respond at this time because of the on-going investigation, but. . .”
- Be proactive. Notify staff and board before something is made public in the media.
- Do not answer on behalf of another agency. Refer relevant questions to those agencies.
- Do not write an editorial during a crisis. These should be written when positive things need to be publicized.
- Reach out to others in crisis.

## Community Crisis Situation

Sometimes communities experience a crisis and may ask the local CAC to plan a role in the recovery. This can be a wonderful opportunity to establish or strengthen your presence in the community; however, there are some important things to consider.

- Will responding to the crisis pull you from your mission?
- Do you have the capacity to help?
- Is your mission temporarily suspended because of the community crisis? In other words, is law enforcement so involved with the community crisis that they are not processing sexual abuse cases in the short term?
- If you do choose to respond, develop a process to identify or screen professionals that you might pull in to help.
- Understand and know the local, state and federal agencies and their role in the disaster. Make sure you are at the table or in on conversations that will involve service you may be asked to provide.
- Insert your expertise to insure you are minimizing any opportunity for children to be victimized.

## Relevant Resources for Community Crisis Planning

**Louisiana Foundation Against Sexual Assault (LaFASA)**

**National Sexual violence Resource Center (NSVRC)**

*Sexual Violence in Disasters*

This guide, written by Alisa Klein, offers readers important information about sexual violence and disaster responses. It presents a range of recommendations from suggesting small changes to developing comprehensive plans, making preparations, and coordinating for-reaching policy change. The guide is arranged according to phases of a disaster, and the color-coded phases offer a multitude of things to consider. The “Getting Started” work sheets in the back have been designed to facilitate the process of disaster planning. (This is a large document and may take time to load.)

**Access guide at:** <http://www.nsvrc.org/publications/default.aspx?PublicationTypeId=24>

## **End Child Prostitution, Child Pornography and Trafficking of Children for Sexual Purposes (ECPAT)**

### ***Protecting Children from Sexual Exploitation & Sexual Violence in Disaster and Emergency Situations***

This manual, as the title suggests, is about how to protect children from sexual violence and sexual exploitation, specifically in disaster and emergency situations. It is not intended to be an academic report but instead is a practical guide that we hope will be of use to people working directly in the field. The aim is to provide fundamental information to assist personnel working in emergency situations in responding to protect children, in terms of what can be done before disaster strikes (which might be called ‘*mitigation*’ efforts), in the immediate aftermath (the ‘*response*’) and in the longer term reconstruction phase (sometimes called the ‘*recovery*’). We have also included recommended actions and key considerations to be taken into account in the event of sexual violence or sexual exploitation.

**Access manual at:** [http://www.ecpat.net/EI/EI\\_publications.asp](http://www.ecpat.net/EI/EI_publications.asp)

## **National Child Traumatic Stress Network**

### ***Psychological First Aid***

Psychological First Aid is an evidence-informed approach for assisting children, adolescents, adults, and families in the aftermath of disaster and terrorism.

**Access manual at:** [http://www.nctsn.net/nccts/nav.do?pid=typ\\_terr\\_resources\\_pfa](http://www.nctsn.net/nccts/nav.do?pid=typ_terr_resources_pfa)

## Appendix A

### Policy on Critical Incident Reporting

National Children's Alliance requires its members to notify NCA of certain critical incidents occurring at or involving local Children's Advocacy Centers (CACs).

For this purpose, a critical incident has been defined as follows:

- **Serious Violations of Law or Regulations**, namely, credible preliminary findings involving significant issues that may place the member organization at risk or may result in a civil or criminal penalties or other serious violations of either local, state, or federal law.
- **Significant Changes in Operation Resulting in Non-compliance with the NCA Standards for Accredited Members.**
- **External Impact**, namely, any other significant case which could possibly generate negative print, television, or radio coverage (not including letters to editors, blogs, or personal correspondence); negative legislative or regulatory attention; or other such situation that could impact NCA and its brand, reputation or operations.

### Reporting Procedure

- Critical Incident reporting should come from the CAC's executive director, other senior CAC personnel, or board chair.
- Within 24 hours of learning of any Critical Incident, the NCA member must notify NCA's Director of Member Services of the matter. This should first be accomplished via a phone call to 800/239-9950 and then by submitting the attached form entitled "Critical Incident Report" via facsimile to 202/548-0099.
- The Director of Member Services will serve as the central point of contact to facilitate prompt, efficient, and consistent communications between the reporting organization and NCA.
- The CAC must make follow up reports to NCA at a minimum of every 3 months (or more frequently as determined by the NCA Executive Director) until the matter has been resolved. A final report must be made detailing the disposition of the matter at hand.

### Examples

- A CAC board member has been arrested and his affiliation with the CAC has been widely reported in the local media. ***This matter should be reported.***
- The CAC's medical provider has terminated her contract with the CAC and medical services are temporarily unavailable according to protocol. A search is underway to find a new provider. In the meantime, clients are being transported to the CAC in a neighboring jurisdiction for medical services. ***This matter should NOT be reported.***
- The parents of an alleged victim are upset with the case outcome and have sued members of the MDT including the CAC itself. While the case may have no merit, ***this matter should be reported.***

**National Children’s Alliance  
Critical Incident Report**

**TO:** Director of Member Services  
National Children’s Alliance

**FROM:** (Name of CAC)

**DATE:**

In accordance with the NCA Policy on Critical Incident Reporting, the following Critical Incident is brought to your attention.

Name and Title of Person Reporting:

Name and Address of CAC:

Reason for Report:

- Serious Potential Violation of Law or Regulations
- Significant Changes in Operation Resulting in Non-compliance with the NCA Standards for Accredited Members
- External Impact

Brief Description of Issue:

Action taken to date; by whom:

Assistance/support needed (if any):

Please submit to  
National Children’s Alliance, 516 C Street NE, Washington, DC 20002  
fax: 202/548-0099