

By Jonathan Kozlowski

SEVEN-LAYER SAFETY

Emergency notification systems and the confusion surrounding them



Since April 16, a handful of people have come forth in the news to express their objections toward Virginia Tech's information management that infamous morning. Nationwide, students, parents, university officials and law enforcement reopened their eyes to the emergency notification system and the policy's and technologies involved.

These systems transmit a message to an audience through an integrated component. Deciding on what technology, what audience, what to say in the message and when to say it are only a slice of what universities and law enforcement agencies are being confronted with — with no concise, clear or

audible answer available.

As everything can have positives and negatives, choosing which emergency notification system can be a daunting task when nothing can stand out as a "silver bullet" for public safety.

"One of the things we, and a lot of other campuses across the country, are realizing is that our systems are probably inadequate," says Assistant Chief Dale Burke of the University of Wisconsin — Madison Police Department. "No matter what we do, there is nothing that's going to reach everybody all the time. But the wider range of options or tools an agency has, the more people that agency will be able to reach."

Acts of notification

Recently, U.S. Senator Dick Durbin (D-Illinois) introduced the Campus Law Enforcement Emergency Response Act. In this effort, the act "will ensure that all colleges and universities develop emergency response procedures and campus notification systems, and test them on at least an annual basis." The legislation requires colleges develop and distribute policies for responding to law enforcement emergencies, report on statistics concerning the occurrence of such emergencies, test response procedures at least annually, and provide notification no later than 30 minutes after the discovery of a law enforcement emergency situation.

SPECIAL SECTION: *Active Shooter Response*

But this is not the first time campus or public notification has appeared on the campus-safety radar screen.

In July 2006, the Warning, Alert and Response Network (WARN) Act was introduced to "establish a voluntary National Alert System to provide a public communications system capable of alerting the public on a national, regional or local basis to emergency situations requiring a public response." The WARN Act discussed a National Alert System's functions, capability and public reception.

Under the WARN Act, a National Alert System's functions and capabilities are to transmit alerts across a variety of commu-

nications technologies to reach the largest portion of the affected population and to incorporate multiple communication technologies and adapt to future technologies.

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*— Editor in Chief Geoff Kohl,
SecurityInfoWatch.com*

Additionally, the WARN Act defines an allowable alert: to notify the public of a hazardous situation that poses an imminent threat to public health or safety; to provide appropriate instructions for actions to be taken by individuals

affected or potentially affected by such a situation; to transmit public addresses by federal, state, tribal or local officials when necessary; and to notify the public when the hazardous situation has ended or is brought under control.

The Jeanne Clery Disclosure of Campus Security Policy and Campus Crime Statistics Act, also known as the Campus Security Act, "requires colleges and universities across the United States to disclose information about crime on and around their campuses." Named in memory of a rape and murder victim in 1986, this act calls for an annual report of crime statistics and security policy statements. Reported crimes are to

be organized into seven major categories: criminal homicide — murder, nonnegligent manslaughter and negligent manslaughter; sex offenses — forcible sex offenses and nonforcible sex offenses; robbery; aggravated assault; burglary; motor vehicle theft; and arson.

Alerts or “timely warnings” are only required to be “triggered when the school considers a crime to pose an ongoing threat to students and employees.” These alerts, as described in the Jeanne Clery Act, are limited to its seven crime categories.

“Under the Clery Act, colleges and universities must make timely notices,” comments Tom Turner, director of campus safety at Roanoke College in Salem, Virginia. “But the federal government doesn’t define what timely is. We need to look at what is the public perception of ‘timely notice’ using the technologies available today.”

In reference to a timely response, “What happens if there is not much information to say?” asks Burke. “Would it be best to spend those first minutes trying to stop the threat or trying to figure out what our message will be?”

A layered approach

The technology of an emergency notification system can consist of a single service or an array of technologies to reach the largest population possible. The ideal system would be able to connect to everyone concerned, wherever they are, at the same time. The target audience would then have the



An emergency notification message can be received through many every-day public and law enforcement technologies such as a handheld device (above), posted monitors or signs (right), or through the law enforcement patrol vehicle computer system (below).

necessary information for law enforcement to accurately and effectively respond to the event — an active shooter situation, a substantial vehicle accident, inclement weather, etc. — and keep the public safe.

Both Burke and Turner agree, a system is never going to get 100-percent notification. “It would be lucky to get 80 to 85 percent of a campus community notified,” says Turner.

As technology advances, the medium of an emergency notification message evolves as well. The technology broadens the emergency notification system to many characteristics such as, but not limited to, e-mail, computer pop-up alerts, mobile (cell phone, PDA, etc.) text message, digital signs, indoor/outdoor speaker voice message, telephone voice message and sirens.

If each type of technology was considered a layer, one layer cannot reach everybody in a timely manner. Layering the technology together can broaden the message’s reach to the public and inform more people of the what, where and what next.



An e-mail-based system sends out a broadcast to every intended e-mail address. “It sends everyone on campus an e-mail, and within a minute, it will come up on their screen,” says Turner. “But if a portion of the campus isn’t in front of their computer, or doesn’t have e-mail forwarded to their mobile, they aren’t going to get it.”

People check their e-mail at different rates. People may check only once a day, once a week or often enough it seems they may live at their desk. “Some people are going to be able to see their e-mail, some their cell phone, some can be contacted through their office phone with a telephone

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auto-dialer and some could be in audible distance of a loud speaker," comments Geoff Kohl, editor-in-chief of SecurityInfoWatch.com, a Web-portal and news provider for the security industry and its security directors and security installers across the country. "Unfortunately, there is no one silver bullet technology to fulfill every possible factor."

Syracuse University in Syracuse, New York, is looking at combining a low-tech technology with a high-tech system. "A low-tech siren system could alert people to go to a more high-tech e-mail or text system for the emergency message," says Anthony Callisto, chief of public safety at Syracuse University.

Aside from the near-standard e-mail, popular text messaging and common siren technologies, other emergency notification system components can include:

- A computer pop-up alert;
- A digital sign;
- An indoor/outdoor loudspeaker voice message; and
- A telephone voice message.

"The key is to get the message out there," adds Kohl.

Choosing an intersection of layers

Considering the toolbox of options and the constant question of "what tool works best," every institution's solution could be as different as its own architecture.

"You want to have a system where you can tailor your audience to the situation," suggests Burke. "Whether it's geographic or audience selective, the advantage comes from the ability to hone in on the target audience."

He advises managers to ask, "Is it reaching the intended audience? Is it cost effective? What is the time involved to create a response? What kind of technical support is involved? What percentage of people are taking advantage of the system? And, of course, what is the cost?"

Choosing the seemingly "best tool" isn't enough. The target audience of an institution's emergency notification system, or its combination of technologies, should be informed and educated on what the system does, how the system does it, when a message will be sent and what the message may say.

Turner adds, "The public perception of how we notify people in an emergency and what precautions to take is going to be driven by the technology and public perception." ■

Editor's note: Additional information on the Campus Law Enforcement Emergency Response Act can be found at durbin.senate.gov. Further information on the WARN Act can be found at thomas.loc.gov. More information on the Jeanne Clery Act can be found at www.securityoncampus.org.

Emergency notification opportunities

The Campus Law Enforcement Emergency Response Act authorizes the Department of Education to administer a competitive grant program for the development and improvement of response and procedures. Many companies have developed unique solutions for agencies, universities and colleges. The technologies offered can be broken into seven categories: e-mail; mobile text messaging; sirens; computer pop-ups; digital signs; loud-speakers; and telephone voice messages. The following sample-list of companies each offers a different solution to the emergency notification system:

3n	.....	www.3nonline.com
Alterus Emergency Warning System	.....	www.alertustech.com
AtHoc	.....	www.athoc.com
AutoComm	.....	www.autocomm-inc.com
Citizenobserver	.....	www.citizenobserver.com
Code Blue Corp.	.....	www.codeblue.com
ColdLight Solutions	.....	www.coldlightsolutions.com
Dialogic Communications Corp.	.....	www.dccusa.com
E2campus	.....	www.e2campus.com
Emergency Communications Network	.....	www.coderedweb.com
First Call	.....	www.firstcall.net
Interactive Mediums	.....	www.interactivemediums.com
MadahCom	.....	www.madah.com
MIR3	.....	www.mir3.com
Mobile Campus	.....	www.mobilecampus.com
Netpresenter	.....	www.netpresenter.com
Rave Wireless	.....	www.ravewireless.com
Ready Alert	.....	www.readyalert.com
Roam Secure	.....	www.roamsecure.net
Skinkers	.....	www.skinkers.com
Voice Technologies	.....	www.voicetech.com
Whelen Engineering	.....	www.whelen.com
Zylaya	.....	www.zylaya.com