



State of Iowa

Protecting and notifying millions of residents is challenging, especially when an emergency strikes. Public safety officials may have days to prepare their communities, or only have seconds to react. And there are many moving parts to an emergency.

What happened? What agencies and/or departments need to be involved? How do they communicate and collaborate as the situation evolves? How are residents notified? Receive updates?

“The goal in emergency management is we always want to communicate everything and in as many ways as possible,” said Allie Bright, program planner, Iowa Homeland Security & Emergency Management. “You can always try to plan for things in emergency management, but you get thrown a curveball. I think that’s what this last year was like with COVID.”

The Iowa Department of Homeland Security & Emergency Management (HSEMD) is the coordinating body for homeland security and

emergency management functions for all residents across the state. The department ensures communities are prepared for, respond to and recover from an emergency when it happens. Iowa has 99 counties, with about 3.2 million residents.

HSEMD is responsible for overseeing and managing a statewide notification system that sends out emergency messages to the public, as well as to internal staff and other agencies. The department was looking to switch to another system, focusing on key features and functionality.

“There were some things that we were really looking for. We wanted to make sure the system was easy for counties and agencies to use,” Bright said. “We wanted to make sure that we have support and resources available 24/7. Emergencies don’t happen nine-to-five, so we needed to make sure that our counties and agencies could use it whenever they need to.”

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A “game changer” to reach an entire community

Bright also said it was important for the department’s new system to offer residents various ways to sign up for notifications.

“We have diverse populations, and we needed people to be able to access the system and get information in the language of their choice,” she said. “People like different modes of technology. Someone who is older may want to access the system differently than someone who is younger. Different demographics may want different options, and those are really important features.”

HSEMD selected Rave Alert, a mass notification system that’s part of a critical communication and collaboration platform. Rave Alert features a customizable interface that can be accessed from any Internet-connected device. Messages can be sent out simultaneously through text, email, voice calls, social media, IPAWs, digital signage and desktop alerts — all through a

single launch point. Text, voice calls and emails can be automatically translated into about 60 languages.

Residents can register for these messages through Rave Alert’s text to opt-in feature, which allows residents to sign up for alerts by texting a unique keyword to a short code. Residents can receive messages in the modes and languages they prefer.

Rave Alert is backed by a public safety grade infrastructure of multiple carriers, carrier networks and aggregators, as well as geo-redundant data centers.

Iowa residents will also be able to register for notifications through the Smart911 app, a free service for community members to create personal safety profiles. They can also include information about the names of family members, phone numbers, home address, medical history and requirements, and even pet information. Residents can also sign up to receive emergency notifications through the app.

“Maximizing sign-ups in our communities are huge and having those different modes of sign-up is really big to us,” Bright said. “A lot of people like an app; they like to be able to download something and set their preferences. Some people want that opt-in page and they want to be able to go to a website they trust or their county’s website, click on a link and sign up that way. And some people want to take the easy route and use an SMS keyword to opt in.”

Bright said the multiple ways residents can sign up for notifications and the options to send them through text, email and voice will help HSEMD reach more Iowa residents, calling it a “game changer.”

The department recently introduced Rave Alert to Iowa residents, and counties will fully transition to the system by July 1. Bright said about 20 state agencies, including the Departments of Public Safety and Transportation, will also be using Rave Alert.

As the counties start to implement Rave Alert, Bright said they will customize the system to meet their community needs. She mentioned some counties are taking advantage of the access and functional needs registry, which captures information through residents’ personal safety profiles. These details will help emergency management personnel ensure the appropriate resources can be allocated and aid in response efforts.

More tools to protect residents

Bright anticipates using Rave Alert for severe weather. The state gets a range of weather events, including tornadoes, flooding and snowstorms. Officials will be able to send weather alerts through Rave Alert. It ties into the National Weather Service, automatically sending out customized alerts based on the weather in the area. Details will include the type of weather, location and severity. Iowa residents will also be able receive weather alerts through the Smart911 app.

“Weather alerts are big for us,” she said. “In the Midwest, we don’t have a body of water to regulate anything. Our weather can go from [warm] like it is today to snowing tomorrow.”

Bright said county officials will be setting up weather alerts based on their preferences. Some communities, for example, will receive alerts about flood watches and warnings because they’re near rivers and others will have alerts based on air quality.

She expects counties will also use targeted messages to notify specific residents about severe weather. Officials can send messages by pinpointing a section on a map and continue to update the map and message as the situation evolves. Only certain residents would be notified about what’s happening and what actions to take, preventing others from receiving alerts that aren’t relevant to them.

“I think the more tools you put in the tool belt when it comes to communication can really bolster that communication across the state,” Bright said.



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