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PRACTICE NOTE

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Public Information: Oklahoma's Weather Alert Remote Notification System for Citizens who are Deaf or Hard-of-Hearing

PRACTICE

Oklahoma Weather Alert Remote Notification (OK-WARN) provides free National Weather Service (NWS) emergency and disaster alerts for Oklahoma residents who are deaf or hard-of-hearing through email, pager, or text messages.

DESCRIPTION

On May 3, 1999, Oklahoma experienced its largest tornado outbreak on record. The tornadoes killed 40 Oklahomans, injured 675 more, and caused \$1.2 billion in damages to homes and businesses. The tornado outbreak also revealed the lack of an effective emergency notification system for alerting Oklahoma residents to severe weather conditions. In 2003, two researchers with the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) conducted a survey of individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing to gauge Oklahoma's emergency alert system for these residents. Eighty percent of survey participants responded that they felt unprepared for and afraid of weather emergencies and that Oklahoma's emergency alert system was not sufficiently accessible for individuals who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.



The May 3, 1999, tornadoes produced 318 mph winds, the fastest ever recorded at that time.

The Oklahoma Office of Emergency Management (OEM) realized that it had to create a system that could reach residents who are deaf or hard-of-hearing. Oklahoma OEM received a Federal Emergency Management Agency grant in 2003 to create a more effective emergency alert system. OEM partnered with NOAA NWS, NOAA National Severe Storms Laboratory, Oklahoma Department of Rehabilitation Services, Communication Services for the Deaf of Oklahoma, and Weather Affirmation, LLC to create OK-WARN. This emergency alert system provides Oklahoma citizens who are deaf or hard-of-hearing with NWS emergency alerts.

OK-WARN receives emergency alerts directly from the NWS offices, condenses them, and transmits them to the deaf and hard-of-hearing communities in Oklahoma in accessible formats. Alerts originate from the NWS Forecast Offices serving Oklahoma counties and are transmitted via satellite to the Oklahoma OEM's Paging Alert System (EMPAS). The EMPAS condenses the information and sends it to local paging companies to be distributed to

pager, cell phone, personal digital assistant, email, and text users who are deaf or hard-of-hearing.

Oklahoma residents who are deaf or hard-of-hearing can register for this service online free of charge if they have their own pager, email address, or cell phone and fill out an application form on the Oklahoma OEM Web site. The client chooses what products and messages he or she would like to receive. Clients can receive NWS notifications about:

- Tornado, severe thunderstorm, flash flood, and winter weather watches and warnings;
- Special or significant weather forecasts;
- Non-precipitation advisories;
- Civil emergency messages that include information about terror attacks, Amber Alerts, wildfires, and chemical spills; and
- Other NWS alerts that may not be disseminated by state and local officials.

Oklahoma OEM and its partners also made OK-WARN 100% redundant. The system provides multiple data sources and attempts to deliver the critical message repeatedly so that the recipient will not miss a warning.

Additionally, the system archives every message in a database.

The Department of Homeland Security integrated the OK-WARN model into its Community Emergency Preparedness Information Network (CEPIN) training program, which was offered in 16 cities throughout the country in 2006.

CEPIN is a Department of Homeland Security-funded course that teaches emergency responders about the challenges that the deaf and hard-of-hearing face in an emergency. It also encourages responders to create special accommodations for the hearing-impaired.

CITATIONS

Liebe, Fred. Deputy Director, Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management. Correspondence with *Lessons Learned Information Sharing*, 03 Aug 2007.

Oklahoma Office of Emergency Management. "OK-WARN for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing." ND.

http://www.ok.gov/OEM/Programs_&_Services/Preparedness/OK-Warn_for_the_Deaf_and_Hard-of-Hearing/.

Wood, Vincent T. *OK-WARN: Oklahoma Weather Alert Remote Notification*. NOAA/OAR/National Severe Storms Laboratory. ND.

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