I-35W Bridge Collapse
The Public Reaction and State Responses

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Remembering and learning

- Media scramble and progression
- Instant worldwide access
- 72-hours of continuous coverage and the media frenzy
- The first 24 hours – DOTs respond
- The myths and conspiracies
- Are our bridges safe?
- Words are powerful
- From gobbledygook to plain talk
Media scramble and progression

- Personal observation and seat-of-your-pants reporting
- Man-on-the-street reporting (may or may not have seen anything)
- Eyewitnesses
- Specialty area news correspondents
- Authorities on the scene
- Expert analysis – pulling rabbits out of hats
  - National security expert; police chief from another state; university professors; former government officials; authors; researchers and scientists
- Authoritative parties
- Taking it home – the local angle
- Talk (radio, television, blogs, E-mails, water coolers)
Instant worldwide access

- Wireless phones
  - Text messaging
  - Video cameras
  - Phone calls
- Do-it-yourself photo and video uploads
  - TV stations
  - You Tube
- Blogs
- E-mail
- Internet news
- Satellite TV and radio broadcasts
- WiFi and wireless Internet access
72-hours of continuous coverage and the media frenzy

Iowa’s experience (Aug. 2, 2007)

- 101 media phone interviews
- Five on-camera interviews
- 14 call backs seeking more details
- 12 media E-mail contacts
- Local, state, regional, national, and international contacts

Similar experience by transportation agencies throughout the country.
The first 24 hours – DOTs respond

- Caring and compassionate
- Calm
- Reassuring
- Credible
- Non-speculative
- Saved the details for later
- Supportive of our colleagues and friends
- Success relied on a previously established foundation of public trust
The Myths and Conspiracies

- “Massive” ultra low-frequency “blast” from acoustic weapons research at Augsburg College
- Corrosion from pigeon droppings or de-icing chemicals
- Global warming and the 91-degree heat
- Fatigue
- Pork-barrel spending
- Secret military sound weapon tested at nearby Rand Corporation physics lab

- Weight of traffic and resurfacing trucks and loads on the west side of bridge
- Terrorism “can’t be ruled out”
- Republican corporatocracy has looted the American treasury starving us of the necessary means to maintain our infrastructure
- Swift river currents
- Train, barge or boat hit
- Vibration from jackhammering
Dispelling the myths and unraveling the conspiracies

- Rapid response
- Monitor and dispel rumors
- Feed the media – Provide regular updates and push information (news releases, news conferences, Web site)
- Be sincere, calm and reassuring
- Be the voice of reason
Are our bridges safe?

- Beware of the loaded question.
- An appropriate response to this question is conveyed in a way that is honest and reassuring, without making unrealistic warranties.
  - Any bridge found to be unsafe is removed from service until it can be returned to a safe state of operation or replaced.
  - Bridges are inspected every two years or more often if warranted.
  - ... has an excellent bridge inspection program.
Strategies used by states to ... … retain/instill public confidence in the Safety of our nation’s bridges

- **Be transparent**
  - Acted immediately to identify similar structures and make them known, along with their inspection histories, to the media
  - Allowed media to observe inspections
  - Access to federal inspection reports
● Be accessible
  ● Phone, E-mail and on-camera interviews
  ● Public information staff
  ● Engineering experts

● Take offensive and proactive measures
  ● Issued statements from governors and DOT directors
  ● Established Web sites
  ● Issued news releases
  ● Held news conferences
  ● Collaborated on development of the AASHTO Web site
  ● July 2008 AASHTO report on the nation’s bridges
Words are powerful

- **Loaded** words or phrases have strong emotional overtones or connotations, and evoke strong positive or negative reactions beyond their literal meaning.

- For example, the phrases “structurally deficient” and “functionally obsolete” refer literally to bridge funding classifications. However, the phrases:
  - Triggered an emotional fear response
  - Created an impression of neglect or unsafe conditions
  - Were easily exploited by the media to elicit negative public reaction
Apply to both your verbal and written communications.

Cut through the technical clutter and spin, and provide information the public really needs and wants in a way that is meaningful to them.

Use vocabulary and terms familiar to the audience. In the United States:

- 40 to 44 million adults are defined as “functionally illiterate” or not having enough reading skills for daily life.
- 50 million adults function below the 5th-grade level.
- Average high-school graduates read at the 9th-grade level.
From gobbledygook to plain talk

- Keep sentences and paragraphs short.
- Use the active voice.
- Be honest and direct.
- Using visuals and bulleted or numbered lists to convey complex information.
- The more critical the information is for safety and health, the greater is the need for conversational style communication.
It’s predictable – the unpredictable will happen again.

It is what we learn from our experiences that will define how we are measured in the future.