

# TIP 44: Best Practices for Alerting Authorities Using Wireless Emergency Alerts for Public Alert, Warning & Notification

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## I. Roles of FEMA and Alerting Authorities

- A. The Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) is a FEMA communications system made accessible to federal, state, local, tribal and territorial (FSLTT) officials for warning the public of an imminent threat and/or public safety incident and providing information on corresponding protective actions.
- B. FEMA's position on public alert, warning and notification (AWN) is that emergencies are local, and therefore it is the responsibility and discretion of elected local officials, or their designees, to provide timely notification to their jurisdiction(s). The decision to issue a Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) to the public is a matter of local emergency official communication plans, policies and procedures.
- C. FEMA does not provide nor place limitations or restrictions on criteria for authorized Alerting Authorities (AAs) to issue a WEA to the public.
- D. FEMA does not monitor, review, modify, approve or disapprove the message text content of WEAs drafted and disseminated by AAs<sup>1</sup>. Alert content, time of transmission, utilized event code, targeted area, duration, and the decision to update or cancel an AWN is the sole responsibility of an AA.

## II. Compose Effective WEA Messages

- A. Effective WEA messages include sufficient information for the public to validate the incident and risk to guide and urge the public to take appropriate protective action.
- B. Effective WEA messages include and clearly communicate: the trusted source sender; description of event; location of incident; protective action to be taken; guidance/expiration time or duration of the incident; and a URL or phone number to direct people to more information.
- C. Many mobile phones in use today support WEA messages of up to 360 characters. FEMA encourages AAs to use the longer message space to provide more complete information, and to include a web address if more detailed and/or visual information will assist the public to take appropriate action. A basic 90-character

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<sup>1</sup> Reference your Memorandum of Agreement with FEMA IPAWS, Appendix C, IPAWS-OPEN Rules of Behavior



message requirement, in addition to the optional 360-character message, is in place for the foreseeable future as wireless carriers complete modernization of their networks.

D. WEA supports English and Spanish languages. FEMA recommends including a Spanish language version of your WEA for a broader reach.

### III. Establish Protocol to Assist Decision-Makers

A. Proper protocol must be established and should be documented to assist decision-makers in determining whether to send a WEA. This includes reviewing criteria applicable to local threats and hazards in accordance with local emergency plans, policies and procedures:

1. Does a situation require the public to take immediate action to avoid or mitigate damage to life and property?
2. Is there a high degree of probability a situation will occur, and you need to warn the public quickly?
3. Is there a missing and endangered person that the public should be aware of?
4. Does the public need to be notified of a public safety situation such as 911 outage, boil water advisory, or ongoing response or recovery resources?
5. Does the event demand immediate notification, regardless of time of day, or can it wait?
6. Will the distinctive audible tones that accompany a WEA disturb recipients or disrupt activities unnecessarily? Mobile phone behavior and the sound accompanying a WEA is intentionally disruptive to call attention to an urgent situation and may alarm an individual and the public.
7. Approximately half of mobile phones do not yet support WEA location based “enhanced geo-targeting”. It is likely that many mobile phones that are 20+ miles away from a targeted alert area will receive a WEA intended for the public inside the alert target area.

B. FEMA advises Alerting Authorities and Alerting Administrators to develop and implement robust policies and procedures, coupled with routine training and exercise(s), using the FEMA IPAWS Technical Support Services training and demonstration environment<sup>2</sup>.

1. The IPAWS Office within FEMA’s National Continuity Programs provides guidance on the effective use of IPAWS services. Upon request, the IPAWS Office can review Alerting Authorities’ plans and may recommend ways to eliminate gaps and improve internal safeguards.

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<sup>2</sup> Reference Emergency Management Institute Independent Study Course 251-A: Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) for Alerting Administrators

2. When issuing a WEA, AAs must review pertinent message fields before transmission. Rushed alerts with poor wording can be ineffective and further complicate an incident. To avoid errors, pre-script messages with as much information as possible before an event.
3. The Alerting Authority should establish security procedures to prevent inadvertent or unauthorized alert transmission. All Alerting Authorities should have a plan to follow-up and correct any alert sent in error.

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*The Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) is FEMA's national system for local alerting that provides critical safety information through mobile phones using Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA), to radio and TV via the Emergency Alert System (EAS), NOAA Weather Radio via Non-Weather Emergency Messages (NWEM), and on digital media via the IPAWS All-Hazards Information Feed.*