Introduction
State and local governments and their supporting agencies encounter emergency situations daily that can impact property and public safety. They are also responsible for day to day functions for continuation of government and operation of critical infrastructure. In these situations, communication is vital for keeping citizens and government employees safe and informed. However, when the pressure is on, sending the right message to the right person, at the right time, can be a daunting task.

Government agencies and departments can leverage notification tools that can alleviate some of the issues involved with getting response teams up to speed, but only if used correctly. The key is to understand that the mass notification process needs to be simplified during these situations to limit errors. Additionally, the speed of delivery must be increased through automation and there must be a clear audit trail providing details of all the updates and actions that took place.
Simplifying the Mass Notification Process

First, it is important to distinguish between a message template and the far more advanced incident communications workflow and process or also known as an incident template. An Incident Template is created for a specific need and is typically one dimensional—a call out template to a Search and Rescue team as an example would be set up and triggered within seconds of logging into a system and is built to be used over and over with roughly the same content.

One type of incident template that can be used for a few related use cases would be a variable based template. This type of template is pre-engineered with all of the variables one might typically see in any known situation. A dam breach as an example, might have a Variable Based Template that includes these selectable factors:

**Local Dams (Select 1)**
- Fish Mill Dam
- 52 Street Collection Basin
- Walker Street Dam
- Mountain Pass

**Population Under Threat**
- None
- Up to 2,500
- Up to 10,000
- Up to 50,000
- Over 100,000

**Situation (Select 1)**
- Dam Breach Possible
- Dam Breach Imminent
- Dam Breach Actual
- Dam Breach Contained
- Dam Breach Recovery

**Additional Factors**
- High At Risk Population (schools, day care, nursing homes)
- Infrastructure threat (power station, phone switches)
- HAZMAT Threat (refinery, nuclear)
- Transportation Threat (RR, major highway)

One of the biggest benefits of incident communications is that it simplifies the mass notification process for response teams in emergency and high pressure situations. When these teams communicate, it is important to eliminate as many variables as possible. Doing so can reduce the time devoted to alerting everyone, which can be repurposed to focus on the actual problem at hand.

**The Importance of Creating Template Messages for Incidents**

Critical situations require teams to be as responsive as possible. This can be accomplished by setting up templates ahead of time. If dispatch, HAZMAT and S&R teams have templates for different types of incidents—fires, active shooters, chemical spills, missing persons—a notification can be sent out with a few clicks of a mouse. If these templates aren’t in place, sending a message can be much more difficult, as the person in
charge would have to put together the message content, which can be a daunting task in the heat of an emergency.

Without a template for a certain situation, it automatically will require the sender to have to create a message on the fly, figure out who needs to be alerted, what needs to be said to each person and what responses are required. Depending on the severity of the situation, sending a message can take much longer and errors are more likely to occur than normal.

**Keep It Simple**
The simplicity of incident communications proves its worth in direct time to launch in critical situations such as a missing child when every minute counts. With variables and settings already configured in the system, a notification about the missing child can be sent out within minutes of logging in, with ideal layout, required data elements and clear follow up directions. The same likely can’t be said if the message sender was to create everything from scratch for each incident.

Not only does this help in the current situation, but it also sets a standard for missing children, as all notifications about this type of event will be in the same format—meaning citizens will always hear/see the same format and consistently presented message content when a child is missing. With the notification being immediately recognizable by recipients, you will see better response and increased comprehension of the message. This multi-variable menu selection provides consistency to the message sender and is beneficial in all types of emergencies—not just missing children.

**High Threat Incidents Need Rapid Response**
In high threat incidents, dispatch, HAZMAT, and S&R teams don’t have time to waste. The response to these events needs to be almost instantaneous to minimize the damage and/or loss of life. For example, a dam breach can lead to a cascading set of threats that require the response of water company engineers, fire personnel, police for traffic control, deputies for evacuation, HAZMAT, and S&R teams in different fashions.

If the breach causes flooding in residential areas, S&R Swift Water Rescue teams may be deployed to find people in the flood waters. These teams need to be provided data including location vectors, number of potential victims, equipment packs needed and up to date free form information as it evolves. Incident communications automates this process, and provides responders with necessary situational data and updates during increasing threats using “if-then” type of scenarios.
As the situation changes different groups will be automatically selected to receive new information. If one group can’t be reached, then the system automatically notifies the next group—and so on—until someone responds. The automation of this type of communication trail can help limit the damage and casualties and also provides the needed data in a clear, consistent format.

Creating a Notification with a Clear Audit Trail

In state and local government, reporting clear, accurate information to everything from press agencies, upwards to senior management—and laterally to other agencies, such as the Federal Emergency Management Agency—is not only expected but many times a requirement. With an incident communications system, messages and tasks create a clear audit trail. This is a major plus for local officials who need to justify actions that were undertaken to leadership, and to help qualify federal funding for money that was spent during a disaster.

The ability to track how notifications went out, know how the disaster was tracked, followed, and grew, and the responses that were made by teams, make it possible to provide the necessary documentation emergency response teams need to apply for federal grants. If all of this information—how a disaster was handled, how many days it lasted, how many hours that were allotted to various resources—can be provided in a detailed, aggregate report, the success rate of getting grant funds will likely be much higher.

This type of audit trail can also help in public safety if a state or local government is ever the target of a lawsuit. The ability to have a standardized format for sending out information, with time and date stamped messages and responses, can be used as evidence by anyone who is accused of not responding to a situation in a proper or timely fashion. For example, the detailed, aggregate report can show that a HAZMAT team responded in the right amount of time and in the right fashion after being informed of a chemical spill.

The benefits of an audit trail in an incident communication system are not limited to only emergency situations. For example, it could help dispatch, HAZMAT, and S&R teams in justifying overtime shifts and the opening up and use of facilities. This is especially important when groups such as unions are being used for labor. With a report provided of every step that took place in the notification process, documentation can show that everyone on the team had the appropriate (union) or fair opportunity for picking up an overtime shift, and the use of facilities was for good reason.
Conclusion

Manual processes for sending notifications can create numerous problems for dispatch, HAZMAT and S&R teams. In emergency situations, creating a message from scratch can be extremely difficult, as the stresses of an event can lead senders to panic and hesitate or worse, not use the mass notification system at all. For these reasons, having an incident communications system in place with pre-set, variable driven templates for all types of emergencies and situations can prove invaluable. The time saved by using such a process could be the difference between teams saving a life. By simplifying the mass notification process, and creating an audit trail from start to finish when sending a message, incident communications can be a valuable resource for dispatch, HAZMAT, and S&R teams, as well as many other state and local government departments and agencies.
About Everbridge

Everbridge provides a unified critical communication suite that helps clients be better prepared, make better decisions, and respond quickly and confidently during disruptive events. When an incident happens, whether it's a natural disaster or an IT service outage, we automate communications to ensure that the right messages get to the right people at the right time.

Widely recognized by analysts as the market leader, Everbridge solutions are trusted by clients in all major industries and government sectors to connect with over 50 million people around the world.

THE ONLY END-TO-END PLATFORM

- **Planning**: Everbridge is easy to set up, maintain, and organize, meaning that you're always ready for a quick, coordinated response. Everbridge ensures that the right messages get to the right people - with the most advanced opt-in portal on the market, streamlined integration with internal and external data sources, and simple group and contact management.

- **Assessment**: When trouble strikes, you need rich insight, presented simply - so you can quickly assess potential impact and make an informed decision to avoid loss. Everbridge offers the only solution on the market that meets these demanding requirements, with the most advanced interactive dashboard in the industry.

- **Response**: In critical situations, ease-of-use can mean the difference between an effective response and a mistake that carries serious consequences. Everbridge is engineered to be simple to use under pressure, with a user interface that accelerates time-to-message and reduces the likelihood of errors.

- **Delivery**: Even during large-scale disruptions, Everbridge stays on. The most advanced platform in the industry ensures that you reach your contacts - every time. And with worldwide coverage and capabilities, including globally local calling infrastructure and data storage, we're ready to support you wherever your people are in the world.

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