

# Help Me Grow (HMG) Crisis Response System Enhancement: Crisis Communication Strategy

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## Introduction

In response to COVID-19, the HMG National Center partnered with Spring Impact<sup>1</sup> and the Childhood Prosperity Lab<sup>2</sup> to elevate strategies being deployed within HMG systems across the country. The highlighted strategy herein represents the tactics that several affiliates<sup>3</sup> used in their COVID-19 responses, and aims to elevate universal practices for crisis response work moving forward.

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## Summary

In times of crisis families often experience surges in needs, disruptions to traditional support, and disparate information on crisis-response resources.<sup>4</sup> The number of resources may be extremely limited or enormous depending on the context. Navigating these dynamics in the midst of crisis, is often incredibly overwhelming and tends to lead to underutilization of critically-necessary and available resources.

The **Crisis Communication Strategy** practices in this brief leverage an affiliate's existing infrastructure and functions to identify, organize, and communicate the most relevant resources to families in a way that is highly targeted and actionable during crises.

<sup>1</sup> Spring Impact is a nonprofit social enterprise born out of a frustration of seeing social organizations constantly reinventing the wheel and wasting scarce resources. Using a combination of successful and tested commercial and social sector principles while drawing on extensive practical expertise, we help organizations identify, design and implement the right scale model and strategy, enabling them to solve social problems at scale.

<sup>2</sup> Childhood Prosperity Lab (the Lab) seeks to help children flourish, thrive and succeed by building the capacity and transforming the culture of organizations serving and working on behalf of children. Childhood Prosperity Lab helps non-profit organizations, companies, government agencies, foundations, and networks enhance their support of children, families, and communities by helping them utilize new strategies, tools, and resources to advance their efforts and ensure they reach their desired level of impact.

<sup>3</sup> A special thanks to all the affiliates who contributed to the development of these insights: HMG Long Island, HMG North Texas, HMG Pierce County, HMG Washington, HMG Alameda County, and HMG California.

<sup>4</sup> In this brief, crisis response 'resources' are the materials and services that activate or become newly available in times of crisis.

## Relationship to HMG Core Components

- Centralized Access Point (CAP)
- Family & Community Outreach

For more information on these Components please see [here](#). More details on this system enhancement's relationship with the Core Components is below.

### Affiliate Highlight

Prior to COVID-19, **HMG Long Island** leveraged text-based communication structures informed by Disaster and Trauma psychology. "In times of crisis and stress, families can't take in information. We need to give them something to hold onto" said Melissa Passarelli, Programs Director for Docs for Tots - the system's organizing entity.



The COVID-19 crisis validates this approach, and forms the basis for HMG Long Island's elevated crisis communications.

### Context

At the outset of the crisis and stay-in-place orders, HMG Long Island's CAP received a surge of support requests primarily from families seeking basic need supports, e.g. food, diapers, and childcare. In those initial weeks the system was forced to navigate:

- 386% increase in calls; 93% on basic needs compared to 30% pre-pandemic
- Dramatic shifts in the available services for families, with previously known resources closing and new crisis-specific resources becoming available
- A need to communicate information with families in a way that reached them where they were, reflected their priorities, and enabled action

### Action

In crisis communications, HMG Long Island focused on sharing the most relevant resources through mediums that were most comfortable for families. This allowed the affiliate to double down on existing communication practices as well as develop new processes, such as:

- Focusing Family Resource Specialist capacity on high-impact activities, including
  - Updating the resource library, prioritizing partners which historically received the most referrals and the types of agencies most aligned with incoming CAP data, i.e. basic need support agencies
- Prioritizing processing and responding to support requests with the most helpful and relevant information
  - Specifically, specialists transitioned some initial intake processes from calls to a website-based texting platform, Ring Central. This leveraged parents' comfort with cellphones, increased the efficiency of communications, and provided an easily accessible record of support applying "actionability" principles of disaster communications
- Leveraging a mass texting platform, Bright by Text, to complement bespoke communication strategies
  - The platform allowed the affiliate to highlight community events, food drives, and similar initiatives in a highly targeted manner e.g. reaching specific zip codes
  - It also provided opportunities to share ongoing positive parenting messages to enrolled families. This allowed HMG Long Island to supply

core HMG developmental messages in a time of isolation and stress

“Follow up” activities that pre-dated the crisis and the related metrics were deprioritized due to the nature and urgency of the new requests. Developmental referrals were not moving due to agency closures, so that follow-up was natural option for de-prioritization, allowing HMG Long Island to redirect resources towards its communication strategies.

**Key takeaway**

The application of the Crisis Communication Strategy can look very different depending on the context in which it is being applied, but the principles and core components remain the same.<sup>s</sup>

By leveraging this strategy, HMG Long Island was able to effectively pivot the content and methods through which it communicated and empowered families throughout the crisis to meet fundamental needs.

**Detailed Definition of the System Enhancement**

**Objective of the System Enhancement:** Effectively communicate the most relevant information to families in a way that enables action and supports families to meet their children’s needs during times of crisis.

**Core Components of the System Enhancement:**

<p><b>Updated Resource Library</b></p>	<p><u>Aggregate, organize resources with proactive and reactive methods</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Proactive research and outreach to update existing Resource Library at the onset of crisis             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>◦ Helpful hint: Use CAP and historical data to prioritize the partners and services which historically received the most referrals and/or requests</li> </ul> </li> <li>• Prepare reactive approaches to review and organize the influx of external outreach and support services that will come to the affiliate</li> </ul> <p><u>Ensure resources are highly actionable for overwhelmed families</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Collect direct links to services e.g. direct link to applications, phone numbers including extensions, etc.</li> <li>• Update information on services as frequently as possible</li> <li>• Helpful hint: Listen to parents. The real time feedback they provide on availability, quality, and usefulness of the referral in a crisis are priceless. In a crisis parents are partners</li> </ul>
<p><b>Right Message</b></p>	<p><u>Identify and prioritize resources most relevant for families in context</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Frequently use data to: (A) inform wider community discussion and action, e.g. weekly stakeholder meeting; and (B) identify crisis needs and tailor messaging by need, location, and other key characteristics</li> </ul> <p><u>Tailor communication efforts to reflect family priorities</u></p>

<sup>s</sup> HMG North Texas also deployed this system enhancement, but instead of leveraging texting platforms, the affiliate developed one-page and multiple page resource compilations, shared via email and Google Drive. These documents were updated and shared periodically during the crisis. Specifically, the messaging focused on sharing only the most relevant and actionable resources with families so as not to further overwhelm them.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Identify and frame messages directly on real-time challenges, e.g. basic needs, overwhelming number of resources, parental/broader familial support</li> <li>• Ensure messaging enables practical action</li> <li>• Helpful hint: Be open to pivoting work / immediate response efforts towards basic needs of families, particularly in emergency response given the implications on child wellness</li> </ul>
<b>Right Place and Time</b>	<p><u>Meet parents “where they are” i.e. leverage communication channels families are already using</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use touch points and messengers where families are already seeking support e.g. through CAP or other community actors such as food bank distributions</li> <li>• Leverage existing and preferred communication channels, e.g. mobile communications via social media or texts</li> <li>• Leverage mass media (e.g. social and traditional media)</li> <li>• Helpful Hint: Don’t be afraid the leverage partner expertise and communications functions to reach parents</li> </ul> <p><u>Prioritize timeliness of communications</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure communications maximize parental time. Time, especially in crisis, is a critical resource of families</li> <li>• Set expectations with families, follow up, give assurance, etc.</li> </ul>

**Structural Requirements of the System Enhancement:**

Mission Alignment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Be open and responsive to align messaging with family needs, including a willingness to shift focus towards basic needs and holistic family health</li> <li>• Cultivate relationships with community actors and providers to reflect the social determinants of health (i.e. basic needs)</li> </ul>
Data	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Leverage quality data sources and partners who accurately reflect family needs to the wider system of stakeholders</li> </ul>
Staff to Distill Message	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Staff with capacity and expertise to identify trends, organize and prioritize resources</li> </ul>
Technology	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Gain access to communication mediums which match families usage in the community, e.g. web based texting application ‘Ring Central’</li> <li>• Helpful Hint: Use high or low touch approaches depending on internal capacity, e.g. social media channels vs. Bright by Text platform can be equally appropriate</li> </ul>

## Common Measures of Success

A Logic Model or Theory of Change in an intentional effort to define and relate social enterprise activities to impact results. Key components of these frameworks include concepts such as: inputs, outputs, outcomes, and impact. The outputs described here are the initial indicators a system might review on the path to measuring and understanding its impact. **Key note:** As a result of the rapid response nature of this enhancement strategy, an exact logic model is still under development.

### Output Indicators:

- Connection rates
- Family and friend referral rates

## Readiness Assessment for Implementing Affiliates

### Overview:

This exercise will help you to assess your HMG system's readiness for implementing the described solution, and enable you to make more informed decisions in what may be involved in preparing for execution.

This is not meant to be a prescriptive answer of 'yes, ready to implement' or 'no, not ready to implement'. The outputs of this exercise **are not** meant to prohibit a system from implementation. Rather this is a lean planning tool to support more robust thinking and application in rapid response.

### Instructions:

To complete this test, read each question and then write the number which most accurately represents the current situation in your system. We suggest you make a note on why you have scored each answer so that you can reference back to it later as you continue to plan and develop your operations.

1. Is there an ambitious yet realistic strategy for responding to the crisis? I.e. defined scope of the problem, need, and the potential response
  - 1) Limited to no strategic thinking in place on how to respond to the crisis and community needs
  - 2) Good understanding of the size of the problem and need, as well as a sense of how your system will seek to address it. i.e. A strong sense of how your system fits into the larger ecosystem of actors, as well as what your contribution will be
  - 3) Detailed understanding of the problem you are seeking to address backed up by research and data. Theory of Change as well as ambitious SMART targets in place for helping to solve identified challenges with a realistic plan.

Your Score & Why: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

2. Is there cultural alignment, i.e. does new/altered response align with your mission? Are you avoiding mission creep or consciously pivoting to redirect resources out of perceived necessity?
  - 1) Proposed communication strategy does not align with values and overall mission of your HMG system
  - 2) HMG system and stakeholders are open shifting communication strategies as is needed for crisis response

- 3) System is actively engaged with promoting services supporting the social determinants of health and holistic family wellness. Thus, stakeholders are interested and well positioned to carry forward the crisis communication strategy pivots, e.g. doubling down on these communications

Your Score & Why: \_\_\_\_\_

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3. Do you have a clear financial strategy and funding for implementing the solution?

- 1) No dedicated funding or pathway to reallocate resources
- 2) Funding and resources able to be reallocated towards emergency response activities
- 3) Funding and resources able to be reallocated towards emergency response activities, as well as dedicated funding secured to support sustained implementation

Your Score & Why: \_\_\_\_\_

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4. Is there a clear project owner (individual, organization, subcommittee) with capacity to drive and deliver strategy?

- 1) There is no clear 'owner' of initiatives or decision making structure in place
- 2) There is a clear project owner with a relevant skill set. The decision making process across stakeholders is understood well enough to drive actions
- 3) The project owner is an experienced individual with previous experience in scaling and is trusted by stakeholders. The decision making structure represents a holistic set of perspectives and has been validated

Your Score & Why: \_\_\_\_\_

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5. Are the functions necessary for implementation well defined and developed for delivery while ensuring quality? E.g. operations manuals

- 1) Few or no processes, systems or values exist or they are fragmented and difficult to find.
- 2) Most processes and documentation for delivery and replication are in place but with some gaps. Values have been established.
- 3) Accurate documentation is in place for process, systems, training, legal agreements, procedures & ensuring quality. Values are in place, recognized and embedded across the organization.

Your Score & Why: \_\_\_\_\_

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6. Are there people or partners willing and able to take on the new way of working?

- 1) There are no interested parties who are willing and/or qualified to take on this strategy or those people are difficult to access.
- 2) There is evidence of a supply of people or organizations willing and qualified to implement this strategy.

3) There is evidence of a large supply of people or organizations willing and qualified to implement this strategy.

Your Score & Why: \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

**Scoring Rubric:**

- No score lower than 2, and at least four 3s: Ready to implement this strategy with minimal additional planning required
- No score lower than 2, with up to three 3s: You have a promising ability to implement this strategy, with select areas to focus your preparation
- A mix of 1s, 2s, and 3s: You have more work to do to prepare for robust implementation of this strategy

**Potential Risks to Implementation**

Risk	Severity of Impact	Likelihood of Impact	Mitigating strategies - Sample
<b>Lack of focus on developmental services</b>	Medium	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Re-introduce screenings and development resources within pivoted communication strategies as is appropriate e.g. community blasts</li> </ul>
<b>Sustained mission creep</b>	Medium	Low	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• If system is embracing basic need supports, define the parameters around which your system might be helpful e.g. connecting to housing solutions vs. providing housing solutions</li> <li>• Look to connect with other stakeholders to avoid "mission creep" long term</li> </ul>
<b>Assumptions on need elevating the wrong resources for families</b>	High	Medium	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Continue to leverage CAP data, partner and specialist insights, and experience to elevate resources</li> <li>• Continue to maintain the full resource library as is possible</li> </ul>

**Additional Resources**

- Recorded affiliate webinar session
- Social determinants of health resources

**Conclusion**

The Crisis Communications Strategy encompasses common practices that Spring Impact observed across rapid response approaches. Its ability to leverage existing HMG infrastructure and relationships, flexibility in application, and promising outputs make it a highly compelling strategy to consider for future response efforts.