

Jeff Phillips -- 2014 GT Top 25 Winner

Elaine Pittman | February 25, 2014



If disaster were to hit Los Ranchos de Albuquerque, N.M., a virtual team would step in to aid the emergency management department's social media efforts. From monitoring social mentions of the emergency to amplifying messaging on Twitter and Facebook, a team of trusted citizens is ready to assist Jeff Phillips, emergency management coordinator for the village. He's spent years working on the concept, Virtual Operations Support Teams (VOST), which has spread across the U.S. and the world.

In 2009, Phillips saw social media's potential to improve emergency management, and spent the year creating protocols for its use while developing a local and national following. He realized early that he couldn't maintain a social media presence while performing his traditional emergency management duties during a disaster. So he considered how to enlist citizens to do social media on his behalf. "That's always been my thought process: build out social media capacity in a structured way using trusted agents," he said.

Unveiled in 2011, the VOST concept has helped emergency managers build their own teams — from Suffolk County, N.Y., and Clark County, Wash., to Spain and the Netherlands, groups of virtual, vetted members digitally support governments in crisis.

Los Ranchos has yet to activate its VOST — “knock on wood,” said Phillips — but he participates in many teams, including nearly a dozen activations in 2013 to support social media efforts during large wildfires.

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