

# America's Plain Language Authorities Share Concerns About Coronavirus Outreach

*Clarity experts warn of risks from confusing and conflicting messages*

WASHINGTON, March 4, 2020 -- The Center for Plain Language and Clarity International, America's plain language authorities, encourage the U.S. government to follow crisis-communication best practices in outreach about coronavirus (COVID-19).

With the numbers of infected people increasing daily, Americans' questions and confusion are also on the rise. Many people do not understand where the risk is greatest, how tests are happening, or even what they can do to protect themselves.

Everyone needs to know what they can do to prepare — and how to separate truth from hype. Without clear messaging and specific calls to action, people may panic or act on misinformation. Either outcome can have wide-ranging impacts on national health and security.

"We already see how a lack of clear guidance has led to empty supermarket shelves, price-gouging, and a potential shortage of masks. Clear communication from the government and other experts can help us avoid such unintended consequences," says Dr. Barbra Kingsley, chair of the Center for Plain Language and crisis-communication speaker. "People are anxious, but they **want** to be prepared. Unfortunately, when they don't know what to do, they fill in the blanks."

Crisis-communication research shows that these best practices will help people stay informed:

- Explain risks clearly and factually.
- Identify actions with clear and focused language.
- Provide ongoing warnings in short, clear, and descriptive language.
- Make information accessible in a range of easy-to-find channels.

Good guidance exists, such as the Centers for Disease Control's [\*Get Your Household Ready for Coronavirus Disease 2019 \(COVID-19\)\*](#). This information can be simplified even further for readers with lower literacy skills, and it can be made readily available for those who speak English as a second language. The CDC, a past winner of the Center for Plain Language's ClearMark Award (given to the best in plain language in North America), is well positioned to give clear, just-in-time scientific data and information.

"Providing every person with the accurate and timely information they need is a fundamental social-justice issue," said Julie Clement, President of Clarity International.

"When faced with a new and unfamiliar situation – like this strain of coronavirus – experts must communicate rapidly changing information in consistent and simple ways. This is no time for jargon or doublespeak. People need information they can understand and use immediately."

[The Center for Plain Language](#), a non-profit organization, helps government agencies and businesses write clear and understandable documents. [Clarity International](#) is a non-profit promoting clear legal language. Both organizations use plain language, train those who should use plain language, and urge people to demand plain language in all documents.

SOURCE: The Center for Plain Language

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