

MOSPRA Assists Joplin Schools With Tornado Recovery

When the May 2012 tornado struck Joplin, Missouri, the Joplin School District was also ripped apart. In order to assist in the recovery efforts of the school district, the Missouri School Public Relations Association was asked to help by Joplin Schools. Members of MOSPRA went to Joplin to assist the first few weeks after the tornado, and then served as resources for the coming weeks and months after to assist Joplin in their recovery efforts.

The planning, chapter building, networking, and support that MOSPRA had developed prior to this event was evident through the quick reaction to the crisis and also to the ability to network across the state for resources and information. NSPRA's mission is to be a resource to schools and MOSPRA has worked to fulfill that. The result of that work was seen in the Joplin effort to help plan, coordinate, and execute effective communication to the community and nation and effective communication with the local, national, and international media.

Chapter Goals/Objectives For Project & Timeline of Events:

MOSPRA's initial goal was to set up an organized communication system for Joplin Schools. Staff were overwhelmed, and so the MOSPRA members were dispatched to Joplin and took over the communication efforts of the district and established interview requests procedures, fact sheets, and media interview procedures (examples included in packet).

Once the communication system was organized, the MOSPRA members worked to establish daily routines and connections with the media. By the end of the first week, an effective communication system was established for the district and those practices continued throughout the summer.

After it was clear the district was able to oversee the communication for the district, MOSPRA members served in a support function for the weeks following by making sure that there were at least one if not more MOSPRA members in the district to help guide, direct, advise, and plan whatever Joplin needed.

As the summer progressed, MOSPRA members served Joplin through regular phone conversations and meetings to help them plan the "next steps" for the school's communication plan.

As the beginning of the school year neared, MOSPRA members were asked to come back to Joplin to assist with the media that would be there on the first day of school.

With the lessons learned in Joplin, MOSPRA felt that these should be shared and communicated out to other districts to help them prepare. So workshops and handouts were developed to distribute to schools to help them learn from the events in Joplin. The workshops were held throughout the past year at MOSPRA & NSPRA conferences. Other organizations like the Missouri School Boards' Association, Missouri Association of School Business Officials, and the Missouri

Association of School Administrators have asked for presentations and workshops on Joplin as well as effective communication tools as a result of the MOSPRA efforts in Joplin.

Communication Plan Related to Project, Identification of Target Audience And Explanation of Desired Outcomes, and Success/Outcome of Program

MOSPRA's efforts and goals in Joplin were to allow the story of what happened in Joplin be told in the way it needed to be told and by whom it should be told by.

At the beginning of the crisis, the goal was to determine the status of the students and staff members. This was done through social media, phone calls, emails, and physical visits by Joplin Schools staff. MOSPRA took on the role of keeping the media and the public focused on the fact that Joplin was working to determine the status of all students and staff and would not rest until that happened. This was the initial phase of communication.

As the focus of the media changed, the MOSPRA members then worked to guide the interviews from the initial disaster reporting to more of a personal story focus. MOSPRA members prepped students and staff before interviews with local and national media, and MOSPRA members made sure to protect those that shouldn't or couldn't be interviewed (this could be for multiple reasons, but the main one was that they just might not be emotionally ready to be interviewed).

One of the other major initial communication pieces was to communicate out to other schools and communities what the school district needed. By using MOSPRA and NSPRA (and other SPRA organizations), we were able to communicate out quickly that the school needed money and that was the best way to support the district at that point in time.

As the weeks and months followed, the main goal was to communicate out the recovery efforts, district needs, and other important information as it developed. MOSPRA's goal was to always be available to assist when needed. In a crisis response such as this, the audience is about as varied as it can be in any situation. MOSPRA's overall goal was to get Joplin School's communication program back to functioning and then support it as needed.

The MOSPRA efforts were successful, and Joplin will continue to be an ongoing project for MOSPRA as the district transitions through various phases in the recovery efforts. Joplin Schools has an expanded and functioning communication program that is reaching out to the community, media, and other schools effectively.

When asked how MOSPRA helped, Dr. CJ Huff, superintendent, and Kim Vann, director of communication, stated, "Within hours of the tornado it became very clear that communication would be our most challenging and most important task. Our staff, our families, and our students needed to know what was happening with each

other and their schools. Given the enormity of the destruction and the lack of traditional communication tools, we knew we needed help. Our first thought was to call on our friends from MOSPRA and they responded without hesitation. They did whatever needed to be done from finding cell service to managing social media to handling the onslaught of local, regional, national, and international media. It was a weight off of our shoulders to know that we had experts we could trust to help us navigate the weeks and months after the disaster. We've made lifelong friends with these honorary Eagles.”

Documentation and Copies of All Related Materials:

Examples of work and photos are attached

Explanation of How Program Relates to NSPRA's Goals & Objectives:

The following goals and objectives were met through the Joplin Tornado Recovery Efforts.

Goal 1. NSPRA will be the professional organization that is indispensable to school public relations professionals and other education leaders.

Objectives:

1. NSPRA members will have the skills they need to plan and implement an effective public relations program.
2. NSPRA members will be recognized and valued as critical members of school/district leadership teams.
3. School communication professionals will use NSPRA products, services, and resources.

Goal 2. NSPRA will be the recognized leader and authority on school public relations.

Objectives:

1. NSPRA (staff and members) will be visible throughout the educational community.
2. NSPRA will be the primary source of expert information and knowledge on school public relations.
3. NSPRA members, superintendents and other educators will understand the positive impact of an effective communication program on student achievement and on a district's mission.
4. NSPRA members will use new and emerging communication technology to expand outreach and engage families and communities in the schools.
5. NSPRA will advocate for effective public relations in education organizations.

How MOSPRA's Efforts Meet These Goals and Objectives:**Goal 1; Objective 1:**

Throughout the past, MOSPRA has made one of its top priorities the professional development of its members. Through relevant workshops, conferences, and mentoring, MOSPRA has developed an effective program to make sure members of

the organization are equipped to implement an effective communications program no matter what the situation. This effort was honored last year with a “Mark of Distinction” by NSPRA.

From that effort, MOSPRA members were ready to respond in a moments notice to implement a communication program for Joplin Schools. In less than 24 hours after the tornado struck Joplin, MOSPRA had rallied together to bring communication professionals to Joplin, and they had an organized system (or at least as organized as possible) running with defined roles, goals, and talking points outlined for Joplin.

As the tornado recovery progressed, a rotation system was established to bring in communication professionals from across the state (and also from other neighboring states and SPRA chapters) to make sure Joplin Schools had the communication team they needed in place to assist and execute various projects. Without the close-knit ties of the MOSPRA chapter (along with close ties with NSPRA and other SPRA chapters) and consistent professional development and organization building, this effort would not have been possible in such a short amount of time or implemented as effectively as it was.

Goal 1; Objective 2:

MOSPRA members were active members of the Joplin Schools recovery team/Cabinet meetings. They were seen as resources and experts on how best to handle the communication and public relations situations Joplin Schools was facing. They were trusted to implement and run many communication efforts and write press releases, fact sheets, and speeches as the “official” message from Joplin Schools.

MOSPRA members were regularly used the weeks and months after the tornado during conference calls and other events to give advice and recommendations to the district.

Goal 1; Objective 3:

The NSPRA network was used as a resource to Joplin Schools by distributing information, needs, and requests across the nation in a way that would benefit Joplin Schools the most. One of the best examples of this was informing schools that wanted to help that they needed to raise financial support instead of bringing product donations. Schools across the country began efforts to raise money and began bringing or sending that to Joplin to help in the recovery efforts.

The NSPRA network allowed for this to happen quickly and effectively.

Goal 2; Objective 1, 2, 3, & 6:

As a result of MOSPRA’s efforts in Joplin, members of the organization have been invited to speak across the state at different schools and conferences to explain the communication efforts in Joplin and the need for an effective communication program in a school district. These efforts have also been recognized by the

Missouri governor's communication office through the relationship that MOSPRA members have built with that office during and after the tornado.

Dr. CJ Huff, Joplin superintendent, has also stated at various conferences and meetings that an effective communication and community outreach program was one of the major reasons they were able to recover as quickly as they did. He has been an active and vocal participant in encouraging schools to join MOSPRA because of the services the professional organization provides. From those comments, many schools have added a communication professional or some expanded communication program. They now understand the value of having a communication professional in their district.

At the various conferences and presentations, MOSPRA members have been able to reference the work in Joplin as a great example of why schools need to be a member of MOSPRA/NSPRA and why adding a communication professional in their district is a wise investment of district resources.

Because of this effort, communication positions are being added in Sedalia, Strafford, Republic, & St. James, and many other districts are adding expanded communication efforts as their budgets allow. (See attached articles about Sedalia.)

Goal 2; Objective 4:

Throughout the initial recovery efforts in Joplin, social media took a prominent place in the communication plan. When the district's systems and website were taken out, Facebook and Twitter became the main methods of communication for the first few days. The district used these systems to distribute information to the public as well as locate students by having them post to the district's Facebook page wall that they were okay.

After the Missouri General Assembly passed Senate Bill 54, which limited communication through channels like social media between students and staff, the use of social media by Joplin Schools was used as an example of how Facebook and Twitter can be used responsibly and effectively by schools and why the law should be overturned or adjusted.

Other Relevant Examples of Chapter's Special Efforts:

One of the most important parts of an effective PR program is when the PR program isn't noticed because everything runs smoothly. The goal of public relations is to be behind the scenes making sure things work together to effectively communicate a message.

By taking a look at the articles and messages communicated out during the tornado, one can see this goal was achieved. The story of Joplin was told with consistent talking points in an organized fashion through the support of the Joplin Schools communication department and the MOSPRA members assisting them.