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LESSON LEARNED

Emergency Public Information: Including Web Site Links in Short Message System and Twitter Messages

SUMMARY

Public information officers (PIOs) should include direct links to Web sites in emergency alert messages disseminated via Short Message System (SMS), Twitter, and other communications tools that limit the number of characters. This can help ensure that recipients of these alert messages can quickly access additional official information about the emergency.

DESCRIPTION

In December 2010 and January 2011, the state of Queensland, Australia, experienced record rainfall, which caused massive flooding throughout the region. Flood inundation caused damage to approximately 29,000 homes and businesses. In addition, flooding forced the evacuation of thousands of people from several towns and cities across the state. In total, the floods caused 35 casualties, while three individuals remained missing as of August 1, 2011. The Australian Government declared a disaster zone of more than 500,000 square miles, affecting more than 2.5 million people. Flood response operations included national, state, district, and local personnel. Further, the Australian Defense Force deployed 1,900 military personnel to assist with response and recovery operations. The Queensland Reconstruction Authority estimates that flooding resulted in more than 5 billion Australian dollars in damage.

> The state of Queensland is part of the Commonwealth of Australia. Queensland is Australia's second largest state with an area of approximately 666,000 square miles and a population of 4.5 million people. The capital, Brisbane, is located in the southeastern corner of the state.

> SMS is commonly referred to as text messaging. This service allows users to send short text messages from one cell phone to another or from an Internet Web site to a cell phone. Text messages usually cannot exceed 160 characters, including spaces.

On January 11, 2011, Queensland's Department of Emergency Services (DES) issued an SMS evacuation alert to Moreton Bay, Queensland, residents that stated, "Immediate Flash Flood Warning for Caboolture, Burpengary Area. Very high water levels in Rivers and Creeks. Seek higher ground NOW." SMS limits on the number of characters prevented DES from including specific evacuation information in the message. This lack of information frightened Moreton Bay residents, who then contacted the local radio and police stations to obtain additional information.

Flooding on January 10, 2011

However, these entities were not prepared for the volume of calls and could not provide shelter information to the concerned residents because DES had not informed local authorities that it was sending the SMS alert.

To address the volume of calls, the local government drafted an SMS response that was intended to provide additional evacuation information to concerned citizens. However, delays in the approval process prevented the message from being sent in time to affect evacuation operations. As a result, some people panicked, forcing local response agencies to establish ad hoc shelters to house them. The Queensland, Australia, Floods Commission of Inquiry Interim Report states, "SMS alerts containing insufficient information are of little use and can be positively harmful." The report concludes that SMS alerts should direct recipients to Web sites listing detailed information about locations of floods, evacuation centers, and routes.

Map of Queensland

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CITATIONS
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