

COMMUNICATIONS: INTERNAL AND EXTERNAL

While health care workers continue to fight the COVID-19 outbreak, the need for safe medical care not related to COVID-19 remains important for the communities that hospitals and health systems serve. Emergency, non-emergent and preventive care is still available and safe to access.

Hospitals and health systems must continue to communicate to their internal and external stakeholders enhanced plans and procedures. Communications professionals will need to continue creating post-COVID-19 strategies to inform the community about expanded or reopened services, continued protective measures and strongly encourage anyone in need of emergency care to go to the hospital.

Hospitals and health systems will need to stay attuned to the overall mood of the community and shape the tenor of their communications appropriately, continuing to share timely, accurate health information and helping the public overcome apprehension of seeking care.

Recognizing that recovery of the health care delivery infrastructure will happen on different timetables in different parts of the country, AHA provides a general messaging framework and communications toolkit that includes resources for hospitals to tailor and adapt for their staff and communities.

Hospitals and health systems need to communicate with many different audiences. But all communication outreach should meet certain core objectives that reinforce hospitals are open and care should not be delayed, hospitals and health systems are safe, and the well-being of caregivers and patients is a key priority. The messages below can be customized for different audiences — for example, internal or external, clinicians or patients — but they should reinforce the same objectives.

OVERARCHING COMMUNICATIONS RESOURCES/TALKING POINTS

Hospitals, health systems and clinics are a safe place to seek care, no matter your health need. Since well before the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, the safety of our patients is and always has been our first priority. Our hospitals safely manage infectious diseases every day. We will continue to provide safe, effective, patient-centered care in our facilities.

First and foremost, we are following the guidance and direction of our public health experts, closely monitoring and adopting new findings and following clinical protocols developed by expert scientists and clinicians in every discipline of care.

OVERARCHING MESSAGES ON COVID-19 AND MOVING TO RECOVERY

We are ready, safe and open for you. In coordination with area health care providers, local and state government leaders. We are following guidance to ensure patient safety and prevent the spread of COVID-19 or a resurgence of the virus throughout the state.

Emergencies don't stop, and neither do we. Do not delay care for heart attacks, strokes, falls and other urgent needs. We will continue fighting COVID-19. We will provide our physicians, nurses, other team members and patients everything they need to stay safe. And we'll continue caring for you and your family. Thank you for doing your part. We are here to do ours.

We're here to keep you healthy and safe. We have taken extra precautions to ensure our employees and patients are safe. First and foremost, we are following the guidance and direction of our public health experts and closely monitoring key issues and following clinical protocols. *[Be specific about what measures you are taking to keep patients safe.]*

Thanks to our health care heroes. The doctors, nurses, respiratory therapists and entire health care workforce – cafeteria workers, environmental services, and other support staff – who are in this fight on the front lines are facing pressure unlike ever before with skill, courage and our continued support and thanks.

The health and safety of our community – including our workforce – remain the top priority. COVID-19 has enhanced our already intensive patient safety efforts and ensured we are doing everything possible to keep staff safe as well. You will see additional precautions, including rigorous cleaning processes, in all areas of the hospital, particularly the emergency department and intensive care units, as well as:

- Increased COVID-19 testing opportunities, including curbside testing
- Social distancing in waiting rooms and mask use in common areas
- Limited entry and exit points
- Asking patients to stay in their cars after arrival until called into the office
- Using virtual care when it is available and appropriate

COVID-19 COMMUNICATIONS TOOLS AND RESOURCES

- [COVID-19 Communications Resources](#)
- [COVID-19 Communications Checklist](#)

FRAMEWORK THROUGH WHICH ALL MESSAGING AROUND “REOPENING” SHOULD BE CONSIDERED

As a guiding principle, ALL decisions will be grounded in science and data and will be made in the interest of delivering safe, needed care.

- Prevention and treatment of COVID-19 will continue – prioritizing the safety and well-being of patients, the health care workforce and the community.
- Communicate openly and often during this time of crisis – sharing concrete examples of safety measures, protocols and national guidelines being followed to keep patients safe.
- Ensure that all community members know that their local hospital is open, safe and ready to provide emergency care whenever needed. Care should not be delayed.
- Consider coordination and collaboration with partners for effective and consistent communications – including providers along the continuum of care, as well as other community stakeholders.

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS PLAN AND CHECKLIST

As the cornerstone of the health care community, hospitals and health systems play a crucial role in providing science-backed information and helpful resources to keep the public safe and informed. Communicating early and often with staff will be crucial in efforts to instill confidence in the ability and safety of our organizations. The

women and men bravely fighting this virus must feel safe and be supportive of recovery efforts. As many hospitals and health systems have been doing over the past two months, open and transparent communication with staff must be in place before any large public communications effort occurs. It is critical that staff and internal partners, such as trustees, are updated and consulted frequently. Staff play a critical role in creating confidence in the safety and quality of care provided. Providing them with the information necessary to act as ambassadors for this messaging is a high priority. Consider conducting a brief internal communications survey to gauge the effectiveness of internal communications.

EMPLOYEE BACKGROUNDER

Provide employees a concise reference document or location (intranet) with links to up-to-date clinical guidelines, resources and documents. As the pandemic continues and our recovery efforts evolve, new information will become available, and it will be helpful to provide staff a single source for updated content and guidance. This single source should be designed with the input of various disciplines throughout the hospital, including but not limited to human resources, risk management, clinical specialties, such as infectious disease and employee health and wellness. This information could include:

- [National guidance on non-emergent procedures](#)
- Internal policy on resuming non-emergent procedures
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention infection control recommendations
- Safely Caring for COVID-19 Patients: Tools for Your Workforce
- Isolation protocols
- Training needs and offerings
- Testing procedures
- PPE supply status
- Staffing plans
- Wellness services
- Employee assistance programs
- Work from home assistance when appropriate

INTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS PLAN

During times of crisis and uncertainty, it is more important than ever that hospital and health system leaders provide clear and frequent updates to ALL staff members (clinical and otherwise). Communications should be designed to offer timely day-to-day messages, in addition to information on future planning and what staff can expect to see. Members have reported that a daily huddle for leaders to share updates, to hear a common message regarding status, and to problem-solve is a powerful way to keep the organization aligned with priorities and next steps. Consider recording these messages and making them available for staff who might not be able to be present. Through coordination of talking points, communication dissonance can be avoided or at least minimized.

Proactive communication with staff is critical; share information about steps being taken to ensure the safety and well-being of staff and patients, outline guidance and protocols for staff, and offer recognition and appreciation. Hospital employees serve as influential messengers with patients and within the community.

Below is a general framework for consideration as part of any internal communications plan. Please tailor this framework to meet the needs of your own organization and community and to align with your internal communication strategy during the COVID-19 crisis and progress toward recovery.

WHO TO COMMUNICATE WITH	
AUDIENCE	EXAMPLES
Clinical staff (communications should go to leaders as well as front-line workers.)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Doctors, nurses, techs and all other front-line caregivers
All hospital staff (all departments)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> All staff including environmental services, engineers, food services, pharmacy, etc.
Other clinical partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Community physicians Providers along the continuum of care Key vendor partners
Human resources	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> HR must have up-to-date information, particularly as it relates to any staffing changes
Trustees	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Many boards do not meet frequently; consider more frequent communications throughout the COVID-19 crisis
Auxiliaries	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Volunteers must be aware of all new COVID-19-related protocols
Key community partners	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Consider keeping community organizations, medical or otherwise, affiliated with the hospital/health system abreast of current practices, including local business leaders (for academic health systems, this will include faculty and staff, residents, fellows, students, etc.)
HOW OFTEN TO COMMUNICATE	
<i>***This may depend on where states/communities are in the pandemic.</i>	
FREQUENCY	EXAMPLES
Daily: Overcommunication is key during times of uncertainty.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Staff emails Text messages
Weekly: Highlight key dates so staff feel informed and engaged in any new processes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intranet postings Staff meetings Leadership messages
Monthly (or bi-monthly): Share data, accomplishments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leadership video messages Success stories, vignettes

HOW TO REACH INTERNAL AUDIENCES

COMMUNICATION VEHICLES	EXAMPLES
Traditional staff email	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate often, share relevant information and solicit feedback
Newsletters/Weekly overview	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Compile key information/ reminders of key information
Intranet	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Since the situation may change rapidly, provide staff a single source for updated resources
Text messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Offer relevant and timely updates
Video messages	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Leaders can share message of inspiration, pride and thanks
Interactive video meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interactive meeting platforms offer a good opportunity for Q&A with staff
Signage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reinforce key messages, checklists and protocols on visible signage
Staff meetings	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share information during department meetings
Website updates	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spotlight staff, highlight successes and reinforce key messages; consider including a way for the community to express gratitude and support
Social media posts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Spotlight staff, highlight successes and reinforce key messages, including appreciation
Outdoor signage	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Look for opportunities to spotlight your health care team – could include banners, outdoor signage, elevator wraps, etc.

WHAT TO COMMUNICATE ABOUT

TOPICS	EXAMPLES
Status of PPE supply	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share information about availability of PPE; if relevant, share efforts underway to secure additional PPE Offer instructions on PPE usage
Availability of tests	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share information about testing capability/options Criteria for testing
Infection control processes/guidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Review infection control checklists, highlight any new practices
Clinical processes/protocols	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Share guidelines for resuming non-emergent surgeries; highlight any new practices, workflow patterns, etc.
Safety steps/checklists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Highlight measures being taken to ensure both staff and patient safety during the continued COVID-19 crisis
Workforce/staffing considerations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Proactively share information about staffing changes, furloughs and reductions in pay
Solicit feedback	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Encourage employees to share their feelings, what they need or are concerned about

Recognition, wellness and resiliency	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • It is important to show signs of thanks, from leaders and also patients and community members • Recognize the dedication of staff members • Provide resiliency and well-being resources for team members • Routinely spotlight wellness resources, mental health hotlines, etc. at the bottom of internal messages
Share success stories	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Keep morale up by sharing success stories, examples of things going well, progress being made • Engage staff to help identify success stories/moments of pride

WHAT TOOLS ARE AVAILABLE FOR EMPLOYEES

RESOURCES	EXAMPLES
Online forum	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consider an online community or forum with a Q&A function for staff to ask questions, get advice from leaders and also peers
Resource center	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Develop a place to house all relevant documents, tools and resources related to COVID-19
Talking points/Messages for patients	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Consistency of message is important; share topline messages and guidance to patients so clinicians are able to share information about the hospital/health system practices
Printable signage for clinician offices	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide collateral materials with consistent messaging to be shared with patients and used in clinician offices

COMMUNICATIONS ASSESSMENT FOR LEADERS

As key members of the health care community, hospitals and health systems play a crucial role in providing accurate information based in science that will keep the public safe and informed. Caregivers, staff members and internal partners will be turned to as credible sources of information. It is essential that they have the information needed to do their jobs well, keeping patients and themselves safe and healthy.

This self-assessment is designed to help hospital and health system leaders evaluate how they are communicating internally, what mechanisms are in place and working well, along with potential opportunities to enhance communication efforts.

PROTECTING YOUR HEALTH CARE WORKERS

- Communicate often; frequency should increase during a crisis.
- Be transparent with staff as it relates to what measures are being taken to ensure their safety and well-being.
- Share updates on any new guidance or clinical protocols that should be followed.
- Outline and remind staff what ongoing processes are in place to keep them safe.
- Share patient- and public-facing communications internally to ensure staff are aware and can be consistent in their own responses to patient questions.

HOSPITALS ARE OPEN AND SAFE, AND NEEDED CARE SHOULD NOT BE DELAYED

- Clinicians and hospital employees are valued sources of information within a community; make sure they know current operational status and are able to share key messages.
- Provide employees with easy-to-relay messages about what safety precautions are in place and what they and patients can expect when they come to the hospital.

ESTABLISH TWO-WAY COMMUNICATION WITH HEALTH CARE WORKERS

- Create mechanisms to solicit feedback from employees; understand how they are feeling during these uncertain times.
- Establish a clear path for employees to share concerns and for organizational follow-up to those individuals.
- Ensure you communicate timely and proactively about any new changes or policies so staff are able to ask questions and raise concerns.
- Consider hosting in-person or virtual staff meetings that allow questions from staff.

PROVIDE COMMUNICATIONS RESOURCES FOR STAFF

- Develop and share basic messages, tips and to-dos that health care workers can easily relay to patients and to community members.
- Ensure that staff know how and where they can access all relevant materials, from clinical guidelines and safety protocols to talking points and posters.

RECOGNIZE AND ACKNOWLEDGE STAFF

- In addition to sharing information, people need encouragement, inspiration and a safe way to ask for help if they need it.
- Don't hesitate to send thank-you messages to your team.
- Acknowledge the battle health care workers are fighting and the toll on them and their families, and let them know they are appreciated.
- Be certain to compile and share messages of gratitude and pride sent by others, in addition to resiliency and well-being resources and support services.

ENGAGE A FULL SPECTRUM OF CONSTITUENTS

- Providing high-quality care takes a full team; when appropriate, consider tailoring communications resources for the variety of work units within the hospital.
- Provide communications resources to employed and independent clinicians so patients receive consistent messages.
- Share communication resources and updates with your governing board and other important stakeholders within your community.

CONSIDER NEW MECHANISMS TO COMMUNICATE WITH STAFF

- This is a stressful time. Consider new mechanisms to conveniently communicate with staff and then do it again. It is worth sending a message more than once or in different ways.
- Explore different platforms to communicate with staff, including digital platforms, webinars and virtual town halls, among others.
- Embrace video as an engaging way to deliver messages from leaders, staff, patients and the community.

CELEBRATE THE POSITIVE

- We have a long road ahead of us; share the success stories and positive outcomes.
- Consider engaging staff to share messages of hope, lessons learned and if appropriate patient vignettes.

EXTERNAL MESSAGING

Communication efforts should first demonstrate how hospitals and health systems are continuing to fight the COVID-19 pandemic while stressing that taking measured steps enables the field to move safely toward providing care to those with health care needs beyond COVID-19. This is an opportune time for hospitals and health systems to emphasize their roles as the trusted resource for their community, to seize the conversation and control the narrative. Consider naming a small number of spokespersons to assure consistent messaging, regardless of the communication channel. Through coordination of talking points, a consistent message can be sent.

The field is able to protect the healthy and at the same time care for the sick and injured. While we know that has always been the case, both the public narrative and the public health precautions we have been taking may result in public anxiety about returning to hospitals for needed medical care. With enhanced safety protocols in place and appropriate supply of PPE and by following national and local guidelines, hospitals and health systems can ensure that it is appropriate and safe to resume all levels of care.

There is a need and an opportunity to show strength as a field, uniting with consistent themes of safety and readiness, grounding all action in science and guidance by public health and clinical experts, and demonstrating the clear and concrete examples of what hospitals do (always and specific to this pandemic) to keep patients safe.

Recovery is going to happen on different timetables across the country, but the general messaging framework and elements of communications should be consistent.

CONSISTENT TOP-LEVEL MESSAGES

- Hospitals and health systems are able to protect the healthy, while at the same time care for the sick and injured.
- Hospitals are open to ALL patients, and delaying diagnosis and treatment can put patients at great risk. If you are experiencing a medical emergency, do not be afraid to come to the hospital for immediate care.
- Long before this current health crisis, hospitals and health systems have had both workflow and infection control processes in place to ensure the safety of patients and health care workers. Facing challenges is not new for health care workers; in many ways, it is what they train for.
- In response to this specific health crisis, safety protocols have been enhanced and adapted to best meet the needs of the staff and patients. [Be specific about what measures you are taking to keep patients safe.]

- Your community hospital is carefully following national, state and local guidelines, and taking measured steps to ensure it is appropriate and safe to get the care you need.

SUGGESTIONS FOR MASS COMMUNICATIONS

While we know the COVID-19 pandemic is far from over, hospitals and communities will begin to move through different phases of “recovery,” and it will be crucial that you maintain frequent communications with your community. A sample of ad content, social messaging, print media approaches, press releases and public service announcements is included in the Appendix. Consider the following as tactics to update the community with reliable health information.

- Video messages from hospital leaders and physicians
- Virtual town hall meetings
- Radio interviews/PSAs
- Open letter in newspaper
- Media briefings with different experts

COMMUNICATIONS ASSESSMENT FOR LEADERS

As a key member of the health care community, hospitals and health systems play a crucial role in providing accurate information based in science that keeps the public safe and informed. Hospital leaders, health care workers and community partners will be turned to as credible sources of information. Be sure your team has the information needed to assure patients and communities about the preparedness of hospitals to provide needed care – whether that be emergency care, COVID-19 care or diagnostic and preventive care.

This self-assessment is designed to offer a basic framework that hospital and health system leaders can use to evaluate how they are communicating with the public, what mechanisms are in place and working well, and where there are potential opportunities to enhance communication efforts.

ALL DECISIONS ARE BASED ON SCIENCE AND GUIDED BY PUBLIC HEALTH

- Provide frequent reminders that the hospital field follows federal and state guidance to effectively prepare and respond to anticipated COVID-19 challenges.
- Be transparent in sharing the guidance you are currently following.
- Share updates on any new guidance being followed or practices being put in place.

HOSPITALS ARE OPEN AND SAFE, AND NEEDED CARE SHOULD NOT BE DELAYED

- Communicate clearly that hospitals are prepared for COVID-19-related needs, while also ready to care for other health care needs.
- Emergency care should NOT be delayed.
- Provide employees with easy-to-relay messages about the importance of not delaying emergency care and the protocols in place at the emergency department to ensure patient and visitor safety.
- Continue to share stories that demonstrate patients are getting safe, needed care.

HOSPITALS HAVE TAKEN STEPS TO MITIGATE RISK AND MAKE CARE SAFER

- Hospital and health systems have long been ready to care for illness and prevent the spread of infection. Remind patients of existing safety practices.
- Clearly communicate what additional steps hospitals have taken to make care safer and what patients can expect to see:
 - Limited points of entry
 - Screening for all patients before entering the facility
 - Separate triage and treatment for COVID-19 patients
- Telehealth visits may still be appropriate and preferred for some patients.

PROTECTING HEALTH CARE WORKERS

- Be transparent about what measures are being taken to ensure the safety and well-being of caregivers.
- Share updates on any new guidance or clinical protocols that should be followed.
- Emphasize hand hygiene, new guidelines for PPE and other infection prevention protocols.

MANY NEW SERVICES ARE NOW AVAILABLE

- Remind patients about new screening tools or hotlines for questions related to COVID-19.
- Remind patients that telehealth options remain for those who feel more comfortable with it or find it is more convenient.
- Remind the community about any new hotlines that have been created – mental health and others.

HOSPITALS HAVE MANY POSSIBLE MESSENGERS, IN STAFF AND OTHER COMMUNITY STAKEHOLDERS

- Clinicians and hospital employees are valued sources of information within a community. Make sure they are able to share key messages.
- Coordinate or consider aligning communications related to “reopening” with state or local health departments.
- Consider partnering with other community providers (even other hospitals) to offer consistent messaging about safety and the importance of not delaying emergency care.
- Share key messages and tools with local clinicians to be used in offices and with patients.
- Share key messages with trustees.
- Consider partnering with other community organizations or specialty groups, as there may be alignment in messaging, specifically as it relates to not delaying certain medical needs (heart attack, stroke, maternity care, immunization, etc.).
- Share communication updates with key vendors and other partners.

STRENGTH IN CONSISTENCY OF MESSAGE AND COORDINATION WITHIN THE FIELD

- Consider working collaboratively with other providers to share messages of safety and encouraging patients to not delay care.
- Share consistent messages reinforcing and encouraging patients and communities to follow public health guidelines.
- Coordinate with local and state legislators.