Public Alerting and Notifications During Wildfires

Rapid and effective notification to the public is paramount during a wildfire event that is threatening a municipality, community or other populated area. Redundancy is key when conducting alerts and notifications. There is potential for some residents to not receive one type of alert, but they may be in a position to receive another form of notification. Having multiple alerting options in place to notify the public mitigates the potential for some residents being left uninformed and unaware of the danger. There are multiple methods of conducting alerting and notifications.

Web-based Mass Notification Systems

Various web-based mass notification systems exist to conduct timely notifications to the public. Most of these private vendor systems have similar capabilities in issuing text, email and landline phone alerts to residents in the affected areas. The mass notification systems can be utilized to set up pre-designated "groups" of residents in specific areas, or can send general public announcements to residents who have previously signed up for the system alerts. Further, most of the alerting systems have a wireless emergency alerting (WEAS) capability based on the national integrated public alert and warning system (IPAWS). The cost of a web-based system is often based on the population of the jurisdiction seeking the system.

IPAWS / WEAS Messaging

The Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) unifies the national Emergency Alert System (EAS) with the National Warning and Alerting System (NAWAS) and Wireless Emergency Alert System (WEAS) under a single platform. WEAS is utilized to disseminate and coordinate emergency alerts and warning messages primarily to cellular phones. The system is initiated through a web-based mass notification system (*see above*), and allows the user agency to define an affected area using a mapping tool (circle or polygon). The emergency message is sent via cell towers to all cellular devices located within the designated area. During a WEAS message, it does not matter if an individual's cellular device is signed up for a specific mass notification system. The success of WEAS messaging is often based on the number of cellular towers communicating with each other in a specific area. In rural locations where only one or two cellular towers reach into the affected location, the messaging can bleed over to unaffected areas or may not reach affected residents. WEAS messaging needs to be specific as to the affected location(s) and boundaries of the area being notified. In areas that have very limited cellular coverage, or no coverage, it is vital to also conduct door-to-door notifications, reverse 911 landline notifications and consider EAS broadcast messaging based on the level of the emergency.

WEAS messaging currently allows for 360 characters per message. (Older phones may be limited to 90 characters) This enables the public safety organization sending the alert to consider providing a link within the message that directs the public to a webpage or social media platform that has more specific information about the fire emergency. If a link is provided within the WEAS message, it is important that the website or social media page be actively operational with current information on the incident.

Door-to-Door Notification

It is highly recommended door-to-door notifications be conducted in affected areas during any Level 2 and Level 3 wildfire evacuations. This should begin as soon as possible after unified command has designated an area at a Level 2 or Level 3.evacuation status *(see Level 2 and Level 3 evacuation forms)*. Teams of law enforcement personnel and trained volunteers should be formed into strike teams and assigned specific areas to conduct the door-to-door

notifications. Each address contacted should be logged with the numerical address, last name of resident, number of persons present, whether they are leaving or staying and a phone number (*see evacuation log forms*). Residences at which no one is present should be posted with an evacuation notification sheet and logged as well. It is important to identify any resident with "special needs" during the door-to-door operation. Those individuals may need outside assistance in evacuating their home.

Other alert and notification methods should be activated simultaneously during the door-to-door notification process (i.e.WEAS alerting, reverse 911, etc.). Law enforcement should be the lead agency during the in-person notification process. All strike teams should have a "team leader" guiding the process. Any volunteers utilized to assist in evacuation notifications must receive prior training specific to: the door-to-door notification process, wildfire behavior and locating escape routes and "safe zones" during a fire. Accountability of all personnel assigned to evacuation notifications is the responsibility of the strike team leaders and the commander assigned to oversee the evacuation process.

Reverse 9-1-1

The Reverse 911 system is a communication technology that allows public safety organization to communicate an emergency message to people in specific geographical areas. The system uses a database of telephone numbers and associated addresses tied into a geographic information system (GIS). Unlike the WEAS platform, Reverse 911 is more specific to landline telephone service. It should be utilized in areas where cellular service is unreliable or inoperable. The system can be utilized in conjunction with WEAS messaging, door-to-door notifications and EAS alerting during emergency notifications.

Emergency Alert System (EAS) Broadcasting

The Emergency Alert System is a national warning system by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). It is jointly coordinated by FEMA and the NOAA. The original intent of the system was to allow the president to address the country via all radio and television stations in the event of a national emergency. The EAS is more commonly utilized to distribute information regarding imminent threats to public safety, such as severe weather, fast moving wildfires, child abductions and other civic life safety emergencies. The EAS messaging must be related to a potential life safety emergency. Emergency messages are often formatted by state or local emergency management agencies or the National Weather Service. A designated broadcasting entity (radio or television) receives the message and uses a common alerting protocol to distribute the message to all other broadcast entities that cover the affected area. The alerts are broadcast over radio and television. It is highly recommended EAS messaging be supplemented with WEAS alerts, Reverse 911 messaging and door-to-door notifications.

Social Media Alerting

The use of social media platforms to notify the public of active emergencies is becoming more prevalent nationwide. A public safety organization can easily push out messaging via social media advising of an emergency while also providing links for the public to receive additional information. Social media alerting should not be utilized as the only means of alerting the public during a fast moving wildfire or other emergency. It should be considered a backup form of notification and allows the public safety organization to provide additional information that may not have been included or available during the initial WEAS, Reverse 911, EAS or door-to-door notifications. Social media platforms are user friendly and normally allow the public to ask clarifying questions via a blog. It is important to continually monitor the social media page for user comments that may include inaccurate information or rumor. Those instances need to be dealt with immediately by providing clear and factual information