

Jason Forbes
301-643-1804
PRISM

Drawing from their experiences with the 2002 tornado that devastated La Plata, three public relations experts recently explained the do's and don'ts of crisis management.

Public Relations Individuals of Southern Maryland (PRISM) held a luncheon at the College of Southern Maryland on Thursday, October 13. Guest speakers were Mike Zabko, director of the Southern Maryland Red Cross; Nina Voehl, public information officer for Charles County; and Bruce Leshan, WUSA-TV 9 reporter. The panel members talked about the difficult public relations problems that arise during a crisis.

Voehl described what her day was like on April 28, 2002, the day a F4 tornado nearly destroyed all of La Plata. Voehl has been the public information officer for Charles County since 1993. She said, "In crisis communication you have to realize, in something like this, you cannot do it by yourself. One thing I learned after that (tornado) was how important networking is".

She said that it was very important to accommodate the media because "the press is your friend in a crisis." She advised spokespersons to be aware of the media's time constraints and to schedule updates and press conferences accordingly. She suggested that an organization have a person monitor what the media is saying to ensure that the correct message is getting out.

She also emphasized that there should be one main person who is in charge of getting that organization's message out. She pointed out that it's easier for wrong information to get out when more than one person is communicating to the

-more-

press during a time of emergency.

She said, "Charles County has an emergency operations plan. What we currently have on the website is being updated." The website is www.charlescounty.org/es/LEPC. If a future crisis occurs, Charles County will inform the public through its website and government cable channel in addition to traditional press outlets.

Mike Zabko has led Southern Maryland's Red Cross efforts for the past three years. Zabko said that it is very important for an organization to make sure the public knows what it is going to do after a disaster.

He stressed that every organization needs to have an emergency plan. He said, "There was no time to plan when the tornado struck. It actually took the Red Cross office and put it into the Atlantic Ocean. We didn't have time to think about what we were going to do. It was something you had to have all ready."

He said that the Red Cross has prepared press releases on file. He advised others to prepare press releases that can be easily altered in case of a future crisis. Zabko urged businesses and organizations to keep copies of a crisis contingency plan in locations other than the main building.

He also urged public relations persons to keep websites and phone systems updated with timely information. He said, "Have enough people. Because when that disaster happens, all of a sudden, your work load as a manager or supervisor triples and quadruples."

Television reporter Bruce Leshan covered the 2002 La Plata tornado for WUSA-TV. He also gave some advice for public relations personnel. He said, "If there is one call

-more-

that you have time to make, I would make it to the Associated Press. If you say 'We're gonna have a briefing in an hour,' The A.P. will put out a bulletin and everybody will get it."

About 20 people attended the meeting which was free for PRISM members and \$5 for guests. Those attending were primarily from public relations departments from local businesses.