

## Texas Panhandle Partnership Implements Regional Alert System

POTTER COUNTY, TX – Reverse calling systems play a key role in ensuring effective routine and critical communication to alert local residents and mobilize personnel in a timely manner. In May 2015, an emergency alert regional system in northwestern Texas proved invaluable when it provided mass notification of severe weather and flooding to responders and communities in central and south Texas.

“Our notification project got its start around 2010 when we found that only two of our 26 counties had any kind of mass notification capability,” said John Kiehl, Regional Services Director of the Panhandle Regional Planning Commission (PRPC). Comprised of cities, counties and special districts in the Texas Panhandle, the voluntary association was established in 1969 to assist local governments in planning, developing, and implementing programs designed to improve the general health, safety, and welfare of the citizens in the Texas Panhandle

“We discovered the other counties could not afford the cost of getting an alert system, much less maintaining one,” said Kiehl, “but with help from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and other partners, we were able to establish a reverse calling system to serve a wide array of emergency management purposes at a highly affordable cost.”



This is a mass notification system diagram.

*Photo courtesy of John Kiehl*

After considering different options, the PRPC decided to work with a vendor to form a partnership with other jurisdictions that shared the need for mass notification. The result was the creation of the Alliance for Community Solutions (ACS), a group of stakeholders that share a common interest in developing and implementing cost-effective, technology based emergency management tools that benefit the entire group.

The PRPC applied for a grant from FEMA’s Hazard Mitigation Grant Program (HMGP) to fund the alert system project that would ensure that all counties in the region could affordably obtain and maintain notification capabilities. “We submitted a proposal for a system that would serve the entire 26,000-square mile region and FEMA was kind enough to help fund it,” said Kiehl.

The PRPC received about \$785,000 from FEMA toward the project cost of just over \$1 million. Most of the balance needed to fund the PRPC’s portion has come from donations from individuals and private foundations. HMGP funds were used to purchase licenses at a cost of \$600 per license. Each jurisdiction contributed \$200 toward the cost of its license.

While there were a few challenges, Kiehl has been pleased with the outcome and speaks favorably about some important enhancements that have resulted from the ACS partnership.

“Initially, we had difficulty sending short message system (SMS) text messages. We’d send out the first 25 calls, which would go through without a problem,” said Kiehl. “But after that, they started bottlenecking and

<http://www.fema.gov/mitigation-best-practices-portfolio>

bouncing back. We went through a period of time where people were getting their severe weather alerts a day and a half after the storm had passed.”

The issue was resolved by installing a new smartphone application for both Android and iPhones called Fully Connect. Because it bypasses cell phone service provider servers, Fully Connect lets local officials send messages more quickly and reliably.

Kiehl said partnering with other jurisdictions through ACS has been a plus. The notification system has been improved beyond its original design with enhancements funded by the PRPC and other ACS members. In addition to the common suite of tools that can send alerts by text, voice and email, the PRPC has included an English-Spanish translation. Other ACS partners have added more language modules including French, Mandarin, Cantonese, Vietnamese and German to better serve their non-English speaking residents.

The PRPC is now working on the last major FEMA-funded improvement: integrating the PRPC system with the federal Integrated Public Alert Warning System. When that happens, there will be seven different ways for emergency managers and authorized users to send alerts and notices to residents when their safety is at risk.

In May 2015, historic storms swept through Central and South Texas over Memorial Day weekend dumping up to 10 inches of rain over parts of previously drought-stricken Texas. Medina County, an ACS partner located over 500 miles from the Panhandle, had funded a system enhancement that connected the county’s flood gauges to the mass notification system. As the river rose to pre-designated levels, automated notices were sent to keep county responders and residents aware of the situation as it occurred in real time. The PRPC is now looking to take advantage of this enhancement in the Panhandle.

What the PRPC did in the region is now serving 150 other counties in the state of Texas because they are all working with the same provider. Every enhancement put into the system by any one of the counties is made available to all the other counties and jurisdictions within those counties, at no additional cost.

“FEMA has invested a lot of money in this initiative and we wanted the return to be as great as possible,” said Kiehl. “One of the best outcomes of this project is the partnership that’s been forged through ACS. Together, we’ll continue to cost-effectively improve this system long after our HMGP project has been closed out,” Kyle said. “And anytime an ACS partner adds a system enhancement, all ACS members will benefit from it.”

For additional information about the Texas Panhandle Partnership Regional Alert System, visit:  
<http://www.fema.gov/media-library/assets/documents/103279> and [www.theprpc.org/](http://www.theprpc.org/).