

# Introduction to Emergency Management Communications



## Communication during an emergency

As the increasing occurrence of disasters continue to threaten public safety, one might ask what are the methods in place to help communities make better informed decisions before, during, and after catastrophic events? They would be emergency communications.

Indeed, it's simple to understand how communicating with the public during a crisis would be beneficial, helping to improve public safety, protect property, facilitate response efforts, elicit cooperation, instil public confidence, and even help families reunite (See more below). The question that remains is how.

Well, emergency communications run the gamut; they can include alerts and warnings, policy directives (e.g., evacuation, curfews, and other self-protective actions), information about response status, family members, available assistance, as well as other matters that impact response and recovery.

### H3: Benefits of effective emergency communications:

- Having the public know proper protective actions to take enables people to reduce their risk, saving lives and reducing injury.
- Having the public understand how to mitigate risk to property and the environment may lessen the damage inflicted by disasters
- Having the public know what to expect makes them likelier to follow instructions and enables responders to do their jobs.
- Educating the public enables them to better prepare for emergencies and be ready when those events do occur.
- Seeking the public's cooperation can help boost volunteerism.
- Disseminating timely, accurate, and understandable information builds confidence in the competence of emergency services.
- Providing information to help families reunite (e.g., shelter message boards, hotlines, survivor registries, and other linkages) can help reunite families and enable them to move forward with their recovery.

## Communication challenges in emergency response

The methods themselves (including in-person events, print and broadcast media, and digital and social media) play an important role in efficacy – so, too, does whether the communications are clear, contain specific and adequate information, are in sync with other information being disseminated, and are broadly accessible. That being said, researchers have carefully studied less-intuitive factors that might also influence how well emergency messages are received by publics.

A primary challenge is that emergency communications (by their nature) differ from routine communications. Here's how:



More difficult for people to hear emergency communications, because of factors like change of routine and lack of sleep.



In the case of emergency communications, rumour and speculation tend to fill the information vacuum when official answers are not available. As a result, emergency services will need to not only disseminate correct information, but you also actively counter misinformation circulated.



Among emergency communications, official emergency warnings differ from other kinds of messages as they attempt to elicit a specific response rather than merely raise awareness or provide knowledge.

What's more, individual and community factors also conspire to compromise the timely and positive reception of emergency communications. Those factors include:

#### Community factors

- Residents of rural communities may have more difficulty receiving warnings than those living in urban areas.
- People who have more contacts in the community will receive more warnings and are more likely to act; also, they are more likely to trust officials.
- Families, more than individuals, tend to heed evacuation warnings. Research indicates that people tend to confer with family, extended family, and friends prior to making a decision. Their decisions are then based on the following factors:
  - Families are more likely to act if they have relatives nearby who may warn them and offer them short-term shelter.
  - Concern for children's safety will elicit quicker response from parents.
  - People often view their pets as they would their children and will take action to protect them. However, whereas families with children usually act more quickly to take precautions, in emergencies requiring evacuation, people with pets may endanger their own lives by refusing to evacuate, because many public shelters do not allow pets.

#### Individual factors

- When different people listen to the same message, there may be a variation in what they hear, leading to different interpretation and response.
- Often people will rely on their previous experiences with the hazard to determine what actions they initially take (or don't take).
- Individual responses to warnings vary, but most people will seek some form of confirmation. Optimism bias (thinking that "disasters happen to other people") is overcome with confirmation.
- People tend to make a rapid assessment of the relative safety of their location, producing an emergent perception of risk. If their perception of personal risk is high, people will act quickly. When the perception is low, they will delay acting.
- Children and older adults may not be able to receive and/or respond appropriately to alerts and warnings. Many in this group may also need assistance.
- Non-English-speaking persons may not understand warnings that are provided in English.
- Transients, tourists, and newcomers to the area lack knowledge of local hazards and the history of local disasters, so they may react differently.
- Individuals with access and functional needs may need alerts in accessible formats and additional time and assistance for evacuating. Accessibility of alert and warning messages refers to whether individuals hear and understand them.
- People who have taken the time to prepare for hazards (i.e., they have a plan and disaster supply kit, and have exercised the plan) are more likely to heed warnings and act appropriately. However, getting this preparedness buy-in can be a challenge.

Disaster response spread across multiple organisations also challenge the effectiveness of emergency communications for technological reasons. The primary challenge, here, is the rapid deployment of communication systems for first responders and disaster management workers. Communications networks might have been completely destroyed by the disaster, or communications infrastructure might not have been built in the first place in the disaster zone.

Nor is deploying new communications systems simple. In the case of partial networks, emergency responders might have grown accustomed to their pre-existing systems and are reluctant or not able to transition.

What's more, the communications systems of multiple organisations might not sync with each other, either. Cases of interagency communications failures are also due to either poor command systems or weak definitions of interagency operational needs, i.e., who needs to talk to whom, when, and why, must all be defined well before communications can serve to enable the response.

## Emergency management communications plan

How to overcome the community, individual, and technological challenges with disseminating communications effectively during an emergency? That's where emergency management communications planning comes in.

Whether for a private organisation, non-for-profit, and/or government agency, communications planning typically consists of policies, procedures, and incident command structures meant to clarify protocols in contacting the public, media, and other stakeholders before, during, and after an emergency.

Most emergency management communications plans are structured around a set of concrete priorities; likely including:

- 1 Ensuring the quick and accurate dissemination of information for the safety and well-being of a given community
- 2 Ensuring that all community members affected by an emergency event remain updated until the event's conclusions

What do plans look like after that? They run the gamut. Under the Incident Command System (ICS), communications and incident action plans need to be integrated, thereby capturing management goals and operational objectives. Integration of supporting services and technologies is critical to effective incident response. Since responder safety and effectiveness are closely related to how well communications supports them, the capabilities and capacity of systems to support operations is accounted for continuously during incident action planning.

What's more, communications is integrated into ICS-based management systems by the early establishment of a communications unit during incidents and involvement of the Communications Unit Leader in incident action planning. This is not only to ensure that the response is well supported by communications, but also to reinforce chosen command structures and operating principles generally embodied in ICS (See below), including management span of control.


The communications unit is often established early in multiagency and large-scale responses managed under ICS to support the integration effort. This is intended to bring all communications functions close to incident command, rather than having them managed far from pressing operational considerations.

Structurally, the Communications Unit in NIMS ICS operates in the Logistics Section, under the Service Branch. It is managed by a unit leader, consistent with other NIMS position-naming conventions. Dispatchers (radio operators) and communications technicians serving the incident are also part of the unit.

## ICS and emergency communications

ICS Principles(s)	Feature	Purpose
Communications and Information Management	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrated communications</li> <li>• Information and intelligence management</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop and use a common (incident) communications plan and interoperable communications, processes, and structures.</li> <li>• Ensures that incident management goals and objectives are captured</li> <li>• Maximises responder safety and accountability</li> <li>• Is continuous throughout an incident</li> <li>• Reinforces command structure and span of control.</li> <li>• Establish a process for gathering, analysing, sharing, and managing incident-related information and intelligence.</li> </ul>

### Role of the Public Information Officer in the ICS structure

 <p>Verifies, coordinates, and disseminates accurate, accessible, and timely information on the incident's cause, size, and current situation, for both internal and external use.</p>	 <p>Verifies the accuracy of the information gathered by consulting with the Incident Commander, Incident Command System (ICS) team, response agencies, and technical specialists.</p>
 <p>Gathers information about the incident from Incident Command Centre and the response teams.</p>	 <p>Coordinates dissemination of information internally to response teams and related resources.</p>
 <p>Gathers information related to the type of incident from professional sources, such as response agencies, technical specialists, and emergency response guidebooks.</p>	 <p>Coordinates dissemination of information externally to key stakeholders, media, and the public.</p>

## What is an emergency notification system?

Finally, when getting out emergency notifications during a disaster, systems matter. Emergency notifications are one-way broadcasts to communities (emergency communications, the larger category, include one- and two-way messages), warning communities of emergencies to come or active events.

Systems that provide one-way communication en masse in emergency situations are emergency mass notification systems. Meanwhile, emergency communication systems provide one and two-way communications in emergency situations.

All-inclusive emergency management software, like Noggin Emergency, can also provide emergency communications.

Sources:

- i. Federal Emergency Management Agency: *Communicating in an emergency*. Available at [https://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/is242b/instructor%20guide/ig\\_03.pdf](https://training.fema.gov/emiweb/is/is242b/instructor%20guide/ig_03.pdf).
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- iii. Dan Hawkins, *Issue Brief: Communications in the Incident Command System*. Available at <https://www.cdc.gov/niosh/erhms/pdf/cops-interoperable-communications-technology-program.pdf>.



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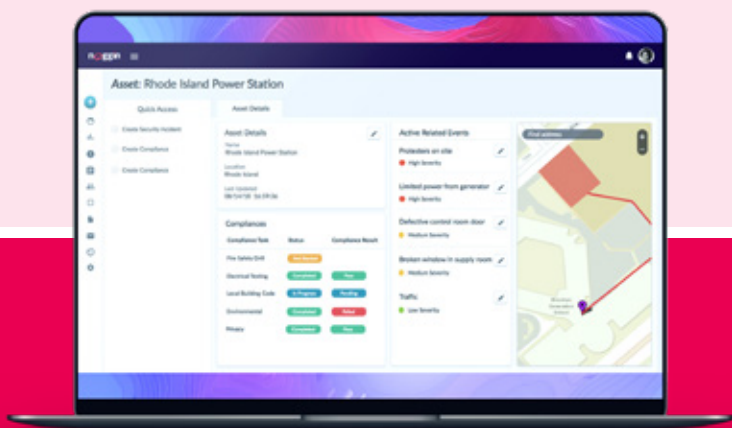
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