



# Crisis Plan and Communications for Event Officials

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## Philosophy

Withholding information relative to the occurrence of injuries and death of horses and/or riders is bad public relations and generates the creation of information (rumors) that is generally incorrect.

Disseminating incorrect information through official sources is worse than withholding information.

Time is of the essence in disseminating the correct information.

Competition officials have an obligation to spectators, the media, riders, parents of riders, spouses of riders, owners of horses, sponsors of riders and/or horses, the volunteers and general public during the competition to be as forthright and forthcoming as possible in informing all parties concerning injuries and the outcome of such injuries.

The Emergency Medical Personnel or the Veterinarian should formulate the information to be disseminated so that the language is accurate and all parties will be relaying the same information.

Every event should have an emergency plan before the start of the competition. (See "Tips on developing a crisis communications plan" prepared by USA Equestrian.) Brief the relevant personnel on individual roles and responsibilities. Identify a spokesperson who will be responsible for dealing with the media at the event. The President of the Ground Jury and the TD should be prepared to make a full report of any serious accident or fatality within 24 hours direct to the USEA office. This is in addition to the normal TD report.

## When A Crisis Occurs

First of all, deal with the crisis. In the event of a serious accident to horse or rider ensure that emergency teams, EMTs and veterinarians, get to the site immediately. If the accident occurs during cross-country, a predetermined official should put a hold on the cross-country action until the crisis is resolved and the track is clear of emergency vehicles and personnel; the same person and only that person must determine when the track is clear and give the necessary instructions to restart any held riders and then let the starters start the next rider.

In the case of a fatality of a horse, be prepared to cover the animal with a tarp or other material and have the necessary equipment to move the covered animal out of the immediate area. Have a plan in effect prior to the start of the competition and brief the cross-country steward beforehand.

## Get The Facts

Interview as many witnesses as you can find, (fence judges, spectators) do your best to ascertain the cause of the accident: was it fence related, excessive speed, rider error, or a physical problem (heart attack, aneurysm)? Make notes and if possible take photographs and check to see if there is any video footage available. This is best done as soon as possible, even while the emergency teams are handling either the injured rider or horse. Unless you are a qualified EMT or doctor, you can be better occupied by gathering facts at the time of the emergency rather than as an afterthought.

## Responding To The Crisis

Take control of the situation. Be prepared to issue a statement as soon as you have all the facts. Quash the rumors before they have time to start by presenting the facts.

Express true sympathy and be honest and straightforward when answering questions. Do not try to cover up, don't speculate, if you don't know the answer say "I don't know but I will find out." State the facts as they stand, don't blame anyone for anything, and explain as much as possible.

Officials need to be very careful in regard to releasing the names of people killed or injured. All the necessary notifications of "Next of Kin" may not have been made. Advise people that a thorough investigation is being done by USA Equestrian and USEA officials at the event and more information will be available as soon as possible.

Stress the safety record of the sport and the rigid standards of USA Equestrian and the USEA. Statistics on the safety of the sport are available at the USEA office.