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ARE YOUR EMERGENCY MESSAGES REACHING THE RIGHT PEOPLE?

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Here are the pros and cons of some of the more popular mass notification solutions available today, as well as suggestions on how to make your emergency alert program more effective.

When an emergency happens, campus officials must be able to quickly disseminate critical information so their community members can take appropriate actions to protect themselves and the individuals in their care. How a person responds can vary, depending on their situation and location. They might need to shelter in place, lock down, evacuate or some other action.

However, before anyone can respond to an alert, they must first be able to see, hear or read the announcement. Unfortunately, no one type of technology can reach everyone in a campus community.

SMS text messaging systems are an excellent way to reach a large number of community members, but these systems generally require a person to register in order to receive notifications. What about people who aren't registered, such as visitors? What about students in class who have turned off their phones to take a test? What about those who don't have a mobile phone? How will campus administrators be able to reach these individuals?

Loudspeakers and other types of audible announcements are another effective way of disseminating emergency messages, especially to visitors or others on campus who are not registered for your organization's SMS text alert system. But what about the individuals on your campus who are hearing-impaired or wearing headphones and can't hear the emergency announcement?

Digital displays and pop-up computer messages are another excellent option, especially for campuses that have a lot of visitors or individuals who are hard of hearing, or if the loudspeakers aren't powerful enough for audible announcements to be heard in a loud environment such as a school hallway filled with students. But what about individuals who are sight-impaired? How can campus officials reach them during a crisis?

A Multi-Modal Approach Reaches the Most People

Because no one technology can reach everyone during an emergency, an organization should adopt a system that delivers alerts in multiple ways, including via SMS alerts, emails, push notifications, RSS feeds, computer screen takeovers, CAP alerts, loudspeaker announcements, digital signage messages and social media posts. This approach allows the strengths of each system to compensate for the weaknesses of others.

So, for example, a visitor who is not signed up to receive campus SMS text alerts from your organization can be reached via digital signage, computer screen pop-ups and loudspeaker announcements.

For a person who is unable to hear an audible announcement, they will be able to see the emergency notifications sent to them via SMS text and on their laptops, as well as digital signage postings.

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Can You Communicate in Other Languages?

America is a diverse nation, and this is particularly true of college campuses, which often enroll many international students. U.S. hospitals also frequently have a high number of patients and visitors from around the world. Additionally, depending on a campus location, K-12 school districts might frequently interact with students and their parents who have recently immigrated to the U.S.

Some of these individuals might struggle to understand emergency notifications that are only conveyed in English, especially when they are under the stress of a security or safety incident. How can a campus ensure its alerts are understood by persons who might not fully comprehend information and instructions that are not delivered in their native tongue?

Fortunately, some mass notification solutions can address this language disconnect. For example, 911Cellular has a multilingual support feature that automatically translates a message to the preferred language of community members.

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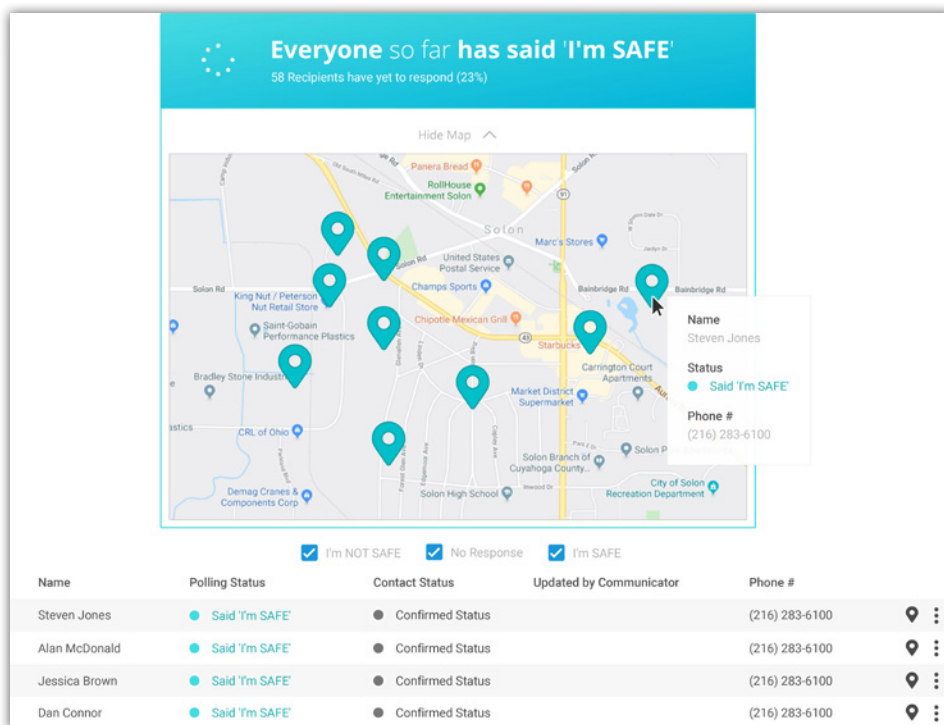
The "I'm Safe" feature from 911Cellular provides crucial information to first responders and campus administrators regarding the safety status and location of community members when a critical event occurs.

Does Your System Allow for Two-Way Communications?

Today's multi-modal solutions have also gone beyond just the ability to send out emergency notifications.

911Cellular offers a feedback board for community members so they can provide vital information to campus officials and first responders after a mass alert has been sent. This information can be extremely helpful to law enforcement, fire and EMS who are responding to an incident.

For example, during an active shooter attack, members of the campus community can report if they see another shooter or if the suspect has left their area.

911Cellular also offers an "I'm Safe" feature, which asks emergency notification recipients if they are safe and receives the recipients' live location and status information.

Consider These Other Promising Practices

Adopting a multi-modal emergency notification solution is an important step to ensuring your campus is conveying potentially life-saving information to as many people as possible during a crisis. For institutions of higher education, multi-modal alerts can also help to ensure Clery Act compliance.

There are many other practices that can help your organization develop an effective overall mass notification program. The following recommendations should be considered as a whole when adopting new or upgraded equipment, revising emergency notification plans and updating policies and procedures.

> Conduct a risk analysis for your overall emergency plan.
> Involve your campus IT department.
> Share resources and work with other stakeholders, including neighbors, county and city officials, religious organizations, local businesses, etc.
> Conduct site assessments for each technology deployed.
> Make sure your vendor's system is not too cumbersome or complicated to navigate.
> Long before any incident occurs, determine who has the authority to issue alerts.
> Messages should originate from a trusted campus authority.
> Determine ahead of time the situations when you will activate your emergency notification system.
> Create clear, concise audible and written messages by working with campus public relations.
> Use and test the system often but not too often.
> Create groups of first responders and decision makers who can receive messages more frequently.
> Automate your SMS text alert database.
> Incorporate adequate cybersecurity measures to protect your SMS alert database.
> Avoid spam filters by white listing (Note: most reputable vendors automatically do this).
> Market your mass notification program, and educate the campus community on how the system is used, what to expect and what to do during an emergency.
> Adopt the opt-out approach to text alert enrollment (or make enrollment mandatory).
> Manage the message when the media are involved by having a good crisis communications plan in place.

TODAY'S MULTI-MODAL SOLUTIONS PROVE MORE THAN JUST THE ABILITY TO SEND OUT EMERGENCY NOTIFICATIONS.

- › Work with international student groups so they will receive and understand emergency messages during a crisis.
- › Include visitors and transient public in your emergency notification plans.
- › Choose the delivery methods most appropriate for the situation. Don't use the all-or-nothing approach to issuing alerts.
- › Adopt technologies, policies and procedures that will enable effective communication with the hearing- and sight-impaired.
- › Mark your storm shelters.
- › Make tests realistic and conduct them at busy times.
- › Regularly train staff on how to issue alerts.
- › Adopt a change-management procedure so that everything is documented and everyone knows about system changes/improvements.
- › For campuses that have undergone major construction or renovation, verify your existing mass notification systems (sirens, loudspeakers, SMS text alert systems, etc.) still provide appropriate coverage.
- › Determine how your campus will communicate with parents and other family members, as well as neighbors, during and after an emergency.

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For more information, visit 911cellular.com.