

### THE CHALLENGE

The National MS Society is the largest MS organization in the world. It provides services to more than 135,000 families affected by the disease, works with 36,000 volunteers and has raised \$1.1 billion for MS research. In January 2024, the National MS Society engaged The TASC Group to navigate an internal dispute that became a public-facing crisis.

Among the National MS Society's long-time supporters was a 91-year-old volunteer whose husband had passed away from MS. She had volunteered for the Society for more than 60 years, leading a large volunteer group in a rural and conservative part of the United States and helping to raise thousands of dollars for the organization.

During a period of internal reflection and renewed commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI), the National MS Society implemented new policies and initiatives to ensure that it was representing and serving a broader range of communities. One of these policies asked both internal staff and external volunteers to include gender pronouns in their email signatures.

The long-time volunteer was distressed by this change and expressed strong opposition to the pronoun policy. Over the course of a year, the organization met with her several times, providing training and explaining the importance of DEI initiatives to connect with underrepresented communities. Despite its efforts, she refused to comply with the new policies and was asked to step down from her volunteer role, which, under the organization's structure, is not considered employment.

Shortly after her dismissal, the volunteer's daughter contacted the National MS Society expressing outrage over her mother's removal. She arranged for her mother to appear in an interview with the right-wing, anti-LGBTQ activist Libs of TikTok. The volunteer appeared wearing a National MS Society t-shirt and claimed she had been "fired" for not being "woke." The video went viral, garnering millions of views and sparking coverage in outlets such as the New York Post as well as numerous conservative and religious media outlets nationwide.

### THE STRATEGY

The TASC Group was brought on to prevent the situation from escalating into a national controversy and to shield the organization from being drawn into polarized political discourse, particularly as the presidential campaign season intensified with President Donald Trump criticizing various "woke" institutions and DEI initiatives. The primary goal was to avoid having the National MS Society become more of a target while simultaneously preparing both internal and external teams for a worst-case scenario.

When CNN reached out for comment after the New York Post coverage, TASC negotiated directly with the outlet to prevent the story from airing. The team also recruited and helped the Society retain external legal counsel to manage negotiations with the volunteer and reach a confidential resolution and settlement, resulting in all parties signing a nondisclosure agreement.

TASC developed a suite of internal and external communications materials as part of its crisis playbook to prepare staff, board members and key stakeholders for possible fallout. The team worked extensively with the internal legal team, the C-suite and staff to ensure unified messaging and mitigate damage to morale during this challenging period.

TASC also managed communications with the board and major donors, preparing them for the possibility that the story could spread into other media environments. Through careful message development and real-time guidance, the team helped the organization maintain internal stability and confidence throughout the crisis.

### THE RESULTS

The TASC Group successfully contained the incident, preventing it from escalating to national mainstream media and keeping the narrative confined to small right-leaning and religious outlets. The team mitigated backlash and protected the National MS Society's reputation while maintaining its commitment to DEI values.

Within days of the initial coverage, TASC helped the organization issue a national apology and post a public statement on its website. The team also prepared proactive communications for partners and volunteers nationwide, clarifying the facts of the incident and reinforcing the Society's inclusive values.

TASC's work enabled the National MS Society to strike a critical balance, upholding its DEI commitments while avoiding alienation of long-time supporters and volunteers from more conservative regions of the country.

As the organization simultaneously underwent major internal restructuring, including a 14% staff reduction, The TASC Group guided the Society through this sensitive process, developing internal and external messaging to minimize reputational damage and maintain morale. The team also provided communications support to address concerns and mitigate potential public commentary from affected individuals.

As a result, the National MS Society was able to recover quickly. The controversy subsided within days, the volunteer accepted the organization's apology and staff felt supported and equipped to handle inquiries. The Society has since received significant positive media coverage, successfully continued fundraising and volunteer engagement efforts and refocused media attention on their work finding cures for MS while helping those affected by the disease live their best lives.