Integrated Public Alert and Warning System
FAQ's for Emergency Managers and Alert Originators

What is IPAWS?

IPAWS is the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System and was established by Presidential Executive Order 13407. In the event of a national emergency, the President will be able to use the IPAWS to send a message to the American people quickly and simultaneously through multiple communications pathways.

IPAWS is also being made available to United States Federal, State, local, territorial and tribal government officials as a way to alert the public via the Emergency Alert System (see below), the Commercial Mobile Alert System/Personalized Local Alert Network (see below), NOAA Weather Radio and other National Weather Service dissemination channels, the Internet, existing unique warning systems, and emerging distribution technologies.

What is CMAS or PLAN?

The Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS), also referred to as the Personalized Local Alert Network (PLAN), was established pursuant to the Warning, Alert and Response Network (WARN) Act. CMAS/PLAN will enable alerting authorities to broadcast emergency alerts to cell phone customers with compatible handsets who are located in the geographical vicinity of cellular towers serving an affected area.

There are three types of messages accommodated by the system: Presidential, AMBER, and Imminent Threat alerts. In the case of Imminent Threat alerts, the message is automatically composed from CAP values selected by the alert originator to fit within a 90 character limitation.

What is EAS?

The Emergency Alert System (EAS) is a national public warning system that requires broadcasters, cable television systems, wireless cable systems, satellite digital audio radio service (SDARS) providers, and direct broadcast satellite (DBS) providers to supply the communications capability to the President to address the American public during a national emergency. EAS is also used by the National Weather Service to relay weather-related warnings. EAS may also be used by state and local authorities to deliver important emergency information about other types of hazardous situations.

What is CAP?

The Common Alerting Protocol (CAP) is an XML-based data format standard for exchanging public warnings between alerting technologies. CAP allows a warning message to be sent simultaneously over many warning systems to many different outlets (such as radio, television, cell phones, Internet).

What is an "alerting authority?"

Public officials are granted the authority to alert the public of emergency situations through Federal, State, and local laws. Specific authorities may be designated in state Emergency Alert System or AMBER Alert plans.

What is a COG?

A Collaborating Operating Group or "COG" is a term used by IPAWS to designate an organization that is responsible for emergency alerting. A COG is established with IPAWS when a Federal, State, local, or tribal alerting authority executes an MOA with FEMA in order to use IPAWS. Further information regarding this process may be found at http://www.fema.gov/emergency/ipaws/aggregator.shtm#3

What are the benefits of using IPAWS?

IPAWS automates and streamlines the process of issuing public alerts. Using IPAWS, COGs are able to send an alert to multiple dissemination channels, such as the Emergency Alert System, CMAS/PLAN, NOAA Weather Radio and other National Weather Service dissemination channels, as well as to newer technologies as they come on line, at the same time. IPAWS also enables the exchange of private alerts between COGs who need to communicate about an emergency.

Does IPAWS replace the systems I already have in place?

The use of IPAWS is optional, and may supplement your existing systems; however, IPAWS is the only means of accessing CMAS/PLAN to disseminate warnings to cellular telephones.

What technology do I need to have in order to send messages through IPAWS?

You need to have computer software that can create IPAWS- compliant messages. These tools are being developed by a variety of private companies (costs vary based on licenses, features etc). You also need a reliable Internet connection.

What does it cost?

There is no cost to send messages through IPAWS. However, there is a cost to acquire private sector software to send alert messages. The software is available from several vendors. FEMA does not endorse the product of any private company but provides a list of vendors who have executed MOAs for the purpose of testing standards-compliant equipment and software. See http://www.fema.gov/pdf/emergency/ipaws/open_developers.pdf .

You may also wish to consult with your current software system provider to determine if the tools you are already using are already or will be compatible with IPAWS in the future. Your existing local warning systems may also be configured to work with IPAWS by private sector system integrators: any customization costs are the cost of the end user.

What type of grants or funding assistance can FEMA provide to help purchase or acquire IPAWS compliant equipment?

The IPAWS PMO office is pleased to provide the following link (http://www.fema.gov/government/grant/hsgp/) to the 2011 Homeland Security Grant Program (HSGP) and the associated IPAWS 2011 HSGP Supplemental Guidance. This information is provided to assist State, territorial, tribal, and local governments with preparing documentation for the acquisition of common alert protocol (CAP) compliant public alert and warning equipment, as well as training, exercise, and alert and warning outreach activities. Funding from the Homeland Security Grant Program, Tribal Homeland Security Grant Program (THSGP), and

the Emergency Operations Center (EOC) Grant Program can be used to enhance existing or establish new alert and warning programs.

Presently, FEMA **does not** provide grants to private entities and/or businesses. Private entities and businesses are encouraged to coordinate their requests with their Statewide Interoperable Coordinator (SWIC), the statewide interoperability governing body (SIGB), and/or the appropriate stakeholders at the State, territory, tribal, and local levels of government. Interested parties are also encouraged to review posted entries at http://grants.gov for additional possible funding opportunities.

Please contact the IPAWS PMO at ipaws@dhs.gov prior to initiating alert and warning program activities if you have any questions.

When will IPAWS be available?

IPAWS version 2.0 is available with the capability of sending alerts between COGs as well as sending Non-Weather Emergency Messages (NWEM). IPAWS version 3.0 is expected to be available to users in fall 2011, providing access to the Emergency Alert System and CMAS/PLAN once cell providers provide operability in their area.

When will CMAS/PLAN be available?

FCC's rules require participating wireless carriers to begin deploying PLAN technology by April 7, 2012. Some participants, however, have committed to offer CMAS/PLAN ahead of schedule (i.e. by the end of 2011). These carriers include AT&T, Sprint, T-Mobile and Verizon.

Is IPAWS Secure?

IPAWS messages include a digital signature built into the system that guarantees the integrity of messages. Messages cannot be tampered with after they are sent. IPAWS has established rules of behavior that offer added security guidance for message originators.

Is IPAWS Reliable?

The IPAWS-OPEN system is built for maximum reliability including a significant increase in bandwidth over the old system, with active back up in regionally separated DHS IT facilities.

How do I sign up to participate in IPAWS?

Step One - Obtain software from a vendor that has an MOA with FEMA for the purpose of testing.

Step Two – Complete the MOA application process with IPAWS to establish a COG. See http://www.fema.gov/emergency/ipaws/aggregator.shtm#3 for eligibility and instructions.

Step Three – Once the COG process is completed and you have received a digital certificate, coordinate with your vendor or system administrator to configure your software to work with IPAWS.

Additional requirements for access to IPAWS-OPEN 3.0 for public alerting authorities are in development and will include a training component.