SELECTED COMMUNICATIONS CASE STUDY

Community Needs & Perceptions Analysis

Crisis Stabilization Unit launch strategy | Stakeholder research | Community engagement | Sensitive-issue communications

Organization Community Mental Health Authority of Clinton, Eaton and Ingham Counties	**Agency** Piper & Gold Public Relations
Role Director of Client Solutions | Account Director	**Date** November 2024

A portfolio-safe adaptation of a larger client analysis. This edition focuses on the strategic communications work: audience segmentation, research, messaging, stakeholder engagement and recommendations for navigating community concerns.

01 | THE CHALLENGE

Launching a new crisis resource with community trust at the center

CMHA-CEI was preparing to launch a new Crisis Stabilization Unit (CSU) in Lansing to provide immediate behavioral health, mental health and substance use crisis support. The communications challenge extended beyond naming and branding. The organization needed a launch approach that could build awareness, strengthen referral partnerships, reduce stigma and respond thoughtfully to different perceptions of the facility.

The communications strategy needed to account for:

- People who may seek crisis care and need the facility to feel safe, trusted and easy to understand.
- Health care, emergency response, government and community partners who may refer people to services.
- Neighbors, families and schools seeking clear information about how the facility would fit into the community.
- Internal leaders, staff and board members shaping the facility's launch and long-term positioning.

The strategic premise: a successful launch would require more than promotion. It would require listening early, understanding different concerns and giving stakeholders useful information they could trust and act on.

Listen first. Segment the audiences. Build from what they need.

The analysis used multiple research inputs to understand how stakeholders perceived the CSU and what information, language and resources would help them support its launch.

Digital survey	Eight advisory and key staff members provided input that helped refine external audience segments and the focus-group framework.
Focus groups and stakeholder meetings	Engagement from July through October included internal and external stakeholders, people supporting access to care and people who may receive services.
Audience segmentation	Stakeholders were organized by their relationship to the CSU and the role they would play in awareness, referrals, education, brand development and community acceptance.
Environmental learning	The analysis considered lessons from related behavioral health announcements to anticipate potential community questions and concerns.

The goal was to find themes across audiences without flattening the differences between them, then use those insights to shape messaging, education, collateral and engagement.

Different stakeholders needed different things from the same story

Individuals served	Safety, trust, clarity and a welcoming experience. Messaging needed to help people understand when and how to seek crisis care.
Community partners	Transparent, comprehensive and current information that would help emergency personnel, health providers, government agencies and other partners make appropriate referrals.
Neighborhood partners	Education about the facility, its purpose and its place in the community, with room to ask questions and address stigma or uncertainty.
Internal stakeholders	A shared vision for the launch, consistent messaging and a clear framework for decisions about positioning, resources and outreach.

This segmentation allowed the communications approach to stay consistent at the organizational level while adapting the depth, tone and information to the needs of each audience.

Trust, safety and useful information mattered more than promotion

- **Education was foundational.** Public-facing communications needed to explain the resource clearly while addressing concerns and positioning the CSU as a community asset.
- **Stigma could become a barrier to care.** Messaging needed to avoid language and associations that could discourage people from seeking help.
- **Partners wanted accuracy and ease of access.** Referral partners needed current information, clear resources and confidence that people would reach the appropriate care.
- **Families were navigating more than a health issue.** Communications needed empathy for concerns that could include safety, housing, employment, transportation, custody and other pressures.
- **Not every stakeholder began from the same place.** Some groups were highly supportive, while others were more skeptical and required a deliberate relationship-building approach.

The analysis recommended an authentic, supportive tone; clear expectations about what people could expect; inclusive language; and the willingness to say when an answer was not yet known while committing to find it.

Turn research into communications people can use

Messaging

- Center stigma reduction, trust and safety.
- Use an authentic, supportive tone that can adapt to different circumstances.
- Explain what people can expect from the experience and process.
- Use inclusive language for people who may not yet understand that they are experiencing a crisis.

Collateral & resources

- Prioritize clear, direct, transparent and up-to-date information.
- Equip partners and staff with resources that help them answer questions and guide people appropriately.
- Develop accessible materials that support both public education and patient navigation.

Community engagement

- Share information proactively and create space to listen to concerns.
- Address questions in the moment when possible and establish a consistent follow-up process when answers are not yet available.
- Build long-term relationships rather than treating engagement as a one-time launch tactic.

A strategy for skepticism, stigma and competing perspectives

One of the most relevant findings was that stakeholder support was not uniform. The analysis identified skepticism among some external partners and anticipated community concerns rooted in stigma, fear and stereotypes.

The recommended approach emphasized:

- Meeting people where they are rather than dismissing concerns.
- Creating opportunities to listen before responding.
- Using research and clear information to address misconceptions.
- Treating stakeholder voices with respect while maintaining the organization's purpose and responsibility to people in crisis.
- Looking for common ground around safety, access to care and community well-being.
- Following up consistently when questions could not be answered immediately.

The communications lesson: complex issues rarely require one perfect message. They require a process that combines listening, clarity, empathy, evidence and sustained engagement.

07 | WHAT THIS WORK DEMONSTRATES

Strategic communications beyond the deliverable

This project demonstrates an approach to communications leadership that begins with understanding the audience before choosing the message or channel. The work connected stakeholder research to practical recommendations for launch communications, community engagement, education and issues preparedness.

Audience & stakeholder strategy	**Sensitive-issue communications**
Research synthesis	**Community engagement**
Message development	**Issues anticipation**
Executive/client counsel	**Integrated communications planning**

Portfolio note: This selected case study is adapted from a larger client analysis and intentionally omits personal contact information, direct stakeholder quotations, detailed operational/security planning, named outreach targets and proprietary brand-development materials.