

Common Alert Protocol Offers Unique EM Opportunities

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Impending changes to the U.S. Emergency Alert System (EAS) present a unique, yet challenging opportunity for emergency managers to improve public notification in times of emergency. Much attention has been paid to acceptance by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) of the Common Alert Protocol (CAP), included in Part II of Title 47 of the U.S. Code of Federal Regulations. Yet other aspects of the coming EAS upgrade allow us opportunities to enhance our overall warning systems.

Subpart D, Section 11.55 of Title 47 states that messages issued at the state level must be treated in the same fashion as a presidential alert message. This gives the governor of a given state (or his authorized representative) the capability of issuing an alert to the people of his or her state without asking for the voluntary compliance of the broadcasters in the state. In the past, participation in the EAS system was voluntary at any level with the exception of a presidentially-issued alert, which has never taken place during an actual emergency since the inception of the system. Title 47 changes that policy.

Time to Take a Closer Look

By requiring that we be able to receive a CAP-formatted message, the FCC forces us to take a closer look at our existing systems. Many EAS systems have received little to no attention, other than required maintenance, for many years. This is largely due to the “if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it” mentality that many of us as emergency managers are forced to adopt, due to lack of resources, lack of time, lack of understanding, or a combination of all of the above.

Perhaps the most significant opportunity that presents itself through the coming new require-

ments is the chance to take a closer look at our ability to notify the special needs population of our jurisdiction. The EAS system upgrade gives the manager the occasion to study how to best notify the blind or visually impaired, deaf or hard of hearing, wheelchair and/or bedbound patient, and the non-English speaking population of our communities.

Devices exist that turn on flashing lights, vibrate pillows, call home or cell phones, translate English text into other languages – the list of available features seems to be almost endless. If a person chooses, he/she soon will be able to receive an emergency notification on his/her PDA, pager, laptop, television, radio, satellite radio and desktop computer simultaneously. The options available to the emergency manager are numerous, with your budget being the primary factor in just what capabilities that you choose to use.

EMPG Funds Can Be Utilized for Update of EAS

Alas, the green monster raises its ugly head at just the time that many of us were contemplating our new, state-of-the-art alert systems and realizing that yes, with a new and improved EAS system, we could do a better job of notifying the public of impending or current emergencies. But don’t despair quite yet; there is hope out there. Emergency Management Performance Grants (EMPGs), issued by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA), can be used to upgrade your EAS system. Rather than attempting to overhaul your existing system all at once, perhaps a basic system can be purchased during a given budget year, with the intention of adding features in the future as funds become available. We don’t have to reinvent the wheel; we simply may

have to add some new and improved capabilities to what already exists.

Conclusion

FEMA is expected to formally adopt CAP in Spring 2009. Then, under Title 47, a 180-day compliance clock begins to tick. Take the coming changes to the EAS system not as another unfunded mandate, but as an opportunity to better serve the citizens who look to us for guidance and help before, during and after a disaster.

Children’s Needs

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emergency operations plan. Save the Children is developing similar partnerships across the country.

These are all strong first steps, but disasters won’t wait for us to get our act together. That’s why the work ahead of us remains as urgent as ever, for our children and for all of us.

Will to Communicate

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information to those who need it by whatever communications means are available – radio, telephone, Internet or messenger. Incident command/emergency management personnel who have “the will to communicate” will always find a way to get the message through.

Maximizing the use of all available communications to create a common operating picture so that emergency management and response personnel can see and react to the response actions taken to mitigate the incident, exemplifies the will to communicate. This is the essence of emergency management communications.