



Lincoln County Health Department (LCHD)

Risk Communications Plan

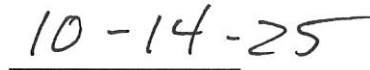
September 2025

This document contains protocols, procedures and resources to execute emergency response communications. Should an actual event occur, the response may vary depending on the type of emergency. This plan will be reviewed and updated annually or as necessary. This version supersedes any previous versions of this document.

This document is hereby approved for implementation and supersedes all previous editions.



Signature



Date

Dr. Brad Black, MD
Health Officer



Signature



Date

Amy Fantozzi,
Board of Health Chair



Signature



Date

Kathi Hooper,
Health Department Director

Record of Changes

Date	Revisions Made	Approved by:	Distribution Date
3/2017	Total re-write		
09/2025	Change formatting, update BOH Chair, update HAN cover sheet example, updated media contacts, removed press release information form.		

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Introduction

Communication with the community will take place any time there is a public health concern or event. The Lincoln County Health Department Risk Communication Plan was developed to serve as the primary mode for communicating with the public and media during an actual or perceived public health crisis. The intent of the plan is to supplement communication activities that cannot meet the demand for public information when it escalates beyond the day-to-day ability to supply it. This plan may be activated to support the County's Emergency Operations Plans (EOP), or it may be activated proactively by the Public Health Officer (PHO) or designated.

Section I: Purpose, Scope and Assumptions

Purpose

This plan was developed to ensure public notification and education to save lives, mitigate loss and assist in preventing further catastrophes. The role is to provide complete, accurate, timely, consistent and credible information to the media and public. Therefore, the purpose of the Risk Communications Plan is to:

- **Gather and disseminate incident data:** Obtain verified, up-to-date information from appropriate sources, including subject-matter experts within the Department, the Incident Commander and staff of the emergency management.
- **Inform the public: Provide** accurate and comprehensive information about a public health incident, considering the unique needs of special audiences, such as the elderly, people with disabilities, minorities, schools and individuals who cannot normally be reached by mass communication. It is critical to provide emergency information in a timely fashion.
- **Analyze public perceptions of the response:**
 - Stop rumors and correct misinformation in a timely fashion.
 - Provide response agencies with insight into community information needs and expectations.
- **Share information with partners and stakeholders:** Communicate with designated public information counterparts, regional health jurisdictions and medical centers.

Scope

The Risk Communication Plan is limited in scope to events that affect or potentially affect public health. The implementation and responsibility of activation of this plan is the PHO or appointed designee. The PHO responds to all media inquiries and coordinates the release of information to the public on behalf of LCHD. The PHO will work in conjunction with the department Public Information Officer (PIO), county PIO and the Joint Incident Command (JIC), if applicable.

Assumptions

- Some events will bring out the media in force, creating many demands on emergency public information systems.
- When a public health emergency or incident has occurred, any information is released, and the list of appropriate recipients will be reviewed and approved by the PHO or appointed designee prior to being released.
- Key contacts may vary depending on the nature of the situation.
- The public in Lincoln County will need and want safety information and real time status reports on risks, threats and emergency operations in Lincoln County.
- Public information needs will change as incidents develop.
- In the absence of real time updates, the public and news media may propagate rumors and misinformation about Lincoln County and the incident operations.

Section II: Roles and Responsibilities

The Public Health Manager or designee will serve as the PIO for LCHD. The PIO is responsible for assuring that the appropriate information is provided to the public, county officials and community partners. The information must be accurate, timely and consistent with other agencies.

The PIO is responsible for:

- Establishing communications links and release information to local agencies, jurisdictions, stakeholders and partners, media, DPHHS stakeholders and the county Emergency Management
- Gathering and coordinating information about the emergency with federal, state, county and city spokespersons
- Developing communication and outreach products (i.e. talking points, briefings, fact sheets, news releases and public service announcements)
- Notifying media of emergencies and provide initial information regarding the event
- Reading and approving all media advisories before release
- Acting as spokesperson or designate duties
- Ensuring preparation for media briefings and preparing other speakers before interviews
- Scheduling periodic media briefings
- Moderating all news briefings, advising the media on protocol
- Responding to inquiries from local, state and national government agencies
- Coordinating emergency public information with other local, state and federal agencies
- Analyzing the impacted community to identify diverse groups which may require additional planning to ensure the information about the crisis is received and understood
- Analyzing public perception of ongoing events and adjust, if necessary, to messages
- Maintaining such logs or other records as deemed necessary

Sections III: Concept of Operations

In the event of a public health emergency, crisis, or disaster, this plan will be implemented by the PHO or designee. Activation is triggered by the emergency's Incident Commander. Any information released and the list of appropriate recipients will be reviewed and approved by the PHO or their designee **prior to being released.**

A review of this process will occur with each use and steps to improve efficiency will be made as they are identified. This plan will also be reviewed annually by the PHEP coordinator to remain current and accurate.

Communication Methods:

Possible methods to disseminate information.

- Landline telephones
- Fax
- Cell phones
- Email & newsletters
- Flyers
- Surveys & feedback forms
- Notes home with students
- Calling trees
- Town halls & public meetings
- CodeRed
- Text alert systems
- Health Alert Network
- Billboards & digital signs
- County and Health Department websites
- Social Media
- Press releases & media briefings
- Door to door canvassing
- Translated materials
- Accessible formats
- Community Health Workers

Health Alert Network (HAN) Protocol

Introduction: The Montana Health Alert Network (HAN) is a network used to distribute important health messages from Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and the Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services (DPHHS). HAN messages are typically received from DPHHS and may address a broad spectrum of health-related issues. Lincoln County Health Department is expected to review these messages and to respond to them in a timely manner, disseminating the information as appropriate.

Purpose: This plan was developed to ensure that HAN messages from DPHHS are received by Lincoln County Public Health are distributed to appropriate audiences to protect public health.

Procedures for response

Receiving HAN Message:

- HAN messages may be sent from DPHHS to Lincoln County Public Health by email and phone to primary and secondary HAN contacts listed in the Public Health Directory. It will be sent by telephone in the form of an automated message providing a call back number for more information and instructions for receipt confirmation.
- When a HAN message is received the contact will acknowledge receipt and evaluate the content of the HAN message to determine its urgency and distribution criteria.
- 24/7 receipt of messages:
 - Messages may be received by email at zsherbo@libby.org or by phone at 406-334-4595. Email messages can be accessed during non-business hours by primary and secondary HAN contacts.
 - Staff will be assigned to monitor email and office phone Monday – Friday.
 - Staff will be assigned to monitor email 24/7

Distributing HAN Message:

- All email or fax messages will use a cover letter designed for HAN distribution with key contact information (see Appendix A). The message will be edited, and local information will be added as appropriate.
- The primary or secondary HAN contact will review the contents of the message and determine the appropriate recipients. List may include, but is not limited to:

○ Healthcare Providers	○ Emergency Management
○ Hospitals	○ Board of Health
○ Clinics	○ Media
○ Labs	○ Pharmacies
○ Schools	
○ Emergency Services	
○ Law Enforcement	
○ Functional Needs	
○ Sanitarians	

- A HAN message that requires an immediate response during non-business hours will be distributed by email as usual, however, may also be delivered by telephone or in person at the direction of the Public Health Officer.

Local Health Alert messages

Local health alert messages may be created to address local situations requiring increased vigilance and response or to address emerging situations.

- All local messages will be sent with approval from the Health Department Director, Sanitarian or Health Officer
- All local alerts regarding emerging situations will be sent to state officials at hhshan@mt.gov

Levels of Health Alert Messages

Health Alert messages will be sent using a system which duplicates the state and federal system of:

- Alert – conveys the highest level of importance, warrants immediate action or attention
- Advisory – provides important information for a specific incident or situation; may not require immediate action
- Update – provides updated information regarding an incident or situation; unlikely to require immediate action

Testing of HAN system

HAN contact information will be tested, reviewed and updated on a quarterly basis.

Section V: Appendices

Appendix A – Public Information Guide

IMMEDIATE Public Information Guide

BE FIRST, BE RIGHT, BE CREDIBLE

1. **Assess the crisis**
 - What information do you need? What do you know? What don't you know?
 - What is the extent and degree of the crisis?
 - What steps are being taken by what government agencies?
 - What should be public do?
 - When will you get back to them with more info?
2. **Identify your audiences:**
 - Who is your audience?
 - What will be your audience's greatest concerns?
3. **Determine communication methods:**
 - Consider the best way to reach your audience. Determine when, where and how you will communicate with them.
 - Prepare alternate methods for message delivery.
 - Schedule message updates.
4. **Develop your three IMMEDIATE key messages:**
 - Think about the top three things your audiences need to know.
 - Support your messages with accurate information.
 - Enhance your message with experts who are knowledgeable and skilled in speaking with the media.
5. **Focus on message integrity:**
 - Be honest about what you know and don't know.
 - Be clear about what is being done and when you anticipate having more information.
 - Be explicit about what the public can and should do.
 - Don't report information that you do not know with *certainty* to be credible.
6. **Create a crisis communication strategy if the crisis will expand beyond one operational period.**

Appendix B – HAN Cover Sheet Template for Fax/Email

Lincoln County Public Health Emergency Preparedness

HEALTH ALERT NETWORK

Date: xx/xx/xxxx

This is a Lincoln County Alert Network Advisory: xxxx-xx

This HAN message carries a recommendation of: UPDATE

Please see attachment for HAN information.

Categories of Health Alert Messages

Health Alert: Conveys the highest level of importance about a public health incident.

Health Advisory: Provides important information about a public health incident.

Health Update: Provides updated information about a public health incident.

Information Service: Passes along low level priority messages that do not fit other HAN categories and are for informational purposes.



Lincoln County Health Department
418 Mineral Avenue, Libby, MT 59923
Phone: 406-283-2447 | Fax 406-283-2466

Appendix C – Media Contacts

Media	Contact	Address	Phone	2 nd phone	Fax	Email
Newspapers						
The Western News	General Manager- Suzanne Resch	P.O.Box 1377, Libby	406-293-4124		406-293-7178	sresch@thewesternnews.com
Kootenai Valley Record	Ray Stout	507 Mineral Ave, Libby	406-293-2424			kvrecord@gmail.com
The Montanian		317 California Ave, Libby	406-901-3644			news@montanian.com
Flathead Beacon Productions	Media Director- Hunter D'Antuono	69 North Main St, Suite B Kalispell	406-257-9220			hunter@flatheadbeacon.com
Daily Interlake		727 E. Idaho, Kalispell	406-755-7000			community@dailyinterlake.com
Tobacco Valley News	Nikki Meyer	PO Box 307, Eureka	406-297-2514			nikki@tobaccovalleynews.com
Radio						
Montana Public Radio University of Montana		32 Campus Dr, Missoula	406-243-4931			ISDN@mtpr.org
Television						
MontanaSky		912 West 9 th St., Libby	406-752-4335	406-293-4335		support@montanasky.net