

The Power of Emergency Notification

Weather Alerting and Community Preparation

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FDM SOFTWARE

This is a test of the emergency broadcast system...” We’re all familiar with the traditional way public agencies notify residents of impending danger. Via television and radio, the emergency broadcast system is activated. But what about those who aren’t watching television or listening to the radio? Unfortunately, those people are often caught unaware.

This summer a powerful earthquake occurred off the coast of northern California. Instantly, the entire West Coast was in danger of an event that until recently most people hardly thought possible – a tsunami. The threat of tsunamis has always been present, but it was still shocking to witness the devastation that overwhelmed Southeast Asia. Afterwards, the attitudes of coastal communities across the globe changed, with the idea that they could be next becoming a generally accepted possibility.

Fortunately, in the recent situation in California, a tsunami did not develop, but emergency agencies took the threat seriously and activated various warning

systems, even evacuations in some coastal communities, such as Crescent City. Emergency broadcast systems were activated and, where available, local sirens sounded. Many people heard the warnings, but had a difficult time receiving post-event instructions. Hours after the warning, those same people weren’t sure whether or not they could safely return to their homes or work.

Even more troubling, the morning after the warning, news broke that Los Angeles County did not have a siren warning system in place. Thus, the local TV and radio station’s emergency broadcast system warnings were the only way residents in LA would have been notified of the situation.

With these limitations, how can public agencies ensure the safety of their constituents? When disasters happen, time is essential. The quicker a response can be mounted, the greater the chance to save lives, and the more likely the disaster will not escalate.

Saving Lives

Emergency notification systems have

the capability to track down people wherever they are, via whatever means they prefer – via phone, email, SMS message, text, Instant Messenger, pager, PDA, and BlackBerry. When time is of the utmost importance, they can provide the key to immediate awareness, particularly for entities such as municipalities, businesses and schools.

There are a number of ways public safety agencies, private organizations and businesses can utilize emergency notification solutions to minimize casualties and save time and money, both during and after a critical event.

Messages can be sent repeatedly to all devices until the recipient provides confirmation of receipt. Using available reporting capabilities, administrators are able to track confirmations and provide follow-up action. In the event of a tsunami, a mass notification system could be used by a tsunami warning center to get the message out to local public emergency agencies in advance of the disaster.

In the event of a weather- or area-related disaster, many emergency notification tools today provide a mapping

capability to notify contacts within the vicinity of a disaster. By selecting a specific region on a map, those individuals or organizations within a certain distance of an event – such as the possible path of a tsunami – can be targeted with a message that contains evacuation instructions or safety tips.

Once the initial notification and confirmations have been sent and received, public agencies and organizations of all types can use the proactive conference

were able to track each employee's response by collecting confirmation messages.

This example points to a real-life application of notification systems during a crisis. Inclement weather is just one example of the way businesses, agencies and first responders can utilize the latest communications technologies to enhance safety and awareness in times of crisis. The value provided by notification systems starts with enhanced communica-

record emergency evacuation instructions so that they may be easily disseminated during a crisis. Prepare post-event instructions, including recovery plans, action timeframes and other vital information.

- Confirm “roll call” capabilities. Ensure your notification system has tracking capabilities that will confirm affected constituents are safe.
- Use a hosted notification system that is housed “off-site” or near the agency



(Far left) A dispatcher for the Nanaimo, British Columbia, Fire Department. Threats of a possible tsunami kept many west coast 9-1-1 centers on their toes following a summer earthquake off of Northern California, prompting plans for public notification and potential evacuation. (Middle) An Urban Search and Rescue worker uses a thermal imaging unit to search for survivors in a house destroyed by Hurricane Ivan in Navarre, FL, last year. A variety of emergency notification systems were used during last year's hurricanes to alert the public of hurricane dangers and recovery efforts. (Left) A Travis County (TX) Sheriff's Deputy uses a Palm Pilot to run a license plate. The proclivity of PDAs like this among public safety personnel allows direct alerting of specialty teams using notification software, avoiding phone trees or individual paging.

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calling capabilities of most reliable notification systems to organize post-event mobilization plans and coordinate relief efforts. Using this feature allows an incident response manager to quickly contact and assemble key individuals on a conference call to begin addressing the incident and planning a response. This type of communication feature proved essential for a national disaster relief agency working to coordinate its efforts after the Southeast Asia tsunami last year.

Hurricane Jeanne Shows Mass Notification's Value in a Crisis

Emergency notification systems played a role for several organizations dealing with the 2004 hurricanes in the Southeastern United States, including a major Internet Service Provider that had to keep its employees updated when Hurricane Jeanne struck. The hurricane caused a power outage at the company's main office and, using notification capabilities as part of the overall disaster recovery plan, this organization distributed news of the hurricane and action instructions to its staff. Administrators

tions, and also includes the additional benefits created by improved call efficiency, scalability, enhanced message delivery, two-way communication, and more.

Preparing for the Unexpected

There are several activities organizations can do in order to prepare and test their emergency notification and communication plans. Whether a potential disaster is an earthquake, a wildfire, a hurricane or even a tsunami, using this checklist to help prioritize your communication plans in the time of emergency is a must.

- Verify contact paths. Establish a routine “checkpoint” to ensure all constituency contact information is up to date. This includes home phone, cell phone, pager and email.
- Conduct regular tests. Create an emergency notification business card with instructions for both administrators and constituents on how to use the notification system. Ensure everyone knows what to expect and how to respond to a notification.
- Create instructions in advance. Pre-

or organization. Utilizing a notification system that is geographically dispersed guarantees your communications will be “weather proof.”

Complete Your Communications Plan

It is vital that public agencies and organizations of all sizes equip themselves in advance to minimize business interruption and safety concerns when crises strike. A well-developed communications plan that is “action ready” is essential to minimizing the time and resources lost in these critical situations. By following the above-mentioned checklist, your organization will be as prepared as possible to handle the challenges a major catastrophe brings. **9-1-1**

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