Emergency Notification Systems Provide Information Safety Net

Up-to-date alerts via your personal communication devices help you make empowered decisions in perilous times.

By Mark Wright

American history would read very differently had technology been more advanced in 1775. Instead of Paul Revere's revolutionary ride alerting the sleeping citizens of Lexington and Concord, telephones would have rung and Blackberries would have buzzed with warnings of the impending invasion.

Today's emergency notification systems cover a lot more ground and touch many more people than Revere's horse-powered outreach. Spurred on by memories of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina—as well as by technological advancement—jurisdictions throughout the U.S. have increasingly adopted emergency communication systems.

Connecticut Out in Front

Most areas of the country are served by a system that allows anyone to dial 911 to quickly contact police or fire departments. In Connecticut, Governor M. Jodi Rell pushed for a system that would allow state authorities to essentially shift the gears of its 911 technology into reverse and make outbound calls to residents all over the state in the event of dangerous weather, missing persons, natural disasters or other crises.

Her efforts resulted in Connecticut recently becoming the first state in the nation to deploy a statewide emergency notification system (ENS). The state's ENS was poised to go live just as this issue of the *SSA Globe* was about to hit the press.

"We are enthusiastic about having this critical emergency service available," says Mark Bildner, owner of Norwalk Self Storage in Norwalk, Connecticut and president of the Connecticut Self Storage Association (CTSSA). "It will give us the ability to protect our customers, employees and facilities. The sooner we have critical information, it affords us a better opportunity for success in dealing with various types of emergencies. Our understanding is this type of 'reverse 911' system is already operational at the local level in many municipalities and it has been successful.

"From a business standpoint, the system makes a lot of sense," adds Bildner. "Employees, customers and others can be notified of an emergency in the area. The ease of communication (i.e. cell phone, email to Blackberry, etc.) is also a plus for businesses and employees. In addition, the statewide system should mean that the local systems will no longer be needed, thus eliminating a cost to municipalities—and any savings to municipalities is beneficial, given the over-reliance on local property taxes in Connecticut."

The state's ENS was developed by Glendale, California-based Everbridge, Inc. (formerly 3n Global). Marc Ladin, the company's vice president of global marketing, says he's seen a lot of rapid growth, with numerous cities, counties and states considering adopting an ENS. "In Connecticut, the governor took a stand that all citizens need to be safe. Cities there also want to be able to control traffic management and other kinds of communication," he adds.

The state's initiative began four years ago, explains Scott Devico, public information officer, and John Gustafson, emergency telecommunications manager, both with Connecticut's Department of Emergency Management and Homeland Security. The state conducted a study that involved 169 towns and cities, and discovered that many couldn't afford their own system. Special legislation was required to allow Connecticut's "enhanced 911" database to be used statewide, and a lot of "due diligence" had to be performed. The result should be increased interoperability and a more reliable system, they say.

The system can alert news media, as well as take over the state's government-run cable channel to broadcast emergency information. The system's default setting enables people to receive communications only at their main phone number, but Devico and Gustafson say citizens will be able to opt in via the Internet to customize the communication mode they prefer to receive notifications on.

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Ladin says citizens need not fear an influx of "spam" messaging, because the communication network being used is closed. Messages can only be sent from the government agency launching the emergency notification. He says citizens will be able to select what types of content they want to receive.

Redundancy is Smart

Residents and businesses in Connecticut and all around the U.S. actually have the capability already to independently receive notifications in the event of a public emergency. Companies like Florida-based Enotem, for example, offer a free public service—while also providing fee-based systems for corporations and government agencies.

Launched a decade ago, Enotem's public service can be accessed via its emergencyemail.org website. There, anyone can register to receive weather, health, homeland security, airport closings and other types of alerts. The alerts can be delivered wirelessly via email, pager, cell phone and more—all for free.

CEO Skip Tamargo says the company's customized services have been used by the White House, the Pentagon and many other agencies at all levels of government. Agencies or companies can sign up to receive service covering one area (a county, for example) for free, he explains, but they have to upgrade to the commercial service for additional areas.

Tamargo also cautions against relying on any ENS that depends solely on phone lines for message delivery. In the event of a major emergency, phone service can easily be disrupted. Better to have an ENS with redundant systems that can deliver alerts to a variety of devices. In fact, says Tamargo, "email and text messaging are by far the most efficient method of notifying a large number of people in a high-density area."

Everbridge's Ladin agrees an ENS that can deliver alerts over different devices is prudent, since systems that provide only one communication mode are vulnerable to critical outages. "You can't predict what infrastructure will be impacted—power lines, phone lines—so you have to have multimodal capacity to communicate across all those paths," he says.

When it comes to receiving vital information, having a backup to your backup can be a relief during times of crisis. You're fortunate if your state or locality happens to provide one of those backup systems. As Connecticut's Governor Rell observes: "Whatever the situation, the emergency alert system means far more people will 'get the word' far more quickly. The more information we are able to provide people the better they will be able to prepare and respond." ❖