

# Accessible AlertSanDiego Brings Emergency Notifications via Text, Voice and Video

Sarah Rich | August 1, 2012



A big challenge for public safety officials is getting emergency alerts to citizens who may not understand traditional notifications. To reach individuals who are blind, deaf or don't speak English, the San Diego County Office of Emergency Services (OES) now offers alternative forms of alert messages.

## **Alert Messaging Goes National**

In April the federal government launched a first-of-its-kind national alert system, called the Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS), so the public can receive emergency alert notifications on cellphones without opting in. The system was developed in partnership among FEMA, the FCC and wireless phone carriers.

Through CMAS, authorized public safety authorities can use FEMA's Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) Open Platform for Emergency Networks to send

geographically specific emergency alert notifications that look like text messages to the public.

The alerts do not use GPS to locate users, but are rather sent by cell-tower region.

“CMAS is really a way that authorities can use IPAWS to send information to the public using their wireless handset,” said Marcie Roth, FEMA’s director of the Office of Disability Integration and Coordination. “We want to make sure that when that information is being sent, people who are hard of hearing who may not be effectively reached through an auditory message, for example, will be able to get that message in a format that’s accessible to them,” she said. “So that would include text message, or for some it might include having a message that relates to them using American Sign Language, for example.”

San Diego County is already registered for IPAWS, so how will CMAS impact alerting in San Diego County? Stephen Rea, assistant director for the county’s Office of Emergency Services, said there are concerns about how CMAS will serve those with access and functional needs.

Currently CMAS messaging allows for a maximum of 90 characters, and URLs can’t be included in the notification, which could limit its usefulness to the access and functional needs community.

“We can supplement AlertSanDiego, our reverse 911 system, with CMAS but we haven’t come up with a good idea on how to get American Sign Language and video somehow referenced in a CMAS call,” Rea said. “ We’re still working on that area.” Not all cellphones can get alerts, however, by 2014 all new cellphones will be CMAS compatible.

A free, opt-in service called Accessible AlertSanDiego sends notifications to registered users through devices like computers, cellphones, smartphones, tablets and wireless Braille readers. The notification is sent through text, voice and video format, said Robert Barreras, emergency services coordinator for the county OES. The videos are recorded in American Sign Language and explain to the recipient what to do in the emergency. The text of the message is also translated into English and displayed below the video. As the video shows the message in Sign Language, a voice recording simultaneously plays the message slowly in English for individuals for whom English isn’t their first language so they may better understand.

“We really try to expand the message out to the various communities that would need to receive it,” Barreras said.

The new service is an addition to the existing AlertSanDiego, a countywide automated phone alert system. AlertSanDiego lets users register cellphones, voice over Internet protocol (VoIP) numbers and email addresses with the system for receiving emergency alerts. According to the AlertSanDiego website, listed and unlisted land line numbers are already included in the system and don’t require registration.

Accessible AlertSanDiego now enables the county to send those alerts in alternative formats. Stasia Place Richardson, senior emergency services coordinator for the OES, said the service is designed to address what's known as the "access and functional needs" community, which includes people with physical limitations, as well as non-English speakers and others.

"It's more than just people with disabilities," Richardson said.

## **Alerting the Whole Community**

The San Diego County OES didn't work alone in implementing the alternative messaging system. Leslie Luke, the office's program manager, said internal planning related to county response activity and preparedness is done through a partnership with the county's Public Health Services and Aging and Independence Services.

For community outreach to people with access and functional needs, the OES created a work group consisting mostly of subject-matter experts who meet monthly. The county worked with Deaf Link, a San Antonio-based communications company, to develop the new message formats. AlertSanDiego was developed in partnership with Twenty First Century Communications.

"We worked with Deaf Link to figure out how we can do some of our messaging, putting some of our messaging online and helping us reach out into the community with some town hall meetings to be able to provide, notify and socialize this with the actual community," Luke said.

Stephen Rea, assistant director for the OES, said technology is a crucial component to reaching out to the access and functional needs community.

"They are generally more comfortable with using text messaging, phone messaging, Braille readers and smartphones, so it seems like an obvious choice for us," Rea said. "Instead of trying to introduce something new, let's use what they're comfortable with and see if we can leverage what we've got and contact them with their preferred manner of being contacted."

<http://www.govtech.com/public-safety/Accessible-AlertSanDiego-Brings-Emergency-Notifications-via-Text-Voice-and-Video.html>