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## LESSON LEARNED

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### **Social Media in Emergency Management: Using Conferences as Safe Exercise Opportunities**

#### **SUMMARY**

During the weekend of Friday, March 1 through Sunday, March 3, 2013 California Volunteers, Anaheim CERT and a team of Virtual Operation Support Team (VOST) volunteers helped to conduct a social media exercise during the California State CERT Conference. There were 129 distinct twitter handles in use during the conference on the #CalCERT hashtag for twitter, which represents approximately 32% of the attendees. The conference exercise produced the following social media activity: 954 posts, 131,475 reach and 822,917 timeline deliveries. The importance of creating safe exercise opportunities in a live social media environment was the key lesson learned. Repeated exercises in the future should structure tasks based on behavioral measures and provide a team orientation and briefing prior to delving into the online exercise environment.

#### **DESCRIPTION**

During the CERT Exercise, participants were encouraged to Live Tweet and utilize social media during the conference. A scavenger hunt game was established to encourage the use of a variety of platforms including: Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and Pinterest. The primary objective of this game was to simulate data that volunteers might be able to produce from the field during a disaster and simulate communicating with family and friends to confirm their safety and well-being. Game information was posted on a blog to encourage conference participants to engage with social media during the event.



This exercise was highly rated for providing an opportunity for Virtual Operations Support Teams (VOST) members to refresh their skills. As designed, the game rules were quite complex and provided some challenges for the VOST members who had to review data manually. However, the VOST team was able to respond dynamically to changes. Participants were successful in using social media to communicate their experience during the conference.

#### **Major Strengths**

- VOST team members described the exercise as a positive means of practicing and familiarizing themselves with social media monitoring tools.

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- The exercise created an online community of CERT volunteers and coordinators who continue to dialogue utilizing the CalCERT Facebook Group and #CalCERT hashtag
- The exercise, with recommended changes, may be easily replicated in other communities to allow VOST teams to practice and to engage more communities with social media.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

For a first attempt at a social media exercise at a State level during a conference this exercise was a great success. VOST team members were able to improve their personal skill set in monitoring techniques and their understanding of the team organization during a social media deployment. Exercise participants were exposed to opportunities to use social media not only to connect during the conference but to continue sharing knowledge and resources after the conference ended. Furthermore, it encouraged participants to consider the disaster communication opportunities and means of gathering situation status information as a tool to help their CERT teams as well as provide event information through their chain of command and local officials.

### Primary Areas for Improvement

Throughout the exercise, several opportunities for improvement in VOST's ability to respond to the incident were identified. The primary areas for improvement, including recommendations, are as follows:

- The structure of future exercises should focus on behavioral measures.
- Simplify the game rules to make completing and evaluating the tasks much easier. Ensure that the scoring of the game rules conform to existing methods of tracking social media data.
- Provide an orientation to off-site or virtual team members regarding the layout or geography of the area they are working.

## REFERENCES

California Volunteer CERT Conference Social Media Exercise After Action Report  
<https://www.llis.dhs.gov/content/california-volunteer-cert-conference-social-media-exercise-after-action-report>

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