Emergency Notification Best Practices

State and Local Government

Executive Summary

Emergency notification systems are gradually becoming commonplace in most communities across the United States. With the advent of mobile technology and an ever more connected public, constituents have come to expect rapid notification of emergencies or crises in their area. While more and more communities are adopting emergency notification and incident management solutions, it is critical to note that there is a science behind effective utilization of such systems.

From crafting the perfect notification, to the richness of the contact information collected, to the methods of how contacts are obtained, it is important for every community to adopt these critical best practices. Doing so can ensure that when an incident takes place, the administrators will be able to utilize the system to its full potential to protect people's lives and the community's most important assets. Additionally, there are many non-emergency, everyday uses for an incident management system, and learning the benefits of using the system at an operational level ensures the maximum ROI (Return on Investment) for a community.

In this paper, Everbridge has brought together several of its most progressive users to share their insight, expertise and several industry best practices that can be utilized by every community.

> **Brian Radcliffe** of South Central Task Force leads the operation of his organization's system that covers 8 counties and over a million residents.

Patrick Maynard from Ventura County, population of 823,318, shares his knowledge as an administrator of one of Everbridge's most advanced clients.

Mike Guerrera from the State of Connecticut, administers Connecticut's 3.5 million citizens for emergencies and supporting the day-to-day operations of many agencies and departments.

From the importance of an effective opt-in campaign to unique use cases for increasing the ROI through everyday operational system use, these expert level users have developed best practices on the following issues:

+ **Contact Information & Communication Paths**
+ **The Importance of Opt-In**
+ **Overcoming Public Resistance**
+ **Crafting the Perfect Message**
+ **Non-Emergency Usage Tips**
+ **Custom Reports and Analytics**
+ **Training**
+ **Selecting a Vendor**

Contact Information and Multiple Communication Paths

High-quality information is one of the key criteria for effective emergency notification. Rich, accurate, citizen contact information is a fundamental component of a comprehensive and successful emergency notification strategy. However, to be successful, it is also important to know the contact paths that your audience uses the most. The more contact paths that are available and utilized, the higher the likelihood that a message will be received and viewed. Ultimately, the most important thing to remember is that the goal of any communication strategy is to reach the intended recipient – not just to reach a device.

"We're using all the options available to us. Mobile phones, home phones, business phone, SMS, and e-mail," said Brian Radcliffe of South Central Task Force. The more contact options that are available, the more robust and effective the system becomes. For example, a single smart phone can be used as 5 different contact paths alone, so it is important to provide as many options as possible since many people will also want to provide home phone, business phone, alternate emails, and instant messaging.

The Importance of Opt-In

To ensure that your organization has the most accurate contact information available, the use and promotion of a full-featured opt-in portal is critical. With more households using mobile phones as primary methods of contact and the general increase in internet connectivity and email use, opt-in contact information is an invaluable resource in utilizing multiple contact paths and increasing confirmation rates.

"We do operate the opt-in portal and in addition to that, we have a double-sided, bilingual informational card, both English and Spanish, that we pass out. We've made these available everywhere from city hall to public libraries, fire stations, police stations, churches and non-profit groups," said Patrick Maynard of Ventura County California, "We've used this very widely. I think to date we've probably printed close to 50,000 copies."

Having multiple ways to opt-in will increase response rates and ensure that your database is filled with accurate and up-to-date contact information. Online opt-in and paper forms are just some of many methods of acquiring this information; some users have found success with more unique and personal strategies.

Brian Radcliffe of South Central Task Force had an original idea involving community service to drive opt-in rates, "We have a Girl Scout leader (who) thought it would be a great idea to get her Girl Scout troops set up in some of the computer rooms in the high school. They had an open house day for people who don't have Internet access to come in and get registered and have the girls take care of handling it for them. And (Girl Scouts) would get service project credits, so I thought that was a great idea to promote the opt-in program."

Sometimes, despite promotions or multiple opt-in options, certain sections of the population still do not take the time to provide their contact information. In these cases, it often takes an emergency incident to drive them to action. It is important that whenever a crisis or emergency occurs, the public is aware of their options to opt-in to the emergency notification system.

Mike Guerrera of the State of Connecticut experienced just that, "We were running about somewhere under 50,000 (opt-ins) before a large storm system was approaching. We had a hurricane coming last August. We took advantage of that opportunity to go out with a lot of press – there were some news stories about the program. And because of the hurricane, people were interested. So we've doubled our number of opt-ins from less than 50,000 to over 100,000 as a result of two major storms, one in August and one in October (a big snowstorm we had here.) We used those events to stimulate people to sign up."

Overcoming Public Resistance

People are growing increasingly more protective of their privacy. With email spam, unsolicited phone calls, junk mail and more, individuals are growing less likely to part with their personal contact information. Thankfully, when it comes to things that matter, such as emergencies, it is generally easier to get essential contact information if the right messages are communicated consistently.   Keep in mind that once an individual signs up through opt-in, you have set an expectation that the information that they have provided will be used.

“People are interested at first but we have over a hundred 911 centers that are using the system independently. Unfortunately, some of them never use it, and we get people responding to our e-mail with, ‘Well, how come my town is not using it,’” Mike Guerrera of the State of Connecticut explained, “And we have to tell them it’s a decision, an individual decision of the town to whether they use the system or not. . . .people are genuinely happy because the system works well if the communities use it responsibly and use it when they should be using it.” Consistency in how the system is utilized will generate long-term benefit from a public that is well informed and has developed expectations from community leadership regarding the types and frequency of notifications.

Crafting The Perfect Message

Our experts found that there are many aspects of a message that contribute to its effectiveness. Specific considerations include length, reading level, timing, and information necessary for particular situation.

First, keep it short. Communicate only the most critical information in brief, easy to understand language. In a crisis situation, you want the information to be received and processed as quickly and easily as possible.

“The length of the message we suggest is no longer than 30 seconds because we’ve had some extremely long messages, and people just don’t want to listen to a longer message and comprehension deteriorates after 30 seconds,” said Brian Radcliffe, South Central Task Force.

Next, consider the time of day when you are sending the message. If it is a non-critical message, sending late at night could be detrimental to your image and reduce the effectiveness of future messages. If recipients are annoyed by a late night message, they could be less likely to pick up a phone call or read a message in the future.

“Our written policy for public notifications is that we will not send a broadcast between the hours of 8:00 PM and 6:00 AM unless it’s critical to their safety. If you call somebody about a missing person at 2:00 in the morning or 1:00 in the morning, these people are sleeping. They have no idea. So we suggest that they think about when they’re sending it and who they should send it to,” added Brian Radcliffe of South Central Task Force.

Non-Emergency System Usage Tips

Emergencies are not the only scenarios in which a notification or incident management system can be used. In fact, many communities get incredible value from their incident management solution on a day-to-day basis, integrating it with regular operational needs.

Weather notifications can be one of the most common non-emergency communications. Whether it is simply to notify the public of outdoor event cancellations, area closures, or to alert them of potential adverse weather, the incident management system is the perfect tool to get word out. Additionally, this type of non-emergency messaging helps create familiarity with system use and the process for sending notifications by communications personnel.

Many communities also use their incident notification system for staffing and overtime purposes, which can save a significant amount of time and processing power for administrators who otherwise would have to resort to personal emails or phone trees.

Custom Reporting and Analytics

Another benefit of having a robust emergency notification and incident management platform is the ability to use strong reporting and analytics features to gain insights into success rates – in real-time. This information gives emergency communications staff the ability to identify weaknesses and make instant improvements in every broadcast.

It is highly recommended that every broadcast that is sent be evaluated after the incident to ensure that best practices are producing the desired results. If there is a very low response or confirmation rate, it could be indicative of bad or outdated contact information in the database. If people are picking up but ending the call before the message is broadcast, it could suggest the need for a stronger identifier or message opening. By conducting these reports, you can gain insight that will help you improve the efficiency and effectiveness of future broadcasts.

Brian Radcliffe of South Central Task Force told us, “I’m the primary (person) who creates the custom reports, and I’ll use them to check on an issue with a broadcast or to help with checking contacts in group lists. If there is an issue such as missed or delayed deliveries, I would use ad-hoc reports to help diagnose what was going on. In these cases, I can create a report with the fields needed, create a .CSV file and then sort the file in Microsoft® Excel® in different sequences to get the answers needed.” Custom reports can provide much more information than simple confirmation rates. They can be customized to provide granular data, from how long the call was active before a hang up, number of answering machine responses, or any other specific responses that can be monitored.

Training

An emergency notification system is generally not operated under ideal conditions. Emergencies are not planned and rarely do they occur as one would expect or hope. Many times administrators are under extremely high levels of stress, are experiencing emotions such as fear, anger or nervousness, and subsequently may not perform at their best. It is for these reasons that adequate training and testing is absolutely critical to the successful management and operation of an emergency notification solution.

“We have formal classroom training and we’ve got a fair number of people trained. Any new users typically are trained one-on-one with me and some of the other counties have a few people who are adept at doing the training, so they’ll do it,” said Brian Radcliffe of South Central Task Force.

Patrick Maynard of Ventura County believes that training should be absolutely mandatory for anyone notifying the public. “We offer a two-hour training. We make it mandatory that if they have any ability to notify the public, that they take part in the two-hour training. With that, we go over the policies and guidelines that have been adopted by our board of supervisors, that have been agreed upon by all the participating agencies. We want to make sure they have a solid understanding of when (they should) and when they should not use the system, how to use the system and where to go for help should they need help. Thus far, we’ve trained about 200 people throughout our county on how to utilize the system.”

In addition to initial training, it is important to provide some form of ongoing or “refresher” training. This could be in the form of a remote meeting reminding users of best practices or in the form of a formal monthly drill.

Many customers have been very successful providing a potential scenario to users and requiring that they create a test notification sent back to the system coordinator; this type of monthly drill forces people who have access to the system to log in, create and send a message that will be evaluated for feedback. Communities vary in their level of testing, but the most beneficial and thorough testing includes entire mock-scenarios that are an “emergency dry-run”, preparing all individuals involved for a potential crisis.

Selecting a Vendor

Selecting a vendor goes much further than a pricing competition. An emergency notification and incident management system is a crucial aspect of a community’s communication toolset that could prove instrumental in saving the lives of its recipients. An in depth selection process that focuses on features, capabilities, redundancy and versatility of the system is paramount to choosing the system that is best for the people who will use it.

Patrick Maynard of Ventura County explained what was important to them in their selection process, “In terms of calling capability and having unlimited access, that was one thing that our old system really created issues for us on, so that was something we’re looking for. We’re looking for somebody with 24/7 support, looking for multiple ways of accessing the system, whether it be by phone, e-mail, Internet, mobile access. That’s all very important to us. A seamless failover, that was another key, critical factor to look for.”

Brian Radcliffe of South Central Task Force notes the importance of a detailed and in-depth selection process. “I think the very first thing you would need to do is step back and decide what they want to do with it and identify their requirements. Basically do a very formal requirements analysis process and from my background in IT, doing analysis sessions and systems work and some of my earlier history, I really think that it needs to be a session that you’d have a facilitator who is skilled enough at leading a session like that to help them identify their requirements. And that's pretty much the process we took when we went about the second effort to acquire a system. And we decided what we wanted first, what was important, and then we went and used that as we evaluated the other systems and took a look at them and in researching them.

Conclusion

As emergency notification systems become increasingly more commonplace across the United States, constituents have come to expect rapid notification of emergencies or crises in their area. It is essential to remember that there is a science behind effective utilization of such systems.

Whether it is ensuring multiple contact paths are available, or crafting the perfect notification, it is important for every community to adopt these critical best practices. Additionally, there are many non-emergency, everyday uses for an incident management system, and learning the benefits of using the system at an operational level ensures the maximum ROI (Return on Investment) for a community. By utilizing the system more frequently for non-emergency situations, administrators and communications staff are more comfortable with the system, experience less anxiety during crises and are more effective during an emergency.

Utilizing best practices will help ensure that when an incident takes place, the administrators will be able to utilize the system to its full potential to protect people's lives and the community's most important assets.