

DHS Science and Technology Directorate

Alerts and Warnings Using Social Media Project

Getting information quickly could mean the difference between life and death

Many emergency response agencies are using social media to issue warnings and alerts quickly. There are potential challenges when using social media, including public response to messages, governance structures, resources and coordination with neighboring communities.

The Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate (S&T) is helping emergency responders understand these challenges and how to best originate and disseminate alerts and warnings to their communities.

Alerting more people, in more places, more ways

In partnership with nationwide practitioners, S&T's Alerts and Warnings Using Social Media (AWSM) project created guidance, which provides analysis, case studies and recommendations on how to improve alert and warning programs using social media, to help agencies alert more people, in more places, in more ways. The guidance addresses five core elements for achieving success: community awareness, governance, partnerships, resources and usage.

Citizens expect to receive critical alerts and warnings on social media platforms and AWSM enables first responders to fulfill those expectations.

Through a four-part program, including research of effective usage, a behavioral study, technology development and a privacy workshop, S&T engaged local and state first responders, public information officers, chief technology officers, university researchers and experts in the field to identify best practices. These best practices were categorized under the topics: usage, community awareness, governance, resources or partnerships.

Staying connected and building trust

To better understand how the public through social media platforms receives these alerts and warnings, S&T partners, including the Centers of Excellence at Rutgers University, Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute and the University of Southern California, conducted research on public response to messages. This behavioral information provided critical insight into how messages need to be crafted and disseminated to ensure public understanding and action.

In February 2012, as part of the fourth and final deliverable of the AWSM project, the National Academy of Sciences (NAS) brought together the S&T stakeholder community of social science researchers, technologists and emergency management professionals, to discuss how officials monitor social media and related privacy considerations. The group also considered what they know about how the public responds to alerts and warnings and the implications of this knowledge.

AWSM's findings provide an important baseline for future research to examine how social media tools and the analytics of messages can be used to enhance citizen and government relationships. Achieving a greater understanding of technology trends and public expectations during emergencies will help emergency responders nationwide keep our nation safe.

AWSM Guidance for Emergency Responses

Usage: Detailing how, why, and when practitioners use social media to disseminate alerts and warnings

Community Awareness: Describing how citizen situational awareness is developed, sustained and changed following an alert or warning via social media

Governance: Developing a common governing structure for integrating social media into alerts and warnings programs

Resources: Coordinating staff with appropriate information technology resources, platforms and tools to meet technical and functional requirements

Partnerships: Detailing coordination with neighboring jurisdictions and relationships with industry officials



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To learn more about the Alerts and Warnings Using Social Media project, please contact SandTFRG@dhs.gov.