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Dissemination of WEA: Survey of Alert Authorities

By DeeDee Bennett, Ph.D., Braeden Benson and Danielle Sharpe

In 2013, researchers from the Center for Advanced Communication Policy (CACP) at Georgia Institute of Technology were tasked by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) program office to research the inclusiveness of people with disabilities and those with language differences with regards to emergency alerts, namely Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEAs). Several research methods were employed to examine the accessibility of emergency alerts and impacts to all stakeholders.

This brief summarizes the survey results on how FEMA approved alert authorities used IPAWS to send WEAs to the public. The survey was sent to all 425 alert authorities in 2014. The questions asked were intended to assist the CACP in identifying current best practices that can be used as benchmarks for emergency managers and other potential alerting authorities regarding ways to assist the identified population. 139 alerting authorities (33%) responded to this survey.

Participant Profile | Nearly 72% of the survey respondents were emergency managers, while only one self-identified as a first responder. Four respondents were government officials and 5 were city managers.

The notification areas are located in various regions across the US.

- Nearly 68% of IPAWS alerting authorities represent a county.
- Rural, Urban, and Suburban areas were the most represented in this survey (over 45% each).
- Nearly half of the authorities are responsible for locations that have a population count between 20,000 and 250,000; with most having more than 20,000 and less than 100,000 people (28%).

IPAWS-OPEN | 31% of respondents only use IPAWS to send public alerts and warnings (such as WEA messages) and 23% use IPAWS for both COG-to-COG messaging, and to send public alerts and warnings. Several alerting authorities indicated their jurisdiction does not use IPAWS-OPEN (35%).

- An overwhelming majority of alert authorities have the authority to approve messages before they are sent (93%).
- Of the 56 responses, half indicated that they did not have any issues with using IPAWS-OPEN.

WEA | Most alerting authorities felt adequately prepared to send emergency messages through IPAWS after taking the IS-247a course (73%).

- Nearly 59% of alert authorities have not practiced sending out WEA messages based on possible emergencies.
- Some alert authorities have recognized this potential problem and have practiced creating and sending WEA messages (41%).
- Most alerting authorities have not used the system in an actual emergency (92%).

Alerting authorities were asked if they would like to be able to include URLs or hashtags (#) into the WEA message; an overwhelming 81% responded yes.

Respondents were asked if they provided information to the public about WEA: 62% indicated yes; 38% indicated no.

- More than half indicated they use some type of internet-based platform to distribute the material (60%); 25% responded that they placed the information on their website, 15% responded they placed a link to the information on their website (typically redirects to another website), and 20% responded that they placed the information on their social media site(s).
- This shows the growing importance of internet-based mechanisms for informing the citizens.

People with Disabilities or Language Differences |

- 91% of alerting authorities indicated that public information was available in accessible formats.
- Of the 9% that indicated they do provide information in accessible format (ASL interpretation, large text, captioning), it was in one form: large text.
- When asked if WEA messages are sent in other languages 7% indicated they sent messages in Spanish. 93% indicated they only sent messages in English.
- Over 33% indicated that they were unaware of anyone that would have a problem receiving WEA messages. Of the 67% that did know of certain populations, they listed people with sensory disabilities, limited English proficiency, and those without access to a mobile phone.

Respondents were also asked to identify the methods they use to craft accessible WEA messages that consider the needs of people with sensory or cognitive disabilities: 42 alert authorities replied. Nearly 40% responded that they had not.

Advice & Suggestions | 28 alert authorities (or 37%) indicated that they did not have a specific comment for IPAWS. Many alert authorities request that the next generation of WEAs allow for them to test the system without sending out a live WEA message to their jurisdiction. They also requested more education on how to properly use the system.

Concerns | From the initial descriptive analysis, the primary concerns from alert authorities include enhanced training on sending WEA through IPAWS, an increase in the number character limits on WEA messages, ability for alert authorities to internally test the system, standardization on when best to use WEA, and a desire to know about the best practices for using WEA.

Opportunities | Majority of the alert authorities mentioned a need for enhanced training, which indicates their desire to actively use the system. Providing on-site training was requested instead of the typical online webinars or independent study courses. The training courses could also provide an opportunity to incorporate information on how to best craft WEA messages so they would be accessible to people with disabilities and those with language differences. The training classes could potentially increase the number of alert authorities who use the IPAWS system to send WEA messages. Increasing the use of WEA by alert authorities and enabling accessible alerts for people with disabilities and language differences.