

L. Saunders

MEMORANDUM

TO: Mayors' Offices
Human Relations Agencies
Interested Persons

FROM: Detroit Commission on Community Relations

SUBJECT: Establishing a Rumor Control Center

HISTORY AND PURPOSE OF DETROIT'S RUMOR CONTROL CENTER

The report of the National Advisory Commission on Civil Disorders issued in March, 1968 dealt extensively with the history of disorders, the patterns of disorders, the basic causes, the formation and conditions existent in the ghettos and plans of action on a local, state and national level. Communication patterns in riots was of particular interest to the Commission. It was pointed out that much of the trouble occurring in the summer of 1967 was generated through distortion of facts and information. "Rumor significantly aggravated tension and disorder in more than 65% of the disorders studied by the Commission. Consequently, the rumors made the job of the police and community leaders far more difficult. The Commission therefore felt that the 'harmful effect' of rumors could be offset if police, public officials and community leaders could quickly and effectively circulate the facts. They proposed the establishment of a Rumor Control Center by cities anticipating civil disturbances. The office, as envisioned in the report, would be responsible for the collection evaluation and countering of rumors which could lead to civil disorder."

Prior to the issuance of the National Advisory Commission report, Mayor Jerome P. Cavanagh created the Detroit Rumor Control Center and gave responsibility for its operation to the Commission on Community Relations. Significant polarization was occurring in the Detroit Metropolitan area at that time. Rumors were circulating in the suburbs surrounding Detroit stating that militants from the inner city were going to invade suburban communities. In the inner city rumor had it that white right-wing groups were planning an invasion. Gun sales for the first three months of the year had spiraled far beyond the equivalent period of last year. Vigilante groups were said to be organizing in small suburban townships. An added and extremely important dimension was the absence of the two major metropolitan newspapers which had been shut down because of strikes since October of 1967. The communication gap created by the absence of the newspapers was being filled by wildly circulating rumors. Mayor Cavanagh at that time said: "Riots are not inevitable...but when I say that riots in this city or in any other city are not inevitable, I must emphasize that every citizen has it within his power to affect the conditions that give rise to violence. "If he accepts uncritically every rumor, if he buys a gun neither understanding how it works nor the legal implications of using a weapon, if he endorses vigilante groups, he has contributed to an atmosphere that may well bring about the very violence he has been seeking to avoid."

"All of these things have been happening in the Detroit area. We seem to have lost our judgment and our perspective. Wildly irresponsible rumors, concerning what 'might happen next summer,' have been spread throughout the Detroit area by commentators whose credibility in normal circumstances would be immediately discounted." In setting up the Rumor Control Center, Mayor Cavanagh informed the public that "each rumor will be checked out, the true facts established and an effort made to dispel the rumor before it can do any more damage." Less than a month after the Rumor Control Center was created the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King occurred. It was during this period that the Rumor Control Center was found to be a vital and significant municipal service.

CCR TENSION CONTROL ACTIVITY

The Field Investigation Division of the Detroit Commission on Community Relations has traditionally functioned as an investigative and information gathering unit focusing on rumor and incident control. Intelligence data on extremist groups is maintained in the usual course of business. Incidents having racial overtones are also investigated and evaluated by this unit. Primary responsibility for the operation of the Rumor Control Center was given to this division of the agency because of its experience.

SUGGESTED PROCEDURE FOR SETTING UP A RUMOR CONTROL CENTER

The Commission on Community Relations has 18 telephones serviced by six outside lines. There are 19 professionals employed at the CCR, all of whom during emergencies service rumor calls. Regularly the flow of calls are handled by the three-man unit of the Field Investigation staff.

There is a special telephone line used only by the Secretary-Director of the CCR for communication with the Mayor. A police phone is also located in the Field Investigation section which can be used to dial directly to any police precinct or bureau. * Line to

Four basic concerns should be considered in setting up a Rumor Control Center. These are:

- ✓ 1. Publicizing the Rumor Control Center
2. Staffing
- ✓ 3. Physical Equipment
- ✓ 4. Establishing a communication network

Publicizing the Rumor Control Center

Where possible it is best to have the chief executive of the city announce the creation, the function, and the location of the Rumor Control Center. Press releases should be sent to newspapers in the city, the metropolitan area, and also to the Negro press. Wire services, television and radio stations should also be contacted and asked to give continuing publicity to the Rumor Center's phone number. Car cards can also be used for posting on buses and in public places.

National coverage by both NBC and CBS television along with stories in national magazines such as NEWSWEEK and TIME gave extensive publicity to the operation of Detroit's Rumor Control Center. Information also appeared in the newspapers of many of the nation's largest cities. Great interest was shown by several European television networks and film clips were shot of the Rumor Control Center's operation.

Staffing

All personnel in the agency except supervision are committed to answering calls during periods of grave emergency when volume is high. At such times the center is manned on a 24-hour basis. The day shift is from 8 a.m. to 7 p.m., and the night shift is from 7 p.m. to 8 a.m. Seven in the evening was designated as the end of the day and the beginning of the evening shift because of curfew which was set in Detroit as 8 p.m.

During periods of grave emergency, a high volume of calls was maintained until 3. At 6 a.m. the number of calls began to increase again.

A supervisor is always designated as being in charge of each rumor shift.

As calls fall off and the 24-hour staffing by the CCR is not warranted, the staff operates the center from 8 a.m. in the morning until 8 p.m. in the evening when the CCR switchboard is connected with the desk of the Detroit Police Detective Bureau where officers take the calls until 8 a.m. the following morning.

The CCR switchboard is shut at 5 p.m. and rumor calls are thereafter taken by members of the Detective Bureau during periods of normal operation when no emergency exists.

Telephone Personnel: During the working day most of the staff persons man the telephones and are relieved by supervisors. A list of volunteers was solicited from Metropolitan Human Relations agencies, but to this time it has not been necessary to use them. * + m NA

Subsequent to Mayor Cavanagh's creation of the Rumor Control Center, after the staff had accumulated some experience in dealing with rumor calls, a set of guidelines for responding to rumor calls was worked out and given to the staff.

(See attached "Guidelines for Responding to Rumor Calls")

Field Investigation Staffing: Where it is possible during periods of emergency field staff is asked to conduct on-the-scene investigation of significant rumors asserted to the fact and relay relevant information to the Rumor Control Center for evaluation.

Police Citizens Complaint Bureau Personnel: When emergency mobilization occurs within the city, the Citizen Complaint Bureau of the Detroit Police Department assign one officer to the Rumor Control Center each 12-hour shift. This officer gives Rumor Control immediate access to inputs germane to the police matters.

Additional Personnel: The Detroit civil disturbance support plan issued by the Mayor's office assigns personnel from Detroit's Model Neighborhood Agency to augment rumor control staff during those periods when emergency mobilization occurs. The rationale for this assignment is that these persons have vital community contacts and can sensitively handle rumor calls without extensive briefings.

Physical Equipment

During the evening shift the switchboard is arranged so that all incoming calls can be taken on phones located in one room. This allows maximum efficiency in usage, exchange, updating, and evaluation of information. During the day shift rumor calls are fed to the Field Investigation unit until the volume becomes such that they are incapable of handling the calls. Primary responsibility for rumor calls lies with the Field Investigation Division and secondary responsibility is given to the Research and Information Division because staff persons there are more likely to be scheduled in the office and can easily cancel any outstanding appointments.

Telephones: The number of outside lines and telephones needed in the office are largely dependent on the size of the agency and community which it services.

It is desirable to have several telephone lines available only for calling out.

The chief executive of the agency should have a direct line to the Mayor's office.

A police phone on which all precincts and bureaus can be directly contacted is mandatory.

Map of Metropolitan Area: This map should be visible to personnel answering phones. A plastic covering over the map makes it possible for recording and plotting verified incidents.

Blackboard: The board should be visible to all operating personnel and used to make temporary recordings of changing conditions (e.g. curfew changes, etc.)

Essential Information Notebooks: Each staff person should have notebooks containing essential information relating to curfew regulations, available temporary shelter, resources for locating missing persons and acquiring emergency food and medical supplies, etc. Loose leaf folders are excellent for this purpose as they facilitate modification of information.

Forms: (1) Rumor Report Sheet (Yellow)-is to be used to record rumors determined by staff to be important. (2) Daily Report to Mayor- is submitted each morning to the Mayor's office for review of the activity of the previous day. (3) Switchboard Tally-used by switchboard operator to tally all rumor calls.

Samples of these forms are attached.

Establishing A Communications Network

For the past five summers the Commission on Community Relations Field Investigation Division has operated the Summer-Week-End Early-warning Project (SWEEP).

On a routine basis staff of the Field Division contacts a number of community service type agencies located at the neighborhood level to ascertain if they are aware of any racial incidents having occurred in the area. Agencies contacted include the Community Action Centers of the Mayor's Committee on Human Resources Development, Community Relations Division of the Detroit Public Schools, neighborhood facilities of the Detroit Parks and Recreation Department, civil rights groups and etc.

The personnel of agencies, during periods of serious disturbance, become the "eyes and ears" of the Rumor Control Center. Informally, they act as "field investigators" and can be contacted by CCR staff to verify and check incidents reported and inquired about by the general public.

EVALUATION OF RUMOR CONTROL CENTER

Since the Center was established on March 7, 1968, we have received over 10,000 calls. Prior to April 4, 1968, the day on which Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. was assassinated, most of the calls were of a speculative nature. These calls reflected a fear that a riot would start on a certain day. Another type of rumor that we received was the type of rumor based on a real or present issue, event or incident. These rumors were characterized by an action on the part of a civil rights group, the Police Department, or students at a school. An example of this type of rumor is the Post Junior High School incident, which occurred in Detroit on March 15, 1968. The students walked out of the school because of dissatisfaction with the school administration. The police were called in to sweep the streets surrounding the school and arrived in force. We started to receive calls asking what was happening at Post Junior High School. The first call asked what the students were doing, later calls came in asking why the police were there, and still later, calls took on the nature of accusations against the police. The first accusation stated that the police were beating the students with baseball bats, later allegations that the police were shooting the students, and still later, allegations that a student had been killed by the police. This type rumor is the most volatile, as it involves something that is presently happening and something that requires a present action. The Rumor Control Center can provide that needed present action, by providing factual information to the public, combatting exaggerations based on fear and emotions and by providing necessary professional advice to the caller.

During the crisis surrounding the death of Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. and the declared state of emergency in the Detroit area, most of the calls were requests for information. Examples of this type of call were: Can one go to and from work during curfew hours? Is the purchase of gasoline permitted during the curfew hours? Is the Canadian Border open? We received and

handled approximately 5,000 calls during this period. Ideally, in emergency situations, the Rumor Control Center should become a gathering point for all information regarding the emergency situation. Our experience during emergency situations leads us to believe that the police are too busy to handle these type calls.

Some indications of the relationship of events to rumors is shown by the volume of calls. The Detroit Rumor Control Center averaged 132 calls per day prior to the assassination of Dr. King and 915 calls the day after the shooting. During the ensuing three days, over one thousand calls per day were received. These calls came mainly from the suburbs surrounding Detroit (mainly white communities). A recurring rumor was of the speculative type illustrating the fear which had been generated in the white communities. The rumor, in essence, indicated that Negroes planned to systematically kill off the children in white neighborhoods.

The frequency of rumor calls has dropped off significantly since the period following the assassination.

CCR staff believes that a Rumor Control Center is absolutely vital to a community experiencing heightened social tensions even with other sources of communication, such as newspapers, fully operative. Citizens should have a source they can call immediately and be assured of getting an accurate and credible response to their questions. The Rumor Control Center fulfills this need.