Should States Take the Lead on Implementing Alert Systems?

Justine Brown | June 30, 2014

As technology becomes cheaper, more sophisticated and easier to use, states have more options available to improve their public warning capabilities and integration with FEMA's Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). Some states are choosing to implement statewide systems while others are giving localities the lead and providing statewide oversight and support.

Iowa is one state that is pushing for a statewide alert system. The state previously left the deployment of alert systems to each county. But based on the results of a survey it conducted — which found that just 53 of the state's 99 counties had a public alert system and that those counties were spending about $600,000 a year on those systems — the state decided to investigate other approaches. In January 2013, the Iowa Homeland Security and Emergency Management Department (HSEMD) issued an RFI to investigate the feasibility of developing a statewide alert system.

"We asked vendors what a statewide alert system might look like and cost," said John Benson, spokesperson for the Iowa HSEMD. "Based on the responses, we recognized that if we did it right, we'd be able to provide statewide coverage for less than what

those 53 counties were paying." He said it would be a cost savings for those who were already paying and provide a new tool to the 46 counties that didn't have a system.

Soon after, legislation was introduced supporting the implementation of a statewide system and requesting funds to support it. The request for funding was secured through the General Assembly this year. The Iowa HSEMD then issued an RFP, which was under review at press time. Once a vendor is selected, plans were to begin implementation July 1.

Benson said Iowa's new alert system likely won't be used on a statewide level, but decisions to alert residents would be made by local law enforcement and emergency management agencies.

"It's basically a statewide system that retains its local control. It will be a statewide system, but the state will probably be the most limited user of it," Benson said. "Our goal is to give local folks a tool to use and they would determine how and when to use it to send an alert for whatever emergency situations they have."

The new system, which will be a Web-based SaaS application, will provide users a single Web page on which they can quickly compose a message and determine how they would like it delivered (text, email, voice mail, etc.). The system will also integrate with IPAWS and will include a special-needs advisory so someone with a mobility impairment can easily alert first responders of the need for assistance.

Local Control

Minnesota is taking a slightly different approach to its emergency alert system plans. Rather than implement a statewide system, the Minnesota Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HSEM) agency has asked counties to implement their own IPAWS compatible systems and is providing oversight and guidance from a statewide level.

"In 2010 we looked at doing a statewide system — what it would cost, what each county would gain from it, and where the funding would come from," said John Dooley, communications and warning officer of Minnesota HSEM. "Third-party software just wasn't sophisticated or available enough yet for us to pursue a statewide system."

Minnesota HSEM then conducted a survey of public safety answering points (PSAPs) and decided to leave it up to the counties to determine and implement alert systems that would integrate with IPAWS (access to IPAWS is free; however, to send a message using IPAWS, an organization must procure its own software that's compatible with the system).

"We thought, because pretty much all disasters are local, we wanted to keep the concept of operation local as well," Dooley said.

At the same time, Minnesota HSEM formed a statewide IPAWS committee. The committee provides the counties with guidance, best practices, and education on IPAWS and how to use it.

“From our surveys, we found the PSAPs really wanted their alert systems to be simple, because when they get a call in and they are dealing with a disaster where they have to alert the public, there is already a flurry of things going on,” said Dooley. “They wanted to be able to choose a system they were comfortable with, and we felt allowing them to make that decision and providing oversight and support from a statewide level would put us miles ahead.”

Seven out of Minnesota’s 87 counties are active on IPAWS, and several others are in the process of securing software and working with FEMA to complete a memorandum of agreement.

Mix and Match in Ohio

In Ohio, local governments have the option of using parts of the statewide system to address their alerting needs. Michael Swaney, communications infrastructure specialist for the Ohio Department of Public Safety, said Amber Alert origination capability and the availability of equipment gave the Ohio State Emergency Communication Committee a means to specify how to do a system at the county level with state government oversight. Swaney said most of Ohio’s equipment was replaced in 2003 when the Emergency Alert System (EAS) replaced the previous Emergency Broadcast System. Today, local governments can use parts of the statewide system as they see fit.

In Texas, the Department of Public Safety (DPS) deployed a major upgrade to the Texas Emergency Alert System statewide this May. The new system will serve as the core of the state’s public alert and warning system, simultaneously activating the state EAS relay to radio, TV and cable systems across the state. The new system will be the state’s primary interface with the IPAWS network, giving the department synchronized access to EAS and enabling IPAWS to generate wireless emergency alerts to the cellphone systems.

In Texas, the size and geographic diversity of the state pose numerous hurdles to conventional EAS capabilities. The upgraded system addresses these challenges by allowing Department of Public Safety officials to create and issue alerts to both the existing EAS system and the IPAWS system. The system will allow Texas DPS to send statewide alerts or target the messages to any number of the state’s 254 counties.

“By replacing its older equipment … Texas now has a more robust, efficient and reliable way to spread lifesaving warnings to its citizens about emergencies via all modes of digital technology,” said Edward Czarnecki, senior director of strategic development and global government affairs for Monroe Electronics, which provided the system.

Czarnecki added that because Texas DPS chose a standards-based approach, the system also sets the foundation for interoperability with future systems the department may consider.

Technology Tools

Benson said the technology has advanced by leaps in recent months, increasing its viability as a lifesaver.

“When you look back over the last 18 months, you can see a huge evolution in technology in terms of how it can be employed for mass notification and emergency alerts,” Benson said. “With that has come recognition that this is something as emergency managers we really need to be leveraging.”

Benson added that the system Iowa plans to deploy can also be used to more effectively manage and alert first responders. It can generate lists and first responders can designate which number should be called to summon them immediately in an emergency.

“You can set up a call list for a specific group of first responders so you can reach out and touch them all very quickly instead of doing the old call tree method,” explained Benson. “It’s another way to marshal your response force more effectively because it doesn’t require human intervention.”

Overall, Benson believes more states will choose to deploy statewide alert systems in the future.

“We are starting to see a lot of states lean this direction,” he said. “With a statewide system, you have unified technology being utilized across the state, and that’s always good in terms of being able to back people up. But there is also the cost that goes along with that, because generally the more you buy, the cheaper it gets. So when you talk about covering an entire state, a lot of times the cost savings really get your attention.”

Several states are pressing forward with other types of early warning systems as well. For example, California is working on a statewide earthquake early warning system, though there is debate about how the system should operate and whether it will be strictly free or whether a more advanced, paid system will be incorporated.

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