Training, Education & Maintenance

Mission Critical Knowledge

Procedural and Technical Training

IPAWS is like any other lifesaving equipment. The first time you use it should not be during an emergency. Lack of a process leads to poor decisions. Consistent and regular training and education creates the muscle memory needed to quickly launch an alert during an emergency. Just like with program ownership, training starts at the top. The person ultimately in charge must know exactly how the system works.

FEMA requires a two-hour online course for the people who send out alerts. Much of it is focused on the technical aspects of alerting rather than the decision-making process. Additionally, one-time training is not enough. Formal training should be scheduled at least once a month so everyone involved is extremely familiar and comfortable with the system.

To ensure a higher level of confidence, you should also plan for random, unannounced drills and tests on a regular basis. The frequency of pop-up drills should be determined by success and confidence. If your team is hesitant about the procedures to follow or how to launch an alert, then random drills should be held more frequently until they're navigated with assurance.

Training needs to include EVERY aspect of the launch sequence and should cover multiple scenarios, including, but not limited to, the following:

- The decision to launch has already been made by the designated decision maker and the operational team is just routinely following instructions to launch.

- A meeting is required to discuss the details of the launch such as drafting a message and determining geographic boundaries.

- An emergency occurs after hours, and the designated decision maker is unavailable to make a decision. In this situation, who is next in line to give authorization? Can that person launch the alert from home? Do they have a copy of the written procedures and passwords with them to launch the alert remotely?

Training through various scenarios builds confidence among your entire staff so they can still respond appropriately and swiftly when something out of the ordinary happens — because it will.

A comprehensive training program should also cover such items as:

- Written launch procedures

- Passwords/Codes required

- Trigger circumstances

- Alert creation (including specifics on message content and character limit)

- Discussion and decision on the geographic activation area

- Discussion and decision on which tools to use

- Access and functional needs within the community

- Alert launch (including how to send it and when to send it)

- Recipient list/Geographic parameters

- Acknowledgement of any errors or barriers in the process

Even basic items like making sure the system is plugged in and software updates should be part of training to avoid simple mistakes during an emergency.

Mindset Shift Reminder!

There is no substitute for regular and frequent training. Case in point: The Lahaina wildfires weren't the first time Hawaii had issues with its emergency alerting system. In 2018, the state infamously sent out a false warning of an incoming ballistic missile, resulting in a federal recommendation that emergency management agencies conduct regular internal drills to maintain proficiency on the tools.

Ask yourself: Are training and drills conducted regularly to instill a sense of confidence in my team's ability to create and send an alert during various types of emergency scenarios?

Drills and Exercises

In addition to regular training, emergency officials also need to conduct drills and exercises on a regular basis. This is the only way to keep the system "warm" and ensure everyone feels ready to respond during a crisis — even if it's in the middle of the night.

When it comes to ensuring you can efficiently perform the critical tasks of sending an emergency alert there are two elements you must focus on: People drills and technical drills. They are connected but they are not the same.

People Drills

Without people who have been trained to the written standard you will struggle to send prompt, timely and accurate emergency alerts. Training needs to be progressive, experiential and frequent (very frequent). Periodic testing should be conducted for all users to stay fresh and up to date on the three IPAWS alert pathways.

Program owners should also conduct monthly proficiency drills with staff, dispatchers and anyone else involved in launching IPAWS messages. Rehearsals should be conducted exclusively in the IPAWS test environment, but they should be realistic and follow the parameters for each alert pathway. Practice using the codes and writing messages within the prescribed character limits. Too often, tests are conducted using real-world language or in the LIVE environment just stating, "This is a test."

When assessing the effectiveness of your people drills, ask yourself the following questions:

- Have the individuals who are designated and authorized to send emergency alerts familiar with the written procedures?

- Have they reviewed the procedures step by step, both with oversight and on their own?

- Have they been given the opportunity to conduct a "live" training by launching WEA tests using the Required Weekly Test (RWT) code?

- Have they sent emergency alerts and warning messages from the alternate or back-up location?

- Have they conducted a no-notice drill during work hours and after work hours? From their homes?

- Have you told the authorized individuals what they need to do if they cannot obtain your permission to launch during an emergency?

- Do they have authority to act in the absence of orders?

The bottom line is you can't leave anything to chance — even the obvious.

And remember, it's a process. The technology is always changing, so training and education never stop. Fortunately, some emergency alerting systems provide a test environment, which makes it easier to stay current on the latest technological changes.

Technical Drills

In most emergency management organizations, there are communication and IT technicians responsible for the maintenance and sustainability of communication, alert, warning and notification equipment. Even though these technicians may never launch an emergency alert, failure to include them in your SOP can leave your team unable to send an emergency alert due to technical issues.

As a part of these drills and exercises, the technical team should:

- Conduct technical and functional training and tests of the hardware.

- Ensure software and firmware on all equipment and user front-end interfaces are up to date.

- Perform maintenance at all alternate sites capable of launching emergency alerts.

- Test back-up emergency power on primary and alternate launch sites.

- Set up and test redundant internet access with multiple ISP providers.

- Regularly test launch capability from mobile sites (e.g., wheeled command post or emergency operations center).

- Confirm all designated and authorized individuals are aware of any and all password updates.

The important task of sending an emergency alert message requires organizations to implement vigorous oversight and focus on the people and technical aspects of emergency alerts. Without an integrated and complementary approach, successful emergency alerts become daunting.

Continuing Education

Public Education

IPAWS is working on developing updated public education. The current guidance is for local alerting authorities to reach out to their media partners and look for ways to educate their communities via local media, social media and community events. There are some limited PSA and educational resources available on the FEMA website.

In general, outreach should educate the public on:

- What is IPAWS
- The different mechanisms of outreach from the IPAWS system
- What they can expect from their jurisdiction
- What they will be alerted about
- What they should expect to see in an alert

A list of FAQs to the most common questions around emergency alerting increases public confidence in your agency's ability to keep the community safe. It also ensures residents will know what to expect from an alert and helps prevent the worst-case scenario — residents opt out of receiving potentially life-saving alerts.

Additional Resources

IPAWS Program Planning Toolkit: This resource guides alerting authorities through the process of collecting and organizing their disaster protocols. After a form has been completed, the system generates a simple, editable document that can be shared with response officials and easily referenced when an immediate response is needed. It also includes prewritten templates for various emergencies and a message generator that uses social science to craft alerts.