



# The American Liaison Network: A Resource and Model for Crisis Communication



Research and Information Support Center (RISC)

## SUMMARY

Quick and effective communication with relevant stakeholders and the ability to conduct safety checks for impacted personnel should be central to any comprehensive emergency response plan for security incidents overseas. Organizations often address this need by implementing a crisis communication plan that includes protocols for disseminating information and filtering updates back to security staff. The U.S. Department of State has decades of experience conveying critical security information to U.S. citizens in times of crisis; from that experience, it has developed the American Liaison Network (ALN). This report provides an overview of the ALN both as a resource and a model for private-sector security managers to use as they consider their own crisis communications protocols.

## WHAT IS THE ALN?

The American Liaison Network (ALN) began as the “warden system” in the 1930s, a term [originating](#) from World War II air raid wardens who patrolled territories in the United Kingdom and United States. In 2016, the Department began [improvements to the program](#) including renaming the old warden system as the ALN. The ALN builds on the core function of the warden system, and promotes a more bi-directional communication paradigm between the overseas posts and the Citizen Liaison Volunteers (CLVs) who comprise the ALN. It is a community of U.S. citizens (and occasionally non-citizens) who partner with U.S. embassies (and consulates) to address health, safety, and security issues affecting U.S. citizens in their respective countries.

CLVs are usually longer-term residents of the country and, ideally, speak the local language. As noted above, they are private citizens who aid the embassy in helping U.S. citizens in need. They assist travelers in distress, help the Department of State track down missing U.S. citizens, and, in the event of a natural disaster or other emergency, aid the embassy’s American Citizen Services (ACS) section to get U.S. citizens to safety. On a day-to-day basis though, CLVs are the “eyes and ears” in the community, providing valuable feedback on what life is like for ordinary U.S. citizens living in a particular country.

A number of success stories illustrate the ALN’s value to both the U.S. Department of State and U.S. citizens abroad. For example, in the aftermath of [Typhoon Haiyan](#), U.S. Embassy Manila used CLVs to help share crisis response information with U.S. citizens in storm-affected areas. In Haiti, CLVs have played a key role in confirming reports of unrest, detailing the conditions on the ground. In other instances, CLVs have performed (at the request of Consular staff) limited consular services when Embassy staff were unable to travel, such as visiting a prisoner in jail or an injured citizen in the hospital.

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## BENEFITTING FROM ENGAGEMENT WITH THE ALN

CLVs serve as a key connection between private-sector expatriates (expats) and the ACS team at the local embassy or consulate. Private-sector expats are also often key candidates to volunteer. In fact, CLV engagement guidance specifically mentions representatives from U.S. or multi-national companies as a key recruitment category. CLVs are, as the name suggests, volunteers and are not government employees; they do not receive any financial compensation for their services. Having an employee serving as a CLV can provide a valuable connection point to the Department of State, although by enrolling in the Smart Traveler Enrollment Program (STEP), private-sector organizations can still receive embassy/consulate messaging in emergencies.

ACS is often in most in need of CLVs in smaller cities and rural areas, which can be the hardest places to reach in an emergency. In places like Honduras, where the Embassy is on the mainland but most of the U.S. tourists travel to the islands (e.g. Roatán), CLVs on the islands can provide an immediate response following an arrest or a crime, until a consular officer can travel for follow-up.

If you or other employees within your organization are interested in becoming CLVs abroad, you should reach out to ACS at the relevant embassy or consulate. Find contact information on the country-specific travel destination pages on [travel.state.gov](https://travel.state.gov).

## THE ALN AS A MODEL FOR CRISIS COMMUNICATIONS

The ALN can serve as a useful model for a similar crisis communications network within your own organization. Though many private-sector organizations have a plan in place for communicating with employees during emergencies, few realize how effective (or ineffective) that system is until it is tested by a crisis in real time. Developing, implementing, and maintaining an effective plan is complex, and there is no one-size-fits-all approach. The U.S. Department of State has wrestled with a similar issue over the years in terms of how it has approached communication with U.S. citizens during crises abroad. As is the case in the private sector, major incidents have illustrated both strengths and deficiencies.

One of the key changes made during the transition from the warden system to the ALN was the focus on two-way communication, and encouraging CLVs to serve as a source of information rather than simply being a conveyer of information. While top-down crisis communication measures, such as email groups, phone trees, or “buddy” systems can and do get information to employees and facilitate accountability checks, the ALN now encourages CLVs to be more proactive by sharing useful security information and identifying potential security risks before they become a crisis. This provides the embassy with valuable security insights that facilitate the implementation of more effective security measures. Similar information-sharing networks among employees could also be useful within private-sector organizations, just as they are between organizations in the OSAC program.

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Organizations looking to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of on-the-ground crisis communication networks could also benefit from the example of the ALN with more proactive engagement with the networks. This includes measures such as developing an engagement strategy, designating a country network coordinator, and planning regular meetings that include substantive training and discussions for the facilitators. These are all components of the ALN that contribute to its success in, and outside of, times of crisis.

Another form of proactive engagement is the inclusion of network members in crisis exercises. As noted above, many private-sector organizations are not aware of shortcomings in their crisis communication network until a significant security event unfolds. For this reason, testing the network through crisis exercises is critical to its long-term success and viability in true emergency situations. To keep CLVs sharp, many embassies include them in their exercises. This allows members of the network to learn firsthand what is expected of them in a crisis and illustrate how they will support the overall response effort. This inclusion also helps to build esprit de corps between the members of the network and the organization that they serve.

Finally, ALN programs differ from embassy to embassy; they are intentionally flexible. This flexibility allows each embassy to determine what structure and level of complexity makes the most sense in a particular operating environment. Local factors such as the size and make-up of the U.S. citizen community in that country, geography, and host country resources help determine whether a small, single network is the best fit, or if a more complex structure with regional sub-networks is a better design. Private-sector organizations could also benefit for a situational approach to crisis communication networks that takes into account various location-specific factors in the design and implementation of a network.

## FURTHER INFORMATION

For additional information about the American Liaison Network or crisis communication networks in general, please contact [OSAC](#).

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