

CASE STUDY IN CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

Overview of Pioneer Human Services

- Referred to by the Reentry Policy Council as “the largest local program serving individuals released from prison in the country” (*Report of the RPC*, p. 583).
- Created as WA State nonprofit in 1963.
- Provides residential reentry centers, jobs and training, housing, & treatment services.
- Of 58 locations, 16 are residential reentry programs for FBOP, WA DOC, etc.

Pioneer Human Services in the News

- Pioneer cultivates positive media portrayals
- Many local and national examples
- Has media policy, Public Information Officer and PR consultant

Critical Incident

- On October 17, 2005, Resident (Milam) escapes from Seattle RRC program
- Is seen at nightclub where a Seattle Seahawk player (Hamlin) is assaulted
- Milam found murdered the next morning
- Allegations by Milam’s family fuel the fire!
- News & sports coverage

Critical Incident: The Rest of the Story

- FBOP Investigation
- Seattle Police Department find no connection between Hamlin’s assault and Milam
- FBOP investigation concludes that: *“rules, procedures, and staff conduct were fully reviewed and found to be in compliance...”*

Critical Incident: The Fallout

- Extensive media coverage of allegations, but none noting exoneration
- Board concerns: new policy and Public Information Officer (PIO) position
- Insurance documentation
- Lawsuit (dismissed)
- Improved security
- Staff development
- (Hamlin recovery)

Comparing “Best Practices” to Incident & Reentry (Institute for Public Relations)

Phase 1: Pre-Crisis = Preparing and preventing a crisis

- *Crisis Management Plan and Team*
- *Trained Spokesperson*

- *Pre-Draft Messages*

At Pioneer, prevention planning and preparation for a crisis was minimal
Pioneer had a Public Relations consultant
Pioneer had a media policy
Pioneer CEO was designated as spokesperson
Pioneer had fact sheets & media kits available, but not draft messages

Phase 2: Crisis Response = What management does after crisis

- *Avoid "no comment"*
- *Check all facts*
- *Within first hour*
- *Concern for victims*
- *Include employees*

Complicating Pioneer response was an FBOP Memo: "All media shall be directed to Community Corrections Office," referred to FOIA
Pioneer's Statement of Work precludes contractor from investigating possible misconduct
Who is/are the victims? Milam/Hamlin/community
Were employees somehow involved in escape?

Phase 3: Post-Crisis= Look for ways to better prepare

- *Reputation repair*
- *Keep stakeholders updated*
- *Evaluate crisis management for lessons learned*

Pioneer's Crisis Management Plan and Policy Revised
Public Information Officer Hired and Trained
Thorough review of security and staff training conducted
Continued efforts to repair reputation (such as ACA accreditation) but limited public exposure

Concluding Thoughts

- As the IPR report notes, "no organization is immune from a crisis," but critical incidents involving residents and staff are an inherent risk for community correctional programs.
- Reentry programs frequently have contractual and policy requirements that preclude or restrict the "normal" PR best practices. They need to plan for this in advance.
- Although we may help thousands of clients to safely reintegrate, one heinous incident can jeopardize an entire program, especially given the politics involved.
- These reasons make it all the more important that community correctional programs develop proactive crisis communication policies and plans. A dialogue on these issues with contracting agencies should take place.

Workshop "Being Ready to Battle Bad Publicity Arising from Community Reentry Incidents"
Larry Fehr, Pioneer Human Services
American Correctional Association, August 9, 2008