



# Memo: Communications Writing Guidelines

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The National Health Care for the Homeless Council's communications encompass three primary channels: mass emails ("e-blasts"), social media, and our website. Messaging for each channel can vary significantly, but all communications can be made more effective through the following of simple guidelines. This document outlines content submission guidelines as well as a few best practices for e-blast communications and *Council News*.

## Content Submission Guidelines

When submitting content for review, it is critical to include a few necessary elements. The following lists detail the minimum of necessary information required for specific submissions.

### E-Blasts

- **Mailing List:** The recipient list that the e-blast will be sent to. If you do not know which list to use, contact me.
- **Requested Distribution Time:** The date when you would prefer the e-blast to be sent out. Please bear in mind that we do not distribute e-blasts on Mondays or Fridays except in special circumstances.
- **Purpose:** the goal of your e-blast (e.g., to encourage recipients to register for a webinar, draw people to a new publication, etc.).
- **Subject Line:** The proposed subject line you wish to use.

- **Copy:** The proposed text to be used in the e-blast. It is acceptable to either embed links or to place them in parentheses beside the appropriate text (e.g. “webinar link <[www.webinarlink.com](http://www.webinarlink.com)>”).
- **Images:** Any images to be included with the e-blast.
- **Technical Requirements:** Any website forms or pages that will need to be created, revised, or made active to support the e-blast.

### *Council News Submissions*

- **Headline:** The title of the item.
- **Copy:** The text for the item.
- **Image (optional):** The featured image to be used with the item.

### Homepage Posts

- **Purpose:** The goal of the homepage post (e.g., draw attention to a Council resource, gather registrants for a webinar, etc.).
- **Requested Distribution Time:** When the post should be made live.
- **Title:** The proposed headline for the post.
- **Copy:** The proposed text for the post.
- **Images:** Any images to be included with the post.
- **Technical Requirements:** Any website forms or pages that will need to be created, revised, or made active to support the homepage post.

### Social Media Posts

#### *Facebook*

- **Purpose:** The goal of the Facebook post (e.g., have readers submit an abstract, visit a Council page, etc.).

- Requested Distribution Time: When the post should be made live.
- Copy (*optional*): The text for the post. Optimally, this should not exceed 50-60 words.
- Image (*optional*): The image to be featured with the post.
- Link: A single link to be featured in the post. *Note: While it is possible to include more than one link in a Facebook post, only one can be featured. If you need to link to more than one item, it is sometimes better to create a Homepage Post to hold that information (when appropriate).*

### Twitter

- Purpose: The goal of the tweet (e.g., have readers submit an abstract, visit a Council page, etc.)
- Requested Distribution Time: When the tweet should be distributed.
- Copy (*optional*): The text for the tweet. This cannot exceed 140 characters—including spaces and punctuation. *Here is a helpful online character counter:*  
<http://www.charactercountonline.com/>.
- Image (*optional*): If applicable, an image to be featured with the tweet.
- Link: A single link to be featured in the tweet. *Note: While it is possible to include more than one link in a tweet, it is not necessarily desirable. If you need to link to more than one item, it is sometimes better to create a Homepage Post to hold that information (when appropriate).*

## E-Blasts: Basic Concepts *and* Simple Guidelines

### Defining E-Blasts *and* Their Metrics

An e-blast is a mass email sent to a list of subscribers. Usually distributed through email marketing software such as Emma, e-blasts may inform recipients of new publications or resources, provide organizational updates via newsletters, or advertise events and opportunities.

Whether informative or solicitous, however, all e-blasts may be measured by two simple metrics: open rates and click rates. *Open rates* simply refer to the percentage of successfully

delivered e-blasts which were opened by recipients. *Click rates* refer to the percentage of opened e-blasts which registered at least one click from recipients.

Both rates are important. In practice, however, click rates stand as the more significant metric, both for their direct measure of user engagement and because open rates are somewhat imprecise, reflecting not the total percentage of subscribers who open emails but only those *who not only open emails but activate images*.

More succinctly: a successful e-blast is opened, and once opened, is clicked.

## Understanding *the Medium*: Elements of an E-Blast

To create successful e-blasts, it is critical to understand the components of the communications themselves. All e-blasts consist of the following components:

- *Subject line*: the title of the email as it appears in inboxes. It is a critical element of an e-blast, as it has a profound impact on open rates. When possible, subject lines should be brief (4-10 words), potentially include actionable language (e.g., “Register today,” “Sign up now,” etc.), and intrigue the reader.
- *Preheader text*: short summary text (0-75 characters) that follows the subject line. This copy allows you to tease the contents of the e-blast to help boost open rates. It should briefly describe the content and, when possible, include actionable language. It should not simply restate the subject line.
- *Body*: The body of an e-blast may include text, images, and buttons. The arrangement and quality of these elements impacts an e-blast’s click rates.
- *Call to Action*: a textual link, image, or button that prompts a user to click it to perform an action. This is a critical part of any e-blast’s click rates, as will be discussed.

## Strategies for Success: Writing Guidelines for E-Blasts

At its best, e-blast writing is clear, succinct, and targeted. It presents readers with a value proposition and then drives them toward a Call to Action, impelling them to, in colloquial terms, “click the shiny red button.” To boost open and click rates alike, a few simple rules of thumb for e-blast writing are helpful:

- **Define Your Purpose**: consider the following question before writing any e-blast: *what do I want my reader to do?* Once you have established your purpose (e.g., register for a webinar, attend an event, etc.), write all copy to encourage the reader to perform that action.

- **Use Actionable Language in Subject Lines or Preheader Text:** Invite the reader to gain some sort of benefit by opening your email. You can often pair a non-actionable subject line (e.g., *Council News* or *NCAB Update*) with an actionable preheader line (e.g., “Learn more...”). Avoid cliché marketing terms and do not use excessive punctuation such as exclamation marks—these elements can trigger spam filters.
- **Include a Header:** As simple as it may seem, a headline is important to include in any e-blast. Readers should be able to comprehend your content at a glance, rather than having to discern your purpose from paragraph copy alone.
- **Place Important Content “Above the Fold:”** Many readers will simply glance at an email and decline to scroll down. With this in mind, attempt to place any important content and Calls to Action “above the fold” (i.e., in the area of the e-blast displayed on a screen without scrolling).
- **Be Brief:** Avoid excessive copy. A reader confronted with a wall of text may simply decline to read the e-blast.
- **Focus on Calls to Action:** Tailor your prose to drive a reader toward clicking on your primary Call to Action. If you include more than one Call to Action, make secondary Calls to Action visually less important (e.g., positioned on a sidebar or beneath the primary Call to Action in the e-blast).
- **Use Button Formatting:** Calls to Action utilizing buttons can generate up to 28 percent higher click rates than textual links. As such, whenever possible, lead your readers to a simple, “buttonized” command phrase such as “Register Now” or “View Publication.” One way to indicate this in e-blast draft submissions would be by using the following formatting: [BUTTON: Register Today].
- **Do Not Write an E-blast Without a Link:** Whenever possible, try not to send a purely informational e-blast. Even the simplest message to subscribers should provide some sort of opportunity for engagement.
- **Use Command Sentences:** Do not merely inform readers of an action that you wish them to take. Instead, use command sentences (e.g., “Please join us for...,” “Register today...,” etc.) to encourage them to take action.
- **Consider Personalization:** E-blasts can include personalized elements such as the reader’s name. Particularly for giving appeals and other solicitations, including a “personalization” tag can create a greater connection with the reader, resulting in some cases in up to 14 percent higher click rates.

- **Consider “Footers:”** It is sometimes a good idea to include a small “footer” with a secondary Call to Action in your e-blast to increase its value. In a webinar announcement, for this example, this secondary Call to Action could be as simple as encouraging readers to access Council resources related to the topic in question. Testing reveals that these features *do* lead to at least some user engagement.
- **A Note on Tone:** The Council employs a measured, professional tone in nearly all of its communications. As such, even when employing command sentences, remember not to employ colloquialisms or unprofessional language.

## *Council News*: Dimensions and Simple Guidelines

### *Purpose and Characteristics*

*Council News* is the National HCH Council’s premier newsletter e-blast. The monthly publication communicates organizational updates—promoting new publications and resources, advertising events and technical assistance opportunities, and highlighting other items of interest to the Health Care for the Homeless community.

In practice, *Council News* typically consists of a series of discrete news items accompanied by headlines, featured images, and embedded hyperlink(s). Most issues feature the following items:

- A “headline” item advertising Conference or Regional Training developments.
- A Member Spotlight profiling the work of an Organizational Member.

These items appear in nearly every issue and should be considered standard features. In addition to these items, newly released publications and web resources are usually highlighted in *Council News*, regardless of whether they have been previously promoted via other channels. Communications staff will evaluate the inclusion of other items on a case-by-case basis—with a focus on maintaining relevancy and reducing redundancy.

In terms of visual hierarchy, *Council News* items are typically featured in the following decreasing order of importance:

- Conference and Regional Training developments
- New publications and resources
- Calls for nominations and membership group developments
- Opportunities for the HCH community
- Topical event information
- Member Spotlights

## Council News Item Writing Guidelines

As an informational newsletter, *Council News* differs from many of our other e-blasts in that it features a large variety of Calls to Action. Each item is a value proposition, and as such should be written to encourage the reader to click on its embedded link(s). A few simple guidelines can help govern items for *Council News*:

- **Determine appropriateness:** Before submitting an item, consider its relevance. *Council News* items must demonstrate a direct connection to the National HCH Council or its members. If you wish to promote items that do not fulfill these requirements, consider contacting Communications staff to see if other distribution channels are more appropriate (e.g., social media).
- **Ensure completeness and formatting:** Please ensure that all item submissions are complete, featuring headlines, copy, and (potentially) featured images. Keep all submissions to a single paragraph of no more than 125 words (if at all possible).
- **Write as a news article:** *Council News* items are unique in that they are effectively news stories and should be written accordingly. Write each item in “inverted pyramid” format. Place the most important detail (i.e. the publication, event, opportunity, etc.) in the first sentence—do not “bury the lead.” Include other details in decreasing order of importance whenever possible. *This is far more important in Council News than other e-blasts—which allow more stylistic variety—as many readers will only glance at each item.*
- **Avoid unnecessary links:** Text links are less effective than buttons, and it is critical not to further dilute their impact by confronting readers with a surfeit of links. Regard the embedded link(s) as your Call to Action. Try not to insert more links than are necessary for your item, and try not to include “back-to-back” links.