

# Get the Word OUT

More fire departments are using their mass-notification systems for non-emergency communications

By RON CORONA & RICK WIMBERLY

A fire department filling a position because of a “forced vacancy” is not an emergency; it happens every day. Clearing residents from roads and chokepoints during days of high fire threat isn’t usually considered an emergency, nor is recalling specialized staff and assembling team(s) for training activities or informing residents that hydrant maintenance will be performed. First responders perform these activities on an as-needed or daily basis.

Although such occurrences aren’t emergencies, they present challenges in fire departments across the country. Non-emergency events devour staff resources. Often, it’s a matter of spending an inordinate amount of time on the telephone—looking for shift replacements, finding qualified personnel, providing status updates to top officials or answering citizens’ questions.

Fire departments across the country are finding that what they call their “emergency notification systems” aren’t just for emergencies. These systems are helping them handle time-consuming non-emergency situations that occur almost daily. The result: significant resource savings and better communications. Plus, by using their emergency notification systems for non-emergency purposes, departments work out the kinks involved in use, strategic planning and integration—better preparing their systems for true emergencies. ▶



## TYPES OF SYSTEMS

Technology used in notification systems may include telephone calls, text messaging, loudspeakers, digital displays, desktop alerts and broadcast alerts. The trend in the industry today is to move toward what we call a “system of systems”—one that combines different delivery modes to maximize the effectiveness. (See “More online!” below.)

## REGULAR USE

The Los Angeles City Fire Department (LAFD) frequently declares Restricted Parking “Red Flag” days when wildfire threats are at their highest. On these days, residents in very high fire hazard zones (VHFHZ) must take precautions, including keeping their cars out of certain parking spots.

When Red Flag days occur, L.A. residents are called with a pre-recorded message informing them that conditions are ripe for fires. They are told what to do to help ensure safety and avoid fines or car towings. These calls are made automatically through the LAFD’s emergency notification system.

Residents in VHFHZs can sign up to receive the notifications through the city’s Web site. They are then placed on a list to receive messages. The system is set up so that, should an emergency occur, the Red Flag messages will be paused while emergency messages are delivered.

In Boone County, Ky., fire hydrants are drained regularly for maintenance. When the draining occurs, local residents often find their water discolored. The discoloration causes no health threat, but nonetheless creates concern and curiosity among residents, who will often call 911 to find out why their water is discolored.

Boone County mitigates these resource-consuming calls by proactively calling residents to inform them that their water may be discolored and providing instructions. The calls are made automatically through the county’s emergency notification system.

## POWER TO THE PEOPLE

Obtaining savings in manpower through the use of emergency communications systems takes effort and planning. You must establish policies and procedures for the use of the mass notification system. On the policy side, one of the most important questions that must be answered is, “When can the system be used?”

Some organizations have taken a hard-line position of using their notification system only in emergencies. Restricting system use to only emergencies means the system won’t be used often, not necessarily due to the challenges of defining what constitutes an emergency, but rather because a high-level official will be required to activate it. This pushes the decision point higher up in the organization, when it may in fact be more effective in the hands of those closer to the situation.

In Santa Barbara County, Calif., fire chiefs and battalion chiefs have the authority to activate the county’s notification system simply by placing a call to the dispatch center. The notification is sent out as long as a public safety issue is involved—emergency or not. Sergeant Tom Walton of Santa Barbara County Sheriff’s Department, who manages

the system for the county, says supervisors know that the system is to be used “strictly for public safety,” but discretion is allowed on the nature of the event.

Reserving the system only for emergency purposes denies a fire or rescue agency opportunities to make sure their system works well when an extreme emergency occurs. Allowing a system to sit idle makes it much more susceptible to technical difficulties or human error. As Walton points out, Santa Barbara’s system works so well because they use it. The county has experienced several major fires in the last few years, all of which created tens of thousands of notification calls. The system is also regularly used for boil water announcements, missing person’s advisories (such as for Alzheimer’s patients who get lost), barricaded subjects and dangerous criminal alerts.

## OTHER SUCCESS FACTORS

To be successful and to make non-emergency processes less troublesome, mass notification systems must integrate with existing in-house applications. The LAFD’s notification system is automatically linked to its fire staff scheduling system. When a schedule change occurs, the notification system knows automatically and reflects the changes in subsequent call-outs. Or when a member acquires, changes or abandons a certification, the system adds or deletes the member from the list for a particular notification or call-out.

Another factor associated with the successful implementation of a notification system: ease of use. The LAFD is finding ways to streamline processes through automation, creating applications that are simple to use. To date, the applications developed for the LAFD resemble, in simplicity, those found in ATMs.

This type of application development approach allows for minimal end-user training and ease of use. After all, no one can predict the time or day when a situation may arise that justifies the system use, emergency or not. Application simplicity allows for a new or seasoned department member to execute a recall or notification. Similar to a banking institution’s ATM, validation, authorization and selection should be the only requirements to executing a request.

## THE BOTTOM LINE

It takes planning, practice and integration, but notification systems don’t have to be reserved for emergencies. As departments in California, Kentucky and elsewhere are discovering, regular use of mass-notification systems frees up staff to perform higher-level work while automated calls are completed by machine. The payoff is not only in time and money savings, but also the knowledge that the system is ready to work when it’s truly needed. ☺

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