

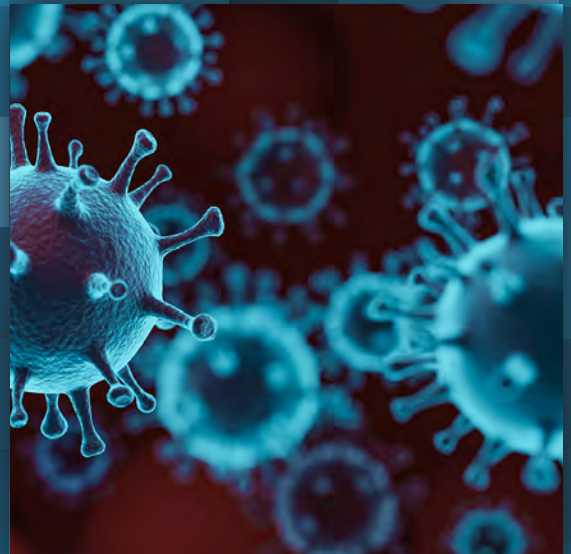
COVID-19 *TOTAL RESPONSE* SERIES

Technical Assistance in an Emergency: The MSG Approach

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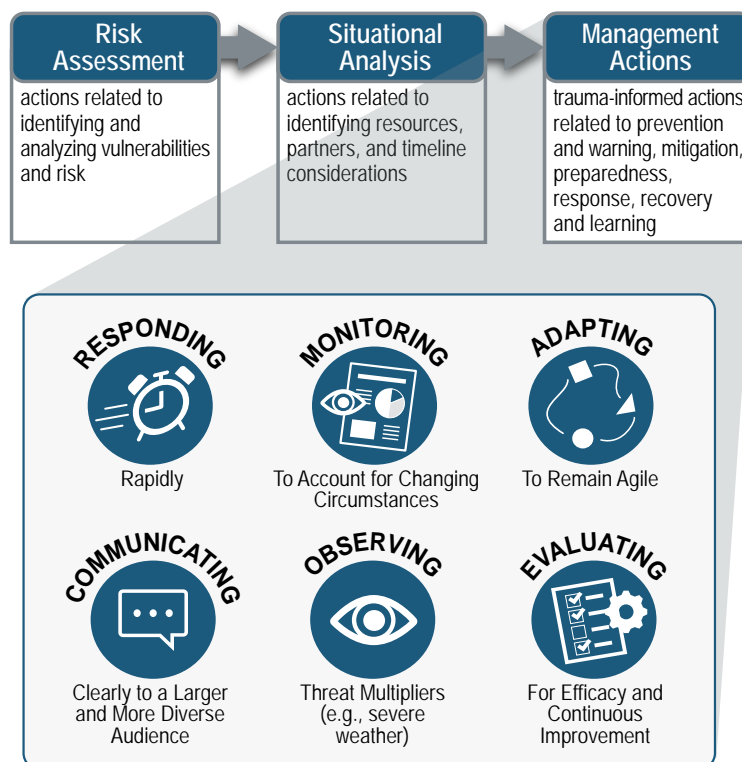
The COVID-19 emergency has necessitated a change in the way technical assistance (TA) services must be delivered and evaluated. This brief describes MSG's *TotalResponse* Emergency TA Model, highlighting adaptations that federal agencies should consider in delivering emergency-based TA to states, service providers, and, where appropriate, directly to populations in need.

TA is a critical tool in response and recovery management actions. TA can also be a proactive strategy for ensuring readiness against recurrence of the emergency or crisis, similar emergencies, or looming threats.

The MSG *TotalResponse* emergency TA model defines six trauma informed approaches for delivering crisis and emergency-based TA. Underpinning these approaches are the principles of trauma informed care:

- **Safety:** Identifying risk, providing stability, and planning for compounding trauma or threat multipliers that may impact TA delivery.
- **Choice:** Giving TA recipients options and flexibility, while honoring the hardships they may be experiencing, so that relationships are maintained and TA delivery options can be explored.
- **Collaboration:** In a time of emergency, TA delivery requires a collaborative approach that is mutually determined. Discussion, understanding, and flexibility afford the space to find the right path forward for MSG as the TA provider and the TA recipient.
- **Trustworthiness:** Honest, timely, open, and ongoing discussion and information build the foundation of a trustworthy source of information, resources, and TA.
- **Empowerment:** TA recipients must be empowered with the tools and information to work effectively in their own communities and systems.

MSG's Emergency TA Model: Key Adaptations to TA in Times of Crisis or Emergency



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The model first defines the three sequential stages to emergency management from initial Risk Assessment, to Situational Analysis, and finally to Management Actions.¹ All crisis and emergency management activities should go through these stages in order to plan, assess, analyze, and act in responding to emergency conditions including the COVID-19 pandemic.

The model then outlines six trauma informed management approaches that must be adopted to perform emergency-based TA effectively: *responding* rapidly; *monitoring* to account for changing circumstances, *adapting* to remain agile, *communicating* clearly for all demographics, *observing* threat multipliers, and *evaluating* for efficacy and continuous improvement. Each approach is described below with particular attention to implications for TA implementation that distinguishes COVID-19 emergency management from “business as usual” TA.



Responding Rapidly

The speed of performing assessments, creating response plans, developing communications, delivering TA, and disseminating information is critical to an effective response to an emergency. TA providers must leverage and utilize all available platforms, networks, and other channels of outreach – including those of intermediaries – to share key messages and information to the affected audience and other key stakeholders within a useful time period. Timeliness and reliability in the speed of the response also builds trust in the TA as a useful component of the emergency response. This means an increasing TA emphasis on:

- **Leveraging multiple existing dissemination platforms.** These include online and virtual platforms, as well as crowdsourcing options such as communities of practice and learning collaboratives; social media platforms (e.g., Twitter, Facebook, LinkedIn, etc.); and messaging services (e.g., WhatsApp, SMS, etc.).
- **Repurposing existing resources.** Leveraging or repurposing existing platforms will save critical time and also afford efficiencies critical to audience reach and engagement. Collaborating with other federal or business partners can be an important strategy in gaining access to additional vehicles or platforms.



Monitoring to Adapt to Changing Circumstance

Technical assistance goals will evolve as an emergency or crisis situation develops. The COVID-19 response must reflect the long-term nature of the pandemic. Unlike a natural disaster which occurs, ends, and has a clear pathway to recovery, the response to COVID-19 has no clear end date. Therefore, TA efforts must be proactive and continuously re-evaluated in developing and executing short, medium, and long-range plans for TA delivery.

- **Phase One:** The response must focus on short-term efforts such as information dissemination for the purposes of individual and public safety within the context of the federal agency and agency-supported services. The response must focus on continuing essential services.
- **Phase Two:** As the crisis begins to resolve and calm, TA can shift from response into recovery, providing TA on how to continue to deliver services or improve the services delivered either in response to the initial emergency, or as a result of the emergency.

¹ Nojavan, M., Salehi, E. & Omidvar, B., 2018, 'Conceptual change of disaster management models: A thematic analysis', Jambá: Journal of Disaster Risk Studies 10(1), a451. <https://doi.org/10.4102/jamba.v10i1.451>

- **Phase Three:** Monitoring threats must become part of the hazard or risk assessment planning that agencies and organizations embed in their operations. TA must include a focus on helping providers plan for operation during a future crisis or emergency and empowering TA recipients to work with others in their networks to increase overall planning and readiness.



To Remain Agile

Adapting to Remain Agile

Technical assistance must be adaptable, agile, and responsive to continuously shifting information. In an emergency situation, information changes rapidly.

Therefore, new information must be constantly updated for accuracy and delivered quickly and efficiently through various channels of outreach. This means greater attention in TA by:

- *Lifting and leveraging the knowledge and experiences* of practitioners on the ground experiencing change and providing these individuals with platforms to share their experiences in real time.
- *Collaborating with new partners and stakeholders* to bring innovative ideas that are working in adjacent fields to a new audience.
- *Allowing new flexibilities in TA delivery* to allow recipients to choose the method and frequency in which they engage.
- Moving from the traditional monthly or bimonthly newsletter model to an as-needed “*flash*” *update model*.
- Using *push notifications* for high-priority updates.
- Moving to *virtual conferences and meetings* to continue effective engagement.
- Ensuring that *websites are frequently updated* with information that is current, accurate, and relevant to the target audience, building the audience’s confidence in the website as a trusted source of information.



Clearly to a Larger and More Diverse Audience

Communicating Clearly to a Larger and More Diverse Audience

Effective TA messaging in an emergency must take into account the needs, demographics, culturally appropriate approaches, and effective channels of outreach to reach a larger national audience.

Communications must be reflective of audience choices in not only receiving, but acting upon, the message. To optimize the impact of messaging, the following strategies should be considered:

- **Differentiate messaging by audience.** Messaging to youth, parents, and older adults will all need to be different. Differentiated messages also provide opportunities to hone in on issues that are critical to subpopulations, but that may not be of high importance to the population at large. This concept can be expanded to live events via webinar platforms that can bring together small groups grappling with a common issue. Differentiation is also needed when developing communications for different stakeholder audiences, as shown in the graphic.



- **Recognizing “new” TA recipients.** During an emergency such as COVID-19, the target audience for TA will expand and require immediate TA response, making accelerated development and delivery essential. Traditional TA efforts are targeted towards participants due to their participation in a federal program, such as a discretionary grant, or due to specialized needs and interest in a TA topic area. To respond effectively to this emergency however, the audience needing TA will likely encompass many recipients who have never previously required or engaged in TA. As such, TA providers during the emergency must recognize these new audiences and consider any baseline learning that must take place, as well as supportive and educational TA resources.
- **Embrace texting.** Most Americans, including low-income Americans, have cell phones, but may not have access to mobile devices, computers, or internet service.² Texting provides a quick way to disseminate high-priority messages.
- **Create culturally competent messages.** Culturally-competent communication considers how best to meet each audience sector by meeting them where they are and in a language and approach that will resonate. This includes considering various age ranges and geographical or regional preferences. A plan to overcome potential barriers to accessing and receiving information will ensure the broadest and most effective reach.



Observing Threat Multipliers

Threat multipliers make already dangerous situations more dangerous by exacerbating existing threats. An emergency such as the global COVID-19 pandemic, in which unemployment has increased dramatically, can provide fertile ground for threat multipliers such as severe weather to impact public safety and delivery of services. Federal agencies, as they are developing their response to these emergencies, must consider the impact of additional threats and the need to reevaluate plans often in order to ensure capacity and capability to maintain services. Implications to TA management include:

- *Continuously monitoring news and information* regularly to identify potential threat multipliers.
- *Creating a flexible response plan* that builds in capacity to respond to new and additional threats.
- *Evaluating how threat multipliers may impact TA* and create action steps to address any new concerns.



Evaluating for Efficacy and Continuous Improvement

A primary challenge to evaluating services for efficacy and continuous improvement is the lack of time and increased burden on all systems and staff to conduct rigorous research as defined by the scientific community. However, there are many efforts that can be creatively implemented to ensure that less formal evaluations (e.g., analytics) occur to ensure that responses continue to improve. Specific examples of approaches during an emergency include:

- *Developing short and simple web surveys* to garner “painless” participant feedback for all significant activities (e.g., a five to seven question Likert scale survey using Survey Monkey or equivalent).

² Mobile Fact Sheet. (June 12, 2019). Pew Research Center. Retrieved from <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/mobile/>

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- *Prominently host an area on the website* for soliciting comments and critiques on specific activities and services as well as suggestions for other topics to cover.
- Regularly and *proactively gather data from TA providers* (e.g., webinar presenters, community of practice moderators, web content providers) on what is working, what needs improvement, and lessons learned to maintain quality and effectiveness.
- Scheduling *regular data analysis* periods to review these data both singly and in combination and adjust the program accordingly.

Implementing these approaches and strategies in federal TA efforts supports the U.S. human service systems, helping state governments, local agencies, institutions, and direct service providers alleviate safety concerns, support continuity of services, and provide the best services possible immediately, during, and following an emergency or crisis.



About MSG

Manhattan Strategy Group (MSG), founded in 2001, is a management and social services consulting firm that works with federal, state, and local government agencies and their programs to achieve performance excellence. MSG works to improve education, workforce development, and human services for individuals with barriers to employment, for underserved populations, and for low-income communities, families, and students.

MSG core services include Technical Assistance, Research & Evaluation, Communication & Information, and Management & Technology. MSG has refined capabilities in the areas of: assessing program and practitioner needs; fostering program and professional development; producing responsive grantee-centric technical assistance (TA) plans; aligning TA staff with the most appropriate knowledge and skills to effectively implement TA plans; identifying the most viable TA delivery approaches; determining the suitable level of intensity for TA delivery; documenting, tracking, and monitoring the provision of TA via our *TotalTA* platform; evaluating the impact of our TA delivery; and, measuring and reporting on required client outcomes tied to established standards and performance improvements.

With in-house experts on staff, access to many of the most influential thought leaders, researchers, and innovators in their fields, and with direct experience working with states to increase access to high quality federal programs and resources, MSG is poised and committed to make a positive difference for all Americans.

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