Social media creates new opportunities for emergency management every day. That’s the message that will be delivered during a new portion of the upcoming annual conference for the National Association of Government Web Professionals in Louisville, Ky. On Sept. 27, speakers will discuss emergency communication and how ideas like MCUrgent, a social media aggregator created by association Treasurer Carol Spencer, can bring emergency managers up to speed with the technical elite.

Spencer, the former mayor of Denville, N.J., and now the digital and social media manager for Morris County, N.J., said she is pushing for more interaction between Web staff and emergency managers because they have a lot to learn from each other. It’s not enough to just throw up a Facebook page or create a Twitter account, she said. The disciplines of social media and emergency management need to cross-pollinate before disasters happen, not during those difficult periods.

“Five years ago, I had to really convince people that social media wasn’t a fad and I talked about email notifications. When I did it this year, I don’t even have to talk about that for social media,” Spencer said. “Everybody gets it.” But even with more people using and learning about technology that can aid emergency communications, most people are still a few steps behind what is possible, Spencer said. MCUrgent, for instance, looked at emergency communications on the local level and fixed a major institutional problem.
MCUrgent is a social media notification system that allows alerts issued through social media or via text message to be sent across a central countywide platform. Citizens who subscribe to the system will receive alerts about emergencies that cross municipal borders. Spencer trained employees in 15 of the county’s 39 municipalities to use MCUrgent’s account with HootSuite, a social media management system. And now when a city or town needs to announce a gas leak or road closure, it does so through MCUrgent, and that message is pushed through not just the city’s Twitter and Facebook feeds, but also a countywide feed.

“Emergencies don’t end at a municipality’s boundaries,” Spencer said. If Denville residents were shopping four towns over during a major flood, for instance, how would they get important information without a central platform like MCUrgent, Spencer asked. No one is going to try to search through four different government websites and piece together the road closure information so they can get home. It didn’t make sense the way it was being done before, she said.

But now the information is issued countywide and locally on social media, the governments maintain their autonomy, and there’s no central authority required to manage everything, save for the initial training that employees may need about HootSuite.

During Hurricane Sandy, Spencer said a woman asked why her town wasn’t issuing announcements on Twitter and Facebook while other towns were. People expect governments to use social media and use it well, she said. “[MCUrgent] matches government communications with public expectations,” Spencer said.

Spencer also encourages MCUrgent users to use a lesser-known Twitter feature called Fast Follow, which enables SMS notifications of the Twitter feed so they can still receive information quickly on their phone in case of a power outage or cell service disruption. This not only further broadens the reach of the news the county and its municipalities want to disseminate, but also helps reach those who are less technologically able and may not feel comfortable with Twitter, she said.

Spencer developed the technical portion of MCUrgent, and the only ongoing cost is to maintain the HootSuite account. Spencer said she is now building marketing strategies to help convince the remaining municipalities to participate and to inform the public about the service.

Spencer was recognized by NASCIO (PDF) for her work on MCUrgent, and HootSuite published a case study of the project on its blog to demonstrate social media’s benefits for emergency communications.

Social media is so valuable, Spencer said, that it doesn’t make sense for emergency management not to make the most of it. “I was mayor in 1999 when Hurricane Floyd put my entire downtown underwater, and we didn’t have any way to communicate with people,” she said. “There wasn’t any Twitter or Facebook. Even the Web was pretty novel for people at home in ’99.” When she first discovered Twitter it was like a revelation, she said.
Web staff members don’t understand the details of emergency management and emergency managers don’t spend all day on Twitter, she said, so when an emergency hits, a government’s social media person is usually required to come help and they’re in an unfamiliar environment. An emergency is the wrong time to try to educate those two parties on how to work together, she said.

Speakers to be featured during the emergency communications segment of the National Association of Government Web Professionals conference include: Jeffrey Paul, emergency management director for Morris County; Jim Garrow, health communications specialist at the Philadelphia Department of Public Health; and Jody Duncan, public information officer for MetroSafe in Louisville, Ky., who will talk about how the city handled a chemical train derailment.

The second half of the day will include a lot of open discussion, Spencer said. And they’re going to cover a broad spectrum of emergencies because while they’re all different, social media plays an important role in managing those events.

At a past conference, Spencer recalled the webmaster for Blacksburg, Va., talking about what happened after the shooting at Virginia Tech in 2007. “One of the things I remember him saying is, ‘One minute, you’re just doing your job and the next minute you are the subject of worldwide press coverage.’” This conference, she said, is a step toward helping emergency managers become an authority on social media.

*Minor changes made for accuracy on Aug. 15, 2013.