



Template for Communications During a COVID-19 Outbreak (For Leaders and Communicators)

The Leadership Conference of Women Religious recommends that all leaders have a plan in place in the event of an outbreak of COVID-19 in your motherhouse, care center, or other large household of sisters. This plan can help the congregation/province communicate with transparency, timeliness, and trust to both internal and external audiences while calming fears and anxiety.

The following is a template for a plan that each congregation/province can adapt to its own realities and communication practices.

LCWR recommends that each congregation complete the following:

- Identify internal audiences and decide how to communicate regularly with them about what you are doing during the outbreak. (*Clear, supportive and frequent communications during this time are essential.*) (see page 2)
- Prepare for questions from external audiences about your care of your sisters during the outbreak. (see page 3)
- Prepare scripted talking points concerning COVID-19 in general and the congregation/province's response that can be used when speaking with families or other parties concerned about your members (see page 4)

Sample Communications to Your Internal Audience in the Event of an Outbreak

*(May include sisters in the motherhouse/care center, sisters on mission, employees
Diocesan congregations might want to also include their bishop.)*

Communications to the internal audience should be proactive and take place as soon as possible after the outbreak has occurred

Talking Points:

- (X number) of our sisters have tested positive for the coronavirus. We are working closely with the local Department of Health to ensure that these sisters are receiving all the care they need.
- Care and safety of our sisters and staff is of utmost importance to us at this time. We are working with the Department of Health to ensure that all precautions are being taken to contain the virus and prevent any further spread.
- We have been following the protocols regarding the coronavirus put in place by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention.
- Every sister's prayer is needed at this time. Thank you for all that you are doing to follow the guidelines for prevention of this illness.
- Remind the sisters that they need to refer any inquiry from a reporter to the Communication Office. Ask them to refrain from speculation and spreading rumors among friends, family, and coworkers.

If an Employee Tests Positive

If an employee in one of your residences who has had contact with your sisters tests positive, you should inform the sisters in the residence.

Talking Points:

- We have received news that one of our employees tested positive. We have been in constant contact with the local health department. The department is informed of our practices and has no new recommendations for us.
- We must recognize HIPAA regulations about not disclosing a person's medical information, however, we will be as transparent as possible with you for the common good of the community.

Because of privacy rights, do not share the name of the employee without the employee's permission.

Sample Communications to Any External Audience in the Event of an Outbreak

(May include the media as well as heads of sponsored ministries, volunteers, benefactors, vicar for religious, other local/regional leaders of religious congregations)

Communications to external audiences takes place ONLY if the congregation is contacted by an outside entity asking for information about a confirmed case.

Message:

The congregation leadership team is working with our local Department of Health after (number) sisters in our (motherhouse/care facility) tested positive for the coronavirus. We are taking immediate steps to address this issue and mitigate further spread. Our public health officials are by our side as we remain committed to the well-being and safety of both our sisters and coworkers.

Keep the information you share about the outbreak to the very minimal. You may wish to:

- Add a sentence that refers to your charism or how the sisters are praying for all impacted by the coronavirus.
- Refer people to your website if you have information there about what your sisters are doing during the pandemic, resources they have found helpful, etc.

If you are contacted by the media for information, **do not ignore a reporter's request and do not reply with "no comment."** Transparent communication with the public is important at this time. You have several options for responding, including:

1. Adapt the statement above for your congregation and submit it in writing to the reporter
2. Ask that the local health officials with whom you are working to respond to the reporter on your behalf
3. If you choose to speak directly to a reporter, be sure to say only what is in your written statement.

While you are under no obligation to report a case to the media, and while you have an obligation to respect the privacy rights of every sister, if a sister agrees to have her name made public, you can do so. This pandemic may be a time when a sister would like to dismiss her concerns for her own privacy for the greater good of providing information to anyone she has come into contact with.

If an Employee Tests Positive

If you are contacted by an external audience, including reporters, asking for confirmation about an employee who has tested positive, confirm this saying: We have been in constant contact with the local health department. The department is informed of our practices and has no new recommendations for us. Refer any questions to the local health department.

Suggested Talking Points for Answering Questions About Your Response to COVID-19 from Family Members or Others Concerned About Your Members and Public Safety

What is the congregation doing to prevent the other sisters and your employees from getting COVID-19?

Our leadership is in constant contact with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, the state Department of Health, and local public health officials. They are following the most up-to-date recommendations and guidelines to ensure the wellbeing and safety of our sisters and staff.

How are you responding since one of the sisters became tested positive with COVID-19?

We are taking immediate steps to address the issue and mitigate further spread. Our public health officials are by our side as we remain committed to the wellbeing and safety of both our sisters and staff.

How are the sisters being updated and how can I get in touch with them during this time?

Our current reality of no visitors is a heart-wrenching one. We understand how hard it is for anyone not to be able to see the sisters these days, especially if one is your own relative. Our dedicated staff in the motherhouse/care facility are ensuring the well-being of all the sisters. (Describe here some of the care and attention each sister is receiving.)

When I call the motherhouse/care facility to ask about Sister ____, my call goes to voicemail. How can I talk to a real person to learn how Sister __ is?

All our calls are presently answered through voice mail. As frustrating as that may feel right now, it is critical that all our staff are in the front lines with our sisters as much as possible. Voicemails are checked on a regular basis and staff will return your call. *(If your motherhouse phone system is not staffed by a person, a congregation may consider placing a similar message on its voicemail system.)*

What are you planning to do for the funeral if a sister dies during this time?

Our community highly values the life of each sister and we promise that if any sister dies during this time, she will receive a service that is consistent with the beauty of the funerals of our sisters who have died in the past. For now, our plan is this: *(adapt according to your plan – i.e., we livestream all our services from our chapel and provide the family members with a link – or -- the sister will be buried now but we will hold a memorial services at a later time at a time that is mutually decided with the sister's family)*