

# CRISIS RESPONSE

JOURNAL

PROTECTION | PREVENTION | PREPAREDNESS | RESPONSE | RESILIENCE | RECOVERY



## SUBSCRIBE NOW

visit [www.crisis-response.com](http://www.crisis-response.com) for rates and special offers



**Authoritative global coverage of all aspects of security, risk, crisis management, humanitarian response, business continuity planning, resilience, management, leadership, technology and emerging trends**

PRINT | DIGITAL

## Using the right words

Communication and the vocabulary used during emergencies can have a significant effect on people's behaviour. **Jeannie Barr** of the Emergency Planning Society investigates further

There is a plethora of information and guidance available on how the timing of communication, appropriateness to its audience and its content are all extremely relevant. But what is 'communication' for those of us working in disaster or emergency management and resilience? Does it simply involve 'telling' people what is needed, what to do or where to find help?

The Emergency Planning Society (EPS) has recently held a series of webinars in which communication frequently came up as a key discussion point; how are we as professionals communicating with people in our communities? How are we making sure that communication is two-way? How do we ensure we are using the right vocabulary? How do we determine our messages and make sure they are relevant?

### Dissonance

Social media, for example, has been hailed as both a potential positive and negative. It is positive in terms of the possibility of engaging with a wide variety of audiences, gauging community sentiment, driving volunteering projects and community engagement.

Conversely, it can also create dissonance and be a source of disinformation, therefore requiring careful monitoring and timely action.

EPS webinars have discussed how the use of vocabulary and terminology has been concerning at times, particularly during the Covid-19 pandemic. Use of the word 'vulnerable' was raised as a potential barrier to those who needed help. Simply put, many of the people who could be considered 'vulnerable' in terms of being at risk of contracting Covid-19 simply did not associate themselves with the word and therefore did not seek assistance. 'Vulnerable' is, therefore, a potentially alienating word.

In our most recent webinar, the Human Aspects and Community Resilience Professional Working Group of the EPS was interested in how the use of language, including unspoken or body language, can also assist in recovery.

Delegates learned that the use of words and phrases can have both an advantageous and detrimental effect on people's well-being, and in some cases – mostly unintentionally – the damaging effect of language that is used at the front line and in public speeches can be harmful and long-lasting.

But communication can also provide a positive turning point for people's recovery. Whether it is verbal, written or translated – the fundamentally important aspects are timing, context and tone, as



Novintito | 123rf

Social media has been hailed as a potential positive and negative

well as consideration of the intended audience and the potential effects on different people.

It is essential to embed empathy in all messaging, whether in a leaflet, part of an official briefing or public speech, or even when supporting someone on the front line – and this can be learned and developed. It is also important to remember that language used across command and control during collaboration – in meetings, documentation, working groups, or correspondence – should always be respectful and humanised. Mistakes can be made, which can be damaging to responders, too.

All communication in these contexts should address the humanitarian objectives in emergencies and all those working in disaster and emergency response and management should have an appreciation of the significance of appropriate communication.

### Author



JEANNIE BARR is Director for Professional Standards and Learning at the Emergency Planning Society, a CRJ Key Network Partner

■ To find out more about the EPS, to become a member or register for any upcoming events visit [the-eps.org](http://the-eps.org)