For Consideration For
NSPRA National School Communication Awards
Gold Achievement Awards – Crisis Communication Campaign

Entrant:
Howard Shen
Webmaster
Cajon Valley Union School District
750 East Main Street
El Cajon, CA 92020
619.590.5823
shenh@cajonvalley.net

Title of Entry:
Media Coverage for Extraction of Stranded Afghani Students
Gold Achievement Awards – Crisis Communication Campaign

District Information:
K-12 Student Enrollment - 17,168
Number of Communication Staff - 1
Synopsis:
Cajon Valley Union School District serves a large immigrant population, including a large Afghan community. In order to serve the immigrant population, the Family And Community Engagement (FACE) Department was created in 2015 to coordinate and fulfill the needs of these families. On August 16, the day before school started, a family reached out to a FACE community liaison, asking to please hold their spot at their local school. Realizing the potential magnitude of the situation, the FACE department gathered a comprehensive list of all CVUSD students known to be in Afghanistan and confirmed that 28 students in 7 families were in Afghanistan, unable to return.

The purpose of this campaign was to raise awareness of the situation of our students in Afghanistan, who were all Legal Permanent Residents (LPR) holding Special Immigrant Visas (SIV). Due to the amount of news coming out of Afghanistan at the time and the subsequent interest from around the world, we knew that it was imperative to bring immediate focus to our students and their families in an otherwise invisible existence in that rapidly deteriorating environment. After interest was established, maintaining the momentum until our primary object was accomplished. Our secondary objective was to bring awareness of students in other school districts who might be in the same plight.

Research:
Research included identifying and locating all stranded students and families and determining which outlet would provide us with most traction. As this was a crisis management communication, there wasn't a lot of research to be done. The stated goal and measurable objectives were to raise enough awareness and provide assistance and resources to those stranded and bring them home.

Planning:
Due to the widespread interest in the situation, we determined that all local, national and international media, elected officials, private and concerned citizens were our target audience. The local media will provide the personal and community touch, whereas national and international media will bring this specific situation above the other news coming from the region. Reaching elected officials, private and concerned citizens will provide the resources for extraction and continued interest as we move forward. The key message was to bring light to the situation. As the United States Military withdrew from Afghanistan, the initial report was that all who wanted to leave were able to do so. We needed to debunk this report without being political or partisan. We needed to keep our message strictly factual.

As the families returned, there was also the media's persistent request for interviews. Initially all of the families asked for privacy, so we had to establish a protocol for students returning to school sites as well as press showing up unannounced. A strict embargo for identity was established until the families felt safe to share their stories.
Finally a press conference was planned for the conclusion of the extraction effort. Date and time of the press conference to be determined.

**Implementation:**
First press release was sent on August 25th, this drew immediate widespread attention. Local and national media outlets contacted us for information, updates and interviews. The initial challenges were to coordinate the requests for interviews, especially with the east coast, and also to have a unified message and updated situation report across the system. We immediately established a small task force. Daily briefing was set up as well as a centralized interview request process. From this point forward, it was a matter of keeping the media updated through our team on a daily, sometimes hourly basis. Our crisis shared a Google Doc to have a consistent narrative and updated sit-rep. National TV coverage included Erin Burnett, Anderson Cooper, and Don Lemon on CNN, MSNBC, FOXLiveNow with Andrew Craft, and Today Show on NBC. Other national and international media outlets included Associated Press, Reuters, Yahoo News, CNN, DailyMail along with regional reporting (sample listed below). Subsequent press releases were sent as the situation developed. An internal communication video was sent on August 30th to update the employees who were just as concerned.

August 31, the office of Congressman Darrell Issa, of California's 50th congressional district, who has been the main resource in getting these students extracted, reached out to plan for a press conference. By this time, seven out of the eight families have returned to the States. A Press Conference was planned for September 2 at the district office and invitation (below) was sent out to all outlets. A joint press conference, including Congressman Issa, CVUSD officials as well as some of the returned families took place on Sept 2nd at the District Office.

**Evaluation:** Our main goal from the onset was to use all available resources and avenues to extract all stranded students and their families. The media coverage brought a spotlight to the situation, including being mentioned during a White House Press Briefing. By the end of August, seven of the eight stranded families were extracted out of Afghanistan. The last family was extracted in November with operational funds coming from an anonymous donor.

Our secondary goal was to raise awareness for other students, families and school districts that might be in the same plight. School Districts, including San Juan Unified near Sacramento have reached out to Cajon Valley for assistance and guidance on best possible strategies to return their stranded students to the States. Cajon Valley was asked to assist in drafting a letter (attached) to the White House signed by 13 US Senators regarding the permanent residents with SIV who are still stranded. With all 28 students back in school, we feel that we have accomplished what we had set out to do with this campaign.

**Press Releases and Internal Communication:**
August 25, 2022
August 27, 2022
Internal Communication Video

Press Conference:

National (TV):
- CNN: Anderson Cooper: https://youtu.be/iH_DeMjZGyQ
- CNN: Don Lemon: https://youtu.be/ZUd5IL-HwTQ
- CNN: Erin Burnett: https://youtu.be/Wc0FyU6CecW8
- FOXNews: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=l-kRUBEnfhs
- MSNBC: https://www.dropbox.com/s/f4hney9zmoaz6dy/tamara_MSNBC_08282021.mov?dl=0
- Today Show:
  https://www.today.com/news/24-california-students-their-families-stranded-afghanistan-t229119

National (Web):
- CNN -
- Yahoo News:
- Reuters:
  https://www.reuters.com/world/southern-california-students-families-stranded-afghanistan-2021-08-26/
- Associated Press:
  https://apnews.com/article/education-afghanistan-immigration-san-diego-c7360740a21bb17fd0b5451a91d50894
- New York Post:
- Newsweek:
- MSN:
- LA Times:
USA Today:  
FoxNews:  https://www.foxnews.com/us/california-students-parents-stranded-afghanistan  
New York Times:  
People Magazine:  
https://people.com/politics/seven-of-eight-san-diego-families-leaving-afghanistan/  
Wall Street Journal:  https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-rescuers-11630103565  
National Review:  
New York Daily News:  
KPBS:  
Local:  
CBS8:  
KUSI:  https://www.kusi.com/24-students-from-el-cajon-stranded-in-afghanistan/  
NBC7:  
Fox5:  
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=apu8nvhYmak&list=PLqayKwJOSYYRcTFgDbxEg1tBaqDoPjIB&index=13  
San Diego Union Tribune:  
International:  
The Daily Mail (UK)

- EpochTimes (China): https://www.epochtimes.com/gb/21/9/1/n13202856.htm