

Faulty evacuation alerts raise own alarm

Losing public's trust could be catastrophic, ex-controller warns.



FIREFIGHTERS battle a blaze Wednesday at an apartment complex in Altadena. False evacuation alerts have added to confusion and stress for county residents. (Gina Ferazzi Los Angeles Times)

BY JENNY JARVIE GRACE TOOHEY AND TERRY CASTLEMAN

County officials apologized Friday after residents across the Los Angeles area continued to receive erroneous emergency alerts that urged them to prepare to evacuate, even though many were not close to any of the fires sweeping across the foothills of the sprawling metropolis.

Residents were awoken in the middle of the night Friday by the now-familiar buzz and chime: “An EVACUATION WARNING has been issued in your area.” Panic ensued as many were left to make a quick decision — was it time to grab their bags and leave?

For some who lived as far as 20 miles from any active fire, the alert was clearly wrong. But to residents closer to active evacuation zones — many of whom were already on edge after fires have damaged or destroyed more than 12,000 structures — the alerts stoked confusion and panic.

“I can’t express enough how sorry I am for this experience,” Kevin McGowan, the director of the Los Angeles County Office of Emergency Management, said at a Friday morning news conference.

McGowan said his top priority is understanding the cause of the faulty wireless emergency alerts — and fixing the problem.

The mistake reveals the technical and administrative challenges of issuing emergency alerts as multiple fires break out across a metropolitan area as vast as Los Angeles. Over the years, Los Angeles city officials have been criticized for not issuing alerts at all. Now, county emergency officials, who preside over an area of more than 10 million residents, face backlash for issuing too many.

“Trust in government is paramount” in the middle of a disaster, said Ron Galperin, former controller of the city of Los Angeles who produced 2018 and 2022 reports on the city’s emergency alerts. “If you don’t do it right, the implications are potentially catastrophic.”

At the news conference, McGowan said the Los Angeles County emergency management team had not initiated any new wireless alerts since Thursday afternoon, when they issued back-to-back messages: First came an evacuation warning alert intended for residents near the Kenneth fire, which instead reached thousands more.

Not long after, the team sent a follow-up message that urged people to disregard the previous message. He said the first evacuation warning continues to erroneously resend, seemingly randomly. It’s unclear why.

“Right now, our No. 1 priority is to establish how we can work, in coordination with our federal and state partners, how we can stop the messages that are going out right now that are not being initiated by human action,” McGowan said.

In the meantime, he urged residents who might get an alert to verify if they’re in an evacuation order or warning zone on alertla.org, lacounty.gov/emergency, or they can dial 211.

L.A. County Supervisor Kathryn Barger, who also spoke at the news conference, called that request “absolutely absurd.”

Barger said she told McGowan that she did not want residents to have to check a website after receiving an official evacuations alert. “I’m not going to tell people, ‘If you get the

alert, go on and check.’ ”

Barger, however, offered no other solution.

“The answers we’re getting are not satisfying,” she said. “I’m not making any excuses. It’s unacceptable, and it is frustrating because we are asking people to trust us, to believe us when we say evacuate. ... We’re drilling down [on this] right now.”

Supervisor Janice Hahn called for the emergency alert system to be disabled until the county can figure out a solution.

“Now, more than ever, we need to know that we can depend on our public information systems to keep people safe,” Hahn said in a statement. “That hasn’t been the case last night and this morning, and I’m frustrated, too. ... Anything less than a fully operational, dependable alert system, is unacceptable.”

Joining a White House news briefing remotely from California on Friday, Federal Emergency Management Agency Administrator Deanne Criswell said that the alerts were part of a wireless emergency alert platform that FEMA offers to state and local governments.

“We are providing technical assistance to them to make sure we can help them understand what happened and ensure that it doesn’t happen again,” Criswell said. “We have to be able to send out accurate information, so we can give people the right information and they know to believe it.”

At a time when misinformation is rife and public trust in government is low, many residents are ignoring official alerts and [turning to the Watch Duty app for up-to-date information](#).

McGowan urged residents not to disable the alerts as technical teams from the county and FEMA work to address the issue.

“These alert tools have saved lives during this emergency,” he said.

As city and county officials apologized for the erroneous wireless alerts Friday morning at a news conference, at least three such alerts sounded off from phones in the room at different times.

They were ignored.

The first mass alert went out about 4 p.m. Thursday afternoon. After that blast, the city Emergency Management Department said the alert was sent “in ERROR.” “Evacuation orders have not changed,” the [department said in a post on X](#).

Residents across the metropolitan area — from Long Beach to Echo Park and beyond — received the alert, which did not appear to discriminate by distance from any particular fire.

In the media room at the city of Los Angeles Emergency Operations Center downtown, phones of elected officials, staffers and a few reporters screeched in unison.

With her back to a giant glass wall separating the media area from the floor of the operations center, newly sworn-in Rep. Luz Rivas — who had been deep in conversation with fellow new Rep. George Whitesides — exclaimed that she'd received the alert to her 818 number.

Staffers speculated whether the alert was related to a nascent blaze near West Hills, the Kenneth fire, until a reporter with a 310 area code number said she'd also received the alert.

The alerts linked to alertla.org, a site that had crashed shortly after the alert went out.

A second alert went out around 4:20 p.m. saying that the evacuation warning was sent in error and was meant to apply only to the Kenneth fire.

Early Friday morning, people got alerts from places far from any fires, including Whittier and Torrance. A mother and daughter in the same home reported that one received the alert and the other did not.

One alert blast came shortly before 4 a.m., almost exactly 12 hours after the original erroneous alert, leading to speculation about a technical glitch.

Ken Dang got that alert in downtown Los Angeles.

“Sending multiple false evacuation warnings to millions of people, especially in the middle of the night, adds mass panic in the midst of a crisis,” he wrote to The Times.

Los Angeles officials are not the first to struggle with emergency alerts.

An infamous [missile alert caused havoc in Hawaii](#) in early 2018 and was not corrected for nearly 40 minutes as residents took cover.

That same year, when the worst fire in California history swept through the town of Paradise, emergency [officials used an old alert system](#) that reached a small fraction of residents rather than the federal government's Wireless Emergency Alert system, which would have reached far more people.

Five years later, when fire ravaged the Hawaiian coastal town of Lahaina, [Maui's emergency managers sent cellphone alerts to residents too late](#), after cellphone networks had already shut down.

Maui's top emergency management official at the time, Herman Andaya, was also criticized for his failure to use outdoor air sirens to alert the public.

Andaya defended that decision, arguing that residents associated the sirens with tsunami warnings and would likely have headed uphill, toward the fire.

In Los Angeles, part of the problem in administering emergency advice, Galperin said, is that the region and its bureaucracy are made up of not just one city and county, but a

patchwork of cities, many of which have their own platforms for sending out notices.

“People don’t think, ‘Oh, I’m now leaving city X and driving into city Y.’ These kind of distinctions are somewhat meaningless when you’re talking about a fire which does not recognize city lines and boundaries.”

Logistical problems abound as residents move from different parts of the city without parameters being changed on phones, Galperin said. For example, he said, a woman he hosted in his home Friday morning received a county alert that said, “Evacuate from your area.”

“The problem is it didn’t say which area,” Galperin said of the county alert. “It was really quite unclear, and it’s really hard to find the best and the most updated maps and status for many people. It’s very frustrating, and it’s life-threatening, quite frankly.”

The problem with faulty alerts and unclear information, Galperin said, is many people who get false alarms silence those notices, or ignore the next one.

In 2018, Galperin, produced a [2018 report](#) on the city’s mass notification system that [criticized city officials for insufficient and inconsistent use of emergency alerts](#).

When the 2017 La Tuna fire broke out in the Verdugo Mountains, hundreds of notifications, tweets and statements were issued by the Los Angeles Fire Department, the report noted, but none was sent via NotifyLA, which reaches a larger audience of Angelenos. A few months later, during the Creek fire in Sylmar, the city did not send out a Wireless Emergency Alert to notify residents of an initial evacuation order.

“NotifyLA has been used inconsistently in communicating emergency information to the public,” Galperin wrote in 2018.

He recommended NotifyLA should disseminate alerts for any large-scale emergency and the city should err “on the side of more information to ensure the widest possible audience during potentially dangerous situations.”

Asked whether he had changed his mind now that residents complained they were getting too many alerts, Galperin said there was no “absolutely correct” way to send out notifications.

“A lot of it requires human judgment of how broad an area do you want to designate as the area for evacuation, or areas where you should consider having your things together ... for evacuation,” Galperin said.

“It’s unrealistic to expect perfection, but it is realistic to want accuracy and to not have things sent out in error.”

Going forward, Galperin said, city, county and federal emergency management should work to be on the same page. He urged government officials to also take advantage of new emergency apps, such as Watch Duty and Fire Source, that are presenting information clearly.

“People are going to these apps, not necessarily because they don’t trust government, but because the apps, in many cases, present the information in a way that is more user-friendly,” he said. “How can we coordinate with them as well?”

Times staff writers Julia Wick, Summer Lin, Richard Winton and Faith Pinho contributed to this report.