

Foundation of an Emergency Alerting Program



Mission Critical Knowledge

Ownership

An effective emergency management program is the first step in overcoming fear and building confidence. Ownership has to come from the top. The person responsible for launching an alert (whether that be the state or local director of emergency management) should personally own the program.

Why? Because they're the individual who is ultimately responsible and whose job is on the line should an alert fail to go out. Delegating this responsibility away is a recipe for disaster.

Mindset Shift Reminder!

Too often, time is wasted while officials ask the next person in command for permission to launch an alert. The truth is each person in the chain of command should feel empowered to press "send." Permission to act without orders should be documented in your formal policies and procedures.

Ask yourself: What's at stake with each second that goes by deliberating over whether to press the button?

Program Overview

The program must be detailed and comprehensive.

Start by creating an IPAWS user policy to make procedures crystal clear and verify all personnel review it. Such a plan provides the teeth and the empowerment for using alerts. It also takes the guesswork out of the process, instilling confidence.

We often worry about the unexpected and forget to plan for the events we should expect. If your community is prone to hurricanes or tornadoes, for example, these expected events should be covered in detail in your emergency response program.

It's also important to remember that managing the system and pressing "send" aren't the same thing. There are technicians who manage and maintain the system, and then there are the decision-makers. The person who owns the program cannot assume that everyone knows everything.

It's imperative to ensure that everyone on the roster that has the authority to launch knows the codes, knows the passwords and knows every step involved in the process to launch an alert.

To create your policy, start by asking the right questions:

The Who, What, Where, When, How

- **Who** — Who has the authority to initiate an alert in your agency? Who are the backups for these individuals? Who are the alert recipients?
- **What** — What is the content you want to send? What action do you want your recipients to take?
- **Where** — Where do you want the alert to reach? (i.e., the technical reach of the broadcasters, TV and radio, or cellular.)
- **When** — When do you use IPAWS to send an alert, and what are your agency's guidelines?
- **How** — How do you use IPAWS? — Do you know the difference between the three delivery methods of IPAWS? EAS, WEA and NWEM (each is different from the alert creation to the way in which they are delivered).

And remember, the real work comes with maintaining the program over time. As the technology used to send alerts changes, it's critical to revisit the program and update it accordingly. Turnover is also an issue, especially at the local level. Replacements need to be identified, documented and trained immediately.

The Unintended IPAWS User

There will be a day when the written procedures, training, drills and exercises will not be enough. When the people you have invested all your time and energy to ensure you can launch an emergency message are unavailable. Now what?

Let's discuss some of the possible workarounds.

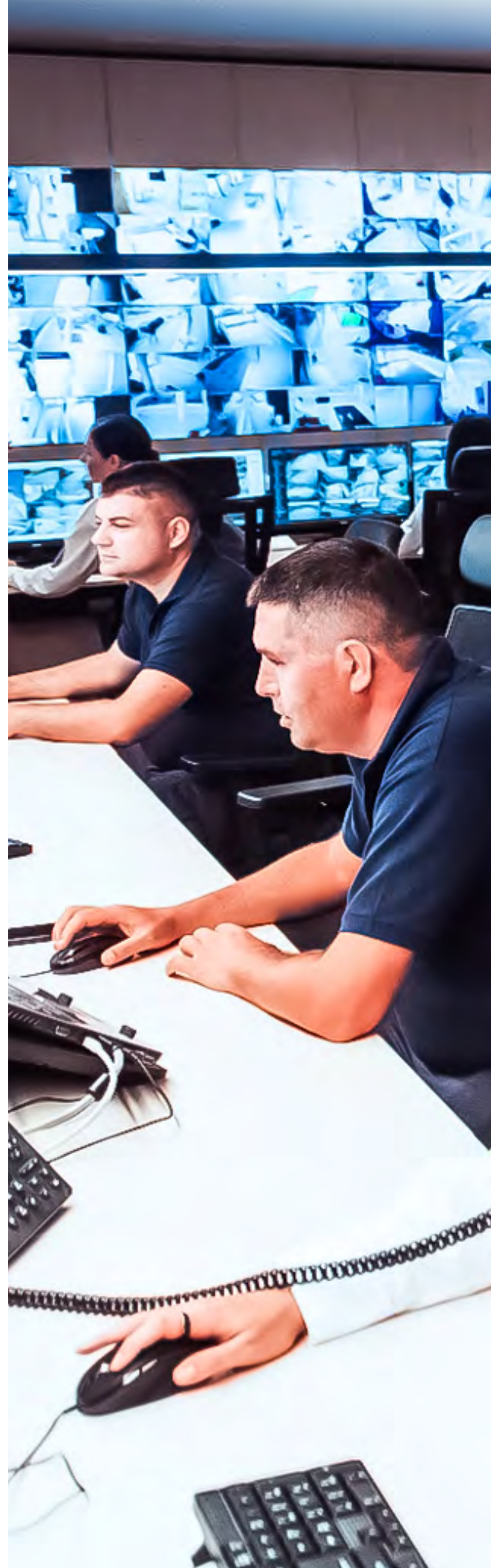
- 1 First, ensure your entire staff, from the director down to the most junior employee, understands the IPAWS/WEA system and the critical importance of timely and accurate emergency messages.
- 2 Second, consider a wide range of back-up options. If you're at the local level, can the county or state launch on your behalf? If you're at the state level, can another state or the FEMA Operations Center launch on your behalf?

The bottom line is you must have a failsafe because lives and property are at stake. As an emergency manager, it is one of the most important actions you will take (or fail to take).

Continuing Education

Additional Tips for Your IPAWS User Policy

- Keep your plan as short as possible. You should be able to reference the plan at a moment's notice without wading through an encyclopedia-sized book.
- Check with your local broadcasters to see who receives the alerts and how far the alerts reach.
- Don't forget to include password management in your documentation. Hint: A post-it note on someone's computer screen is not effective password management.



Pro Tip

Give each authorized launcher their individual passwords and launch codes. Direct those authorized users to store the passwords on their cell phones. If you're a CodeRED user, you can even have a backup plan where the authorized launchers can provide a PIN to the CodeRED 24/7 help desk, and they can launch on your behalf.

EMAP Accreditation

- EMAP accreditation is one way to ensure your emergency management program is comprehensive and effective. It also increases confidence and reduces fear. [EMAP](#) is an independent non-profit organization. Its mission is to “foster excellence and accountability in emergency management programs, by establishing credible standards applied in a peer review accreditation process.”
- Accreditation is voluntary. However, some states have tied accreditation to EMPG funding. Accreditation also shows that a program meets national standards.
- In the 73 standards outlined in the latest ANSI/EMAP 5-2022 Emergency Management Standard, Section 4.7 Communications and Warning provides an excellent foundation for building your program on solid ground.
- The standard outlines five key components:
 - A program that includes hazards outlined in your jurisdiction's Hazard Identification Risk Assessment (HIRA) plan.
 - A communications, notification and alert and warning system(s) that supports the HIRA, has backup systems, can operate in any environment and that is tested on a regular basis.
 - Written operational procedures for each of the systems.
 - Ensuring that the systems are interoperable.
 - A maintenance process for plans identified in the standard which includes a method and schedule for evaluation and revision.



Recommended Reading

[Emergency Management Standard: Emergency Management Accreditation Program, EMAP EMS 5-2022](#)