Minnesota Integrated Public Alert and Warning System - Newsletter

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This month's Issue:

Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS)

The Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS) provides the capability for authorized government agencies to send emergency alerts to citizens' cell phones within in an area affected by an imminent threat.

In this issue we will focus on what CMAS is and can do for you and what it was never intended to do.

As part of the WARN Act of 2006 the CMAS program began with collaboration between the International Wireless Association (CTIA), the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) and the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). These organizations came together to develop a standard warning protocol that all cellular carriers could agree upon that included a special ring tone and vibration cadence used solely for this alerting system. From that mandate the cellular industry has put forth a voluntary effort to provide life-saving alerts to the public when sent from public safety officials.

CMAS was never intended to replace the current warning systems used now or in the future. If you are using Code Red, Everbridge, NIXEL or similar products you will continue to use them for routine messages you want disseminated to the public within your jurisdiction.

Many existing systems rely upon the entry of data whether done by your organization or by the public signing up for alerts that you may send out. This is referred to as an "Opt In" system. These are effective because the persons signing up are interested in receiving alerts and regardless of their location when you send out one they will get it. For example if they are on vacation in Florida they will receive a text message alert even though they are not directly in danger because it is sent to their related cell phone number in your database. There is a down side to this type of system and that is, as the old adage goes "you can lead a horse to water but you can't make it drink". The system is only as good as the people that know about it. Getting the word out is the key to this type of system.

CMAS is due to be deployed in April of 2012, and it is an "OPT Out" system. This type of alerting system will utilize Cellular Broadcast which relies on the tower(s) in the designated area to broadcast to all cell phones that are associated with that tower. So even if you are visiting that area from another state as long as you have a CMAS message compatible handset you will receive that message.

For most PSAP's and departments that have Electronic Telephone Notification (ETN) systems, The contract vendors may already be working on or have tested a CAP (Common Alerting Protocol) compliant module to be added to that system. Many of the current ETN systems will in the near future be enhanced to include this powerful capability. Currently alerting authorities that have to register for IPAWS and complete the online training course will be able to use CMAS. This process will be

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discussed in the March issue. We will cover how to go about applying for alerting authority using the IPAWS system.

The online IPAWS training course addresses the three CAP elements for sending an alert: Severity, Urgency and Certainty. Usage of the CMAS system is structured to follow the three alert types to be issued: Presidential, Imminent Threat and AMBER Alerts. Of these three alerts the user can "OPT OUT" of the Imminent Threat and AMBER Alerts but not the Presidential.
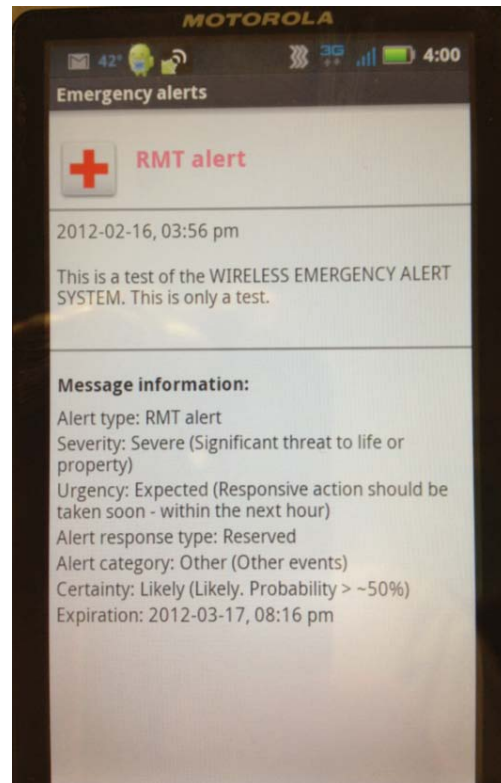
Sending a CMAS Alert does not cost the organization sending it (other than ownership of the third party software) nor the cellular customer receiving.

What does a CMAS Message look like? It resembles a text message in appearance. The photo in the next column shows a required monthly test that was sent to a Verizon Droid handset in Indiana (that just happened to be one from Indiana Department of Homeland Security). For reference the message is referred to as a Wireless Emergency Alert which is what the cellular telephone industry has labeled it. This has created confusion since it differs from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) assigned name of CMAS.

There are several CMAS compatible cellular phones available at this time. Click on the following carrier names to view their CMAS pages to see what phones are available. Most of the carriers include a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) section on their sites which gives more information about this program. A word of caution - some of the lists are not up to date! Several new Blackberry models and the Apple iPhone with IOS 5 phones have been reported to have this feature ready for use by other websites.

The major Provider websites:

ATT   Sprint   T-Mobile   Verizon

Another creditable website visit for information on CMAS Facts and Myths and other Alert and Warning topics is called http://www.awareforum.org/ (Alerts, Warnings & Response to Emergencies)

IPAWS Committee Update

The IPAWS Committee web page is now up and currently being populated up with committee information on membership, agendas, training links and more. If you would like to be informed on committee meetings and action sign up for the MN-IPAWS List serve.

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FEMA IPAWS Independent Study Course

This course takes less than two hours to complete and is required for applying for access to the IPAWS system.

An independent, Web-based study course, "IS-247 Effective Alert and Warning Messaging," has been released by FEMA's Emergency Management Institute (EMI). This self-paced course is expected to take approximately two hours to complete and will include a final test covering the following topics:

- Introduction to IPAWS and some new terminology:
    - o CAP (Common Alerting Protocol)
    - o COG (Collaborative Operating Group)
    - o CMAS (Commercial Mobile Alerting System)
- What are Appropriate, Effective and Accessible Alert and Warning Messages

- Common Alerting Protocol Message Composition (how it changes the way messages to the public are written)

The overall goal of the training is to ensure that warnings and alerts issued via the Emergency Alert System (EAS), Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS) and National Weather Service (NWS) dissemination services are necessary, timely and accurate.

Local government officials applying for IPAWS accounts on behalf of their organizations will be required to demonstrate successful completion of the course. They must also ensure that any other members of their organization who have system access to issue public alerts complete the training.

Next Issue:

COG (Collaborative Operating Group)

Contact Information and Resources

Alert and Warning Page

http://hsem.dps.mn.gov

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