

# Effective Public Health Communication Strategies with Department of Defense Personnel



Wilsie Bishop, DPA  
Chair, Public Health Subcommittee  
September 4, 2024



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## Membership



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\*Board Member

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## Overview / Agenda



- Tasking
- Objectives and Scope
- Report/ToR Crosswalk
- Guiding Principles
- Report Structure
- Organization of Findings
- Chapters and Findings
- Way Forward
- Backup Slides:
  - Subcommittee Activities

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## Tasking



On May 12, 2023, the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Health Affairs directed the Defense Health Board (DHB) to **provide recommendations on how the DoD could better deliver health information within an environment of misinformation.**

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# Objectives and Scope



- A. Identify lessons learned about DoD’s vulnerabilities and capabilities in disseminating health information during the COVID pandemic.
- B. Review DoD/DHA policies and processes used for health communications.
- C. Review academic, commercial, and government research on best practices for health communications.
- D. Provide recommendations for how the DoD could better deliver health information within an environment of misinformation and threats to credibility.

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# Report/ToR Crosswalk



Chapter	ToR Objective A	ToR Objective B	ToR Objective C	ToR Objective D
Introduction	X			
1	X	X		X
2	X	X		X
3	X		X	X
4			X	X

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## Guiding Principles



- Time is of the essence. DoD must prepare for the next health emergency now and sustain the infrastructure to ramp up as needed.
- DoD health communication is military-specific but occurs within a complex and influential civilian communication environment. DoD health communication as a discipline must adapt to the current and future information environment.

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## Guiding Principles



- Trust is essential to messaging uptake and to successful misinformation and disinformation mitigation efforts. Leadership and trusted messengers play an essential role in creating and sustaining trust.
- Communicators of health information must provide recommendations based on available evidence and facts at the time. They must be clear about what they know and what they don't and be honest about the scope of their expertise.

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## Report Structure



Chapter 1: Frameworks that Guide DoD Health Communication  
During a Global or National Health Emergency

Chapter 2: Routine and Emergency Health Communication in DoD

Chapter 3: Health Communication in an Infodemic

Chapter 4: Optimizing Health Communication in DoD

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## Organization of Findings



- Findings and Recommendations have coalesced into three areas:
  - Organizational
  - Societal and infodemic-related factors that impact the military and beneficiary population
  - Best practices in health communications

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# Chapter 1



## Frameworks that Guide DoD Health Communication during a Global or National Health Emergency

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# Communication is Global, National, Joint – and Challenging



**World Health Organization**

<https://www.who.int/about/policies/publishing/logo>

International Health Regulations (IHR)

**National Response Framework**

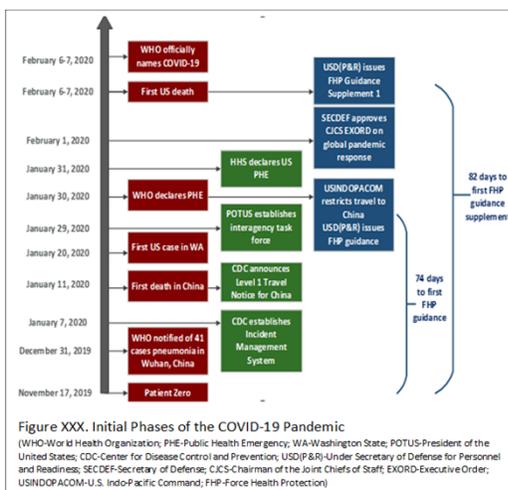
**Joint Publication 3-08:  
Interorganizational Cooperation**

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# DoD Was Not Immune from Contextual Impact



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Information from the U.S. Department of Defense Coronavirus Timeline.

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# Components of Effective Bio-Incident Management



2023 update to the *Biological Incident Annex to the Response and Recovery Federal Interagency Operational Plan*:

- “It should be anticipated that the roles and responsibilities of the public health and medical community and the emergency management community will intersect” during the management of a biological incident.

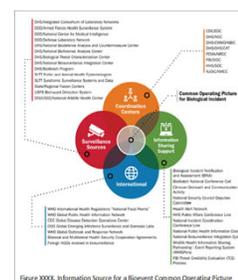


Figure XXXX. Information Source for a Biobest Common Operating Picture

U.S. Department of Homeland Security. Biological Incident Annex to the Response and Recovery Federal Interagency Operational Plan. May 2023.

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## Components of Effective Bio-Incident Management



2023 Department of Defense *Biodefense Posture Review*:

- Mitigating the effects of a bio-incident relies heavily on preparedness efforts to collaborate, understand, prepare, and protect the force from potential threats.
- Once an incident occurs, rapid activation of effective and efficient communication channels provides the foundation for the force to continue operations to meet [National Defense Strategy] priorities with minimal degradation.



U.S. Department of Defense Biodefense Posture Review. August 2023.

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## Components of Effective Bio-Incident Management



- Health Risk Communication is an evidence-based skill set at the nexus of communication, public health, and emergency management.

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## Finding 1:

Organizational



Communication during an international or national health emergency involves multiple branches of government and stakeholders, the interaction of which is difficult to predict.

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## Recommendation 1a:

Organizational



DoD should create or empower an existing group as the standing body to facilitate collaboration against biological and other health threats and ensure risk communication experts are members. The *2023 Biodefense Posture Review* provides one approach to implementing this recommendation.

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## Recommendation 1b:

Organizational



DoD should ensure health risk communication experts are actively **collaborating and engaging** in exercises that evaluate the Department's ability to rapidly respond to a health incident in conjunction with DHS, HHS, DOS, DOD, CDC, allies, and partners **as well as recognize and close the organizational gaps**. *Able Resolve* and *Viral Supremacy* are two examples of such exercises.

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## Chapter 2



### Routine and Emergency Health Communication in DoD

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## Health Communication in DoD During COVID-19



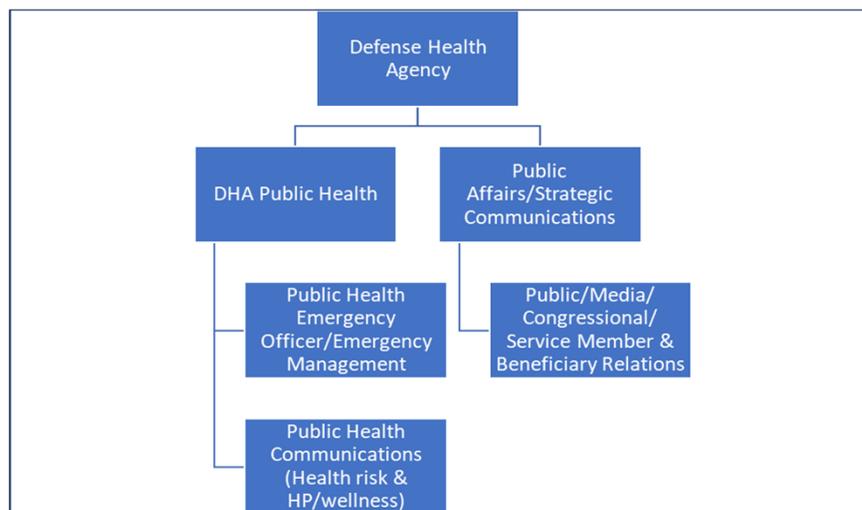
- A chaotic beginning
- Blurred lines of responsibility
- Need for better coordination
- Delays in official communication allowed space for other messages

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## Increasing and Streamlining Communication Capabilities in DHA



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## Finding 2:

Organizational



DHA Public Health has an evidence-based Public Health Communication Directorate available to the entire MHS. Public health communication encompasses risk communication, an essential capability for emergency management, and health promotion/wellness messaging.

A new DHA-level Public Health Emergency Office (PHEO) has also been established in DHA Public Health and relevant instructions are being updated. Co-location of these capabilities enables tightly integrated, organization-wide guidance in future health emergencies. Stakeholders must be aware of these capabilities to utilize them.

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## Recommendation 2a:

Organizational



The DHA should fully establish and resource the Public Health Communication Directorate in DHA Public Health.

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## Recommendation 2b:

Organizational



The ~~D~~HA should define the roles and responsibilities of the ~~P~~ublic ~~H~~health ~~C~~ommunications ~~D~~irectorate within a larger Department of Defense Instruction defining the roles and responsibilities of ~~D~~HA Public Health.

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## Recommendation 2c:

Organizational



The ~~D~~HA should ensure DoDI 6200.03, Public Health Emergency Management within the DoD appropriately defines the role of health risk communication in emergency management, especially for global and national emergencies.

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## Recommendation 2d:

Organizational



The DHA should develop and disseminate a Public Affairs/Strategic Communications campaign to inform stakeholders across the MHS of DHA's health risk communication capability and how it can assist and support them.

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## Finding 3:

Organizational



Public Affairs/Strategic Communications and Public Health Communications have different communication roles and responsibilities. Administrative Instructions provide clarity across areas of expertise.

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## Recommendation 3:

Organizational



The DHA should develop an Administrative Instruction to clarify the types of communication produced and roles/responsibilities executed by Public Affairs/Strategic Communications and Public Health Communications.

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## Chapter 3



Health Communication  
in an Infodemic

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# The COVID-19 Infodemic



“We’re not just fighting an epidemic; we’re fighting an infodemic.”

-World Health Organization (WHO)  
Director-General Tedros Adhanom Ghebreyesus

- Proliferation of misinformation and disinformation
  - Some intentionally directed to Service members to undermine readiness
- Politization of public health and science
- Decline in trust and willingness to take vaccines and adhere to non-medical interventions

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# Misinformation and Disinformation: Old Problems on a New Scale



Misinformation and disinformation proliferated during the COVID-19 pandemic

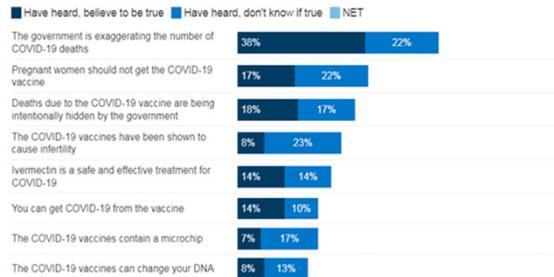
Belief in misinformation about COVID-19 is linked to:

- Reduced compliance with masking and quarantine guidance
- Greater use of poorly evidenced COVID-19 treatments such as ivermectin and hydroxychloroquine
- Harassment, threats, and violence directed towards PH workers

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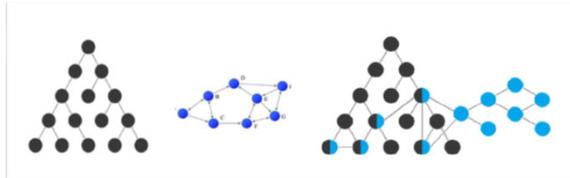
Figure 1  
Nearly Eight In Ten Believe Or Are Unsure About At Least One Common Falsehood About COVID-19 Or The Vaccine

Have you heard anyone say or have you read anywhere that...? IF YES: To the best of your knowledge is that true or false, or do you not know whether it is true or false?



Hamel, Lee, Lunna Lopes, Ashley Kirzinger, Grace Sparks, Mellisha Stokes, and Mollyann Brodie. 2021. "KFF COVID-19 Vaccine Monitor: Media and Misinformation." Kaiser Family Foundation.

## Features of the Information Environment Shape and Direct Information Consumption



Hierarchy

Network

Network impacting  
Hierarchy



Ferguson, N. (2019). *The square and the tower: Networks and power, from the Freemasons to Facebook*. Penguin.

<https://online-metrics.com/three-ways-to-segment-data-in-google-analytics/>

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## The Information Environment and DoD's Vaccine Mandate



- December 11, 2020
  - FDA grants Emergency Use Authorization for Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine
- August 23, 2021
  - FDA fully approves the Pfizer-BioNTech COVID-19 vaccine for all people ages 18 years and older
- August 24, 2021
  - DoD issues Coronavirus Disease 2019 requirement for Members of the Armed Forces \*after vaccine was fully approved by the FDA
- January 10, 2023
  - DoD rescinds August 24, 2021 (and subsequent November 30, 2021) Coronavirus Disease 2019 vaccination requirement for Members of the Armed Forces, in accordance with 2023 National Defense Authorization Act

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## Finding 4:

Societal and Infodemic-related



Features of the information environment challenge DoD efforts to communicate health information to Service members, ~~and~~ beneficiaries, **and civilian employees**. DoD leaders must take action to combat these challenges. Media literacy training programs have demonstrated success in improving students' ability to discern accurate information in digital environments.

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## Recommendation 4a:

Societal and Infodemic-related



DoD leadership and management should seek to recognize where mis- and disinformation are taking hold and take **proactive** steps ~~(e.g., consultations, brown bag learning sessions, mandatory training)~~ to identify and dispel them.

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## Recommendation 4b:

Societal and Infodemic-related



DoD should implement comprehensive media **and scientific** literacy training for Service members **and civilian** staff. **Ongoing** training should **begin** early in the military or civilian career cycle.

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## Recommendation 4c:

Societal and Infodemic-related



DoD should make comprehensive media **and scientific** literacy training available to beneficiaries.

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## Chapter 4



### Optimizing Health Communication in DoD

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## Health Decision Making is Multi-Determined



Individual health decisions are informed by other considerations including:

- Trust in the communicating institution and individual
- Cultural norms and expectations
- Personal motivations and interests
- Psychology and emotions

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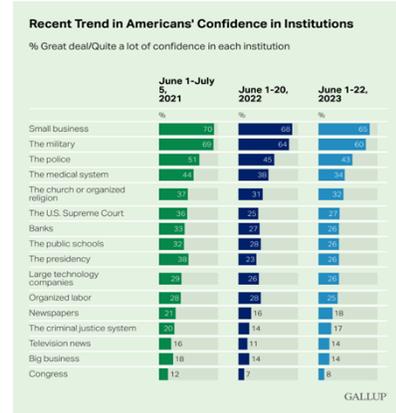
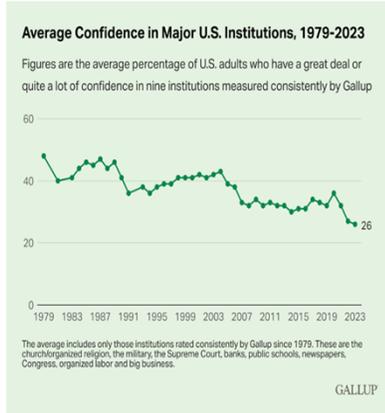
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# Trust Impacts How Messages are Received



- Trust in major institutions has declined.
- Trust in the military and in scientists has declined but remains high.



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Saad, Lydia. 2023. "Historically Low Faith in U.S. Institutions Continues." *Gallup*.

# Building and Sustaining Public Trust



- Health communication is most effective in an atmosphere of trust.
- Institutional trust is extremely important. Words and deeds must align. Each member of the organization has a role in promoting trust.
- Rebuilding lost trust is possible but challenging. A concerted effort to address the sources of distrust is required.

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## Scientific Literacy Can Increase Trust



- Give the audience a context for Public Health recommendations:
  - Explain why knowledge and recommendations change
  - Explain the reason recommendations are being made
- Communicating early and often, while conveying the potential for course correction, helps audience members focus on official information.

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## Building and Sustaining Public Trust: The Role of Trusted Messengers in Cultures and Communities



- Identify trusted messengers, both inside and outside of the organization, and understand how they influence your audience.
- Communicate regularly through trusted messengers within the organization.
- Strengthen the trusted messenger role of health care providers.

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## Strategies to Optimize Health Communication



- Craft messages that resonate
  - Develop “boiled-down” or “gist-” type messages
  - Develop messages in tune with emotions, psychology, and values of target audience
- Communicate where your audience is likely to hear it
- Engage in two-way communication with message recipients
- Build effective communication teams

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## Strategies to Optimize Health Communication: Building Effective Communication Teams



- Communication science is underemphasized in public health conversations. It is essential to health messaging success.
- Effective health communication teams should be comprised of public health experts, other relevant subject area health experts, and critically, health communication experts. Principles of communication science should be promulgated to communicators at all levels of the organization.
- Effective health communication requires a proactive, integrated team effort directed towards specific, meaningful goals. This is particularly true during a health emergency.

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## Finding 5:

Best practices



Health decision-making is multidetermined. Trust is one factor that impacts how messages are received. Institutions and health communicators can protect, grow, and restore trust by addressing the evolution of scientific knowledge, **creating and testing targeted and culturally appropriate messages**, and identifying and leveraging trusted messengers. These principles also apply to communication about changes in medical readiness requirements that occur in response to evolving understanding of health risks.

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## Recommendation 5:

Best practices



DoD health communication campaigns should build trust by (1) educating Service members, beneficiaries, **and civilian staff** about the role of uncertainty and the evolution of knowledge through the scientific process, and (2) leveraging trusted messengers on a regular basis. **Trusted messengers vary across institutions, settings, and cultures and must be identified proactively. ~~These principles should also be applied to help Service members understand changing medical readiness requirements in response to evolving health risks.~~**

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## Finding 6:

Best practices



Health communication experts have identified specific strategies and best practices that strengthen messaging impact.

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## Recommendation 6a:

Best practices



Health communicators in DoD should engage in intentional messaging that leverages recommended strategies and best practices, ~~including those discussed in this chapter~~, to create and evaluate highly effective messages. For example:

1. Utilize evidence-based strategies, ~~and~~ tools, and technologies.
2. Engage in active listening with message recipients. ~~two-way communication~~
3. Craft messages that resonate .
4. Deploy communications where an audience is likely to hear (or watch) them.
- ~~5. Evaluate effectiveness.~~

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## Recommendation 6b:

Best practices



Health communicators in DoD should develop a “communication playbook” for health ~~care~~ professionals and leaders that includes recommended strategies, ~~and~~ practices, ~~and technologies~~. This ~~playbook~~ ~~A playbook for health-care professionals~~ should also include an emphasis on joint decision-making; knowledge of behavior change models; and utilization of strategies to improve health communications. ~~in the clinical setting, should also including how to address challenging topics, such as delivering bad news.~~

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## Potential Future Challenges



- Proliferation of misinformation and disinformation
- Politization of public health and science
- Decreased public trust in institutions and expertise
- Acceleration of mis- and disinformation by Artificial Intelligence
- Erosion of SMs’ willingness to accept DoD’s authority to require specific health behaviors to foster force health protection
- The refusal to follow lawful orders regarding mandatory vaccines by a significant number of SMs may, in the future, extend to other areas prejudicial to good order and discipline in the US military.

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# FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS REVIEW



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# Back Up Slides



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## Summary of Activities to Date



Meeting Date	Discussion Topics
Jun 14, 2023: PH Meeting	Health Communications report development overview
Jun 28, 2023: DHB Meeting	DHA Strategic Communications
Jul 24, 2023: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Follow-up from DHA Strategic Communications</li> <li>• Public health response to COVID-19</li> </ul>
Aug 25, 2023: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Military culture</li> <li>• Misinformation and disinformation</li> <li>• A perspective on government censorship</li> <li>• Science of health communications</li> <li>• Informal military communications panel</li> </ul>

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## Summary of Activities to Date



Meeting Date	Discussion Topics
Sep 19, 2023: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• DoD/DHA legal authorities</li> <li>• Report Development</li> </ul>
Oct 10, 2023: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Public health communication strategies</li> <li>• Civic Online Reasoning</li> </ul>
Oct 31, 2023: PH Meeting	Military spouse panel
Nov 21, 2023: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Health Risk Communication</li> <li>• News and information environment</li> </ul>
Nov 29, 2023: DHB Meeting	Tasker Update

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## Summary of Activities to Date



Meeting Date	Discussion Topics
Dec 12, 2023: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The deadly rise of anti-science</li> <li>• Report development discussion</li> <li>• Emergency communications and operations in the information environment</li> </ul>
Jan 2, 2024: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• COVID-19 Learnings from the front lines</li> <li>• Report development discussion</li> </ul>
Jan 16, 2024: PH Meeting	Report development discussion
Jan 30, 2024: PH Meeting	Report development discussion
Feb 27, 2024: PH Meeting	Report development discussion

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## Summary of Activities to Date



Meeting Date	Discussion Topics
Mar 5, 2024: DHB Meeting	Tasker Update
Mar 15, 2024: PH Meeting	Discussion with Dr. Alleyne
Mar 26, 2024: PH Meeting	Report Development
Apr 9, 2024: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion with Dr. Graham and Dr. Maybank</li> <li>• Report Development</li> </ul>
Apr 23, 2024: PH Meeting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Discussion with Dr. Baur</li> <li>• Report Development</li> </ul>
May 7, 2023: PH Meeting	Report Development
May 28, 2024: PH Meeting	Report Development

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# Summary of Activities to Date



Meeting Date	Discussion Topics
Jun 4, 2024: DHB Meeting	Tasker Update
Jun 11, 2024: PH Meeting	Report Development
Jun 25, 2024: PH Meeting	Report Development
Jul 9, 2024: PH Meeting	Report Development

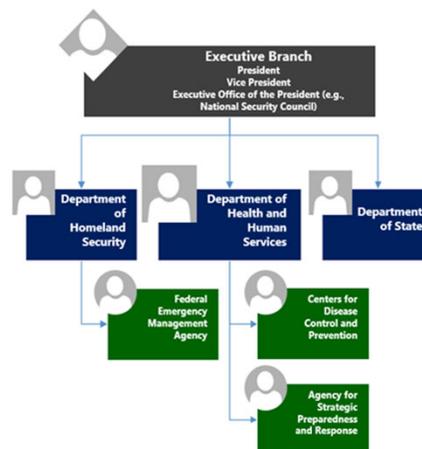
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# The National Response Framework\*



## The National Response Framework

- Guide U.S. responses to disasters and emergencies
- Organizes capabilities and resources under 15 Emergency Support Functions
  - Each Emergency Support Function includes the core capability of 'Public Information and Warning.'



U.S. Department of Homeland Security. National Response Framework. October 2019.

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# Joint Publication 3-08: Interorganizational Cooperation\*



## Joint Publication 3-08: Interorganizational Cooperation

- Outlines principles, guidance, and strategies for effective cooperation and coordination between U.S. military forces and
  - other governmental organizations
  - non-governmental organizations
  - intergovernmental organizations
  - the private sector

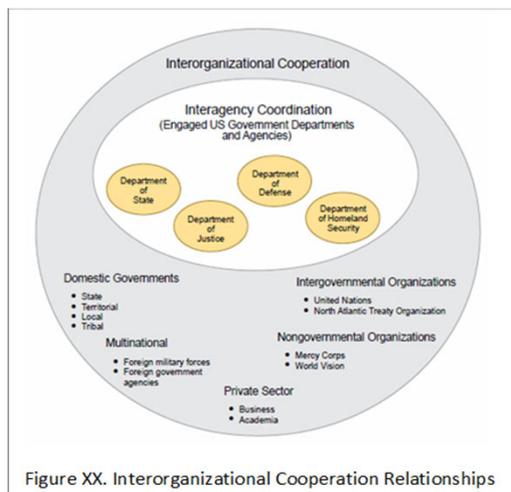


Figure XX. Interorganizational Cooperation Relationships

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Department of Defense. Joint Publication 3-08 Interorganizational Cooperation. October 2017.

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# Routine and Emergency Health Communication in DoD\*



## Public Affairs and Strategic Communication

Promotes the safety, quality, and reliability of routine MHS health care.

*Communication experience*

## Public Health Emergency Management



*Emergency Management experience*

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# Public Health Expertise is Essential but not Integrated into Communication Efforts\*



## Public Affairs and Strategic Communication

Promotes the safety, quality, and reliability of routine MHS health care.

*Communication experience*

## Public Health Emergency Management



*Emergency Management experience*



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