



Testimony of Larry Gispert, President
International Association of Emergency Managers
Before the
Subcommittee on Economic Development, Public Buildings and Emergency Management
Committee on Transportation and Infrastructure
U.S. House of Representatives
On
Assuring Public Alert Systems Work to Warn American Citizens
Of Natural and Terrorist Disasters
June 4, 2008

Chairwoman Norton, Ranking Member Graves, and distinguished members of the Subcommittee, thank you for allowing me the opportunity to provide testimony on alert and warning from a local perspective.

I am Larry Gispert, and I serve Hillsborough County on the West Coast of Florida as Director of Emergency Management – a position I have held for 15 of my 28 years in the field. I have the privilege of serving nearly 1.2 million folks who call Hillsborough County and the City of Tampa home. I am currently serving as the President of the International Association of Emergency Managers and have also served as President of the Florida Emergency Preparedness Association.

IAEM has over 4,000 members including emergency management professionals at the state and local government levels, tribal nations, the military, colleges and universities, private business and the nonprofit sector in the United States and in other countries. Most of our members are U.S. city and county emergency managers who perform the crucial function of

coordinating and integrating the efforts at the local level to prepare for, mitigate the effects of, respond to, and recover from all types of disasters including terrorist attacks. Our membership includes emergency managers from large urban areas as well as rural areas.

I want to express my sincerest gratitude to this subcommittee for the strong support you have provided to the emergency management community over the past few years, particularly for the Emergency Management Performance Grant Program – the major source for building “all hazards” state and local emergency management capacity – and reforming the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Warnings are local

Former House Speaker Tip O’Neil is credited with observing that, “all politics is local.” I would like to modify those remarks by saying that like politics, all disasters are local. One of the most basic responsibilities of local governments and their elected officials is to provide for the public safety – and one of the most basic ways of doing this is by providing a mechanism to alert and warn citizens of pending danger. Depending on the time of day and day of the week this can prove to be very difficult.

In Florida, we face the threat of hurricanes every year. Although the path may change by taking an unexpected curve, speeding up or slowing down, at least they don’t sneak up on us. In addition to hurricanes, we also have over 90 severe weather days a year – with events like winds in excess of 60 mph; driving rain and pounding hail; and even the occasional tornado. These events normally occur unannounced and frequently at night.

The February 2, 2007 (Groundhog Day) F3 tornado struck in the early hours of the morning while most in Lake and Volusia Counties were still sleeping. Tragically, the storm killed 20, destroyed 434 homes and inflicted major damage on another 456 homes.

The December 25, 2006 (Christmas Day) F2 tornado which struck Volusia, Lake, Columbia and Pasco Counties did not result in any deaths. However, over 336 homes were damaged or destroyed by the tornado.

On February 22, 1998 seven separate tornados formed and affected Osceola, Orange, Seminole and Volusia Counties, resulting in the deaths of 42. This deadly storm struck in the early morning hours while everyone slept.

These three incidents underline the vulnerability of our community. They reflect a situation in which the danger can happen with little or no prior notice. In these situations of quickly moving danger, local governments (who have the primary responsibility for alert and warning) currently have few options to exercise. Therefore, a quick and reliable method of alerting and warning citizens of danger would greatly increase their chances for survival.

Systems to warn the public of these severe weather conditions are absolutely necessary in order to ensure their safety. Most of Florida's counties do not use sirens for such warnings because they are only intended to warn those who are outdoors. Florida homes are heavily insulated to insure proper air conditioning which also attenuates the sound of sirens. As a consequence, we must depend on other means to warn the citizens. We utilize the Emergency Alert System (EAS) which captures the audio on all television, radio and cable systems that permits us to issue a voice message. We also depend heavily on the NOAA / National Weather Service All Hazards Radio System to issue warnings to those individuals who have purchased such radios. Local governments have purchased and installed these radios for all public schools and public buildings. We have an active and long-standing public education program that promotes the ownership of such radios.

Current warning systems neither easy nor uniform

Depending on the amount of time available, we will send public safety vehicles into select neighborhoods to warn the public by using their public address systems. Many counties have access to a computerized telephone notification system that dials multiple telephone numbers and delivers a pre recorded message. These systems can also deliver messages to digital pagers. It has been our experience that these systems are good for warning a specific neighborhood of an emergency, but they become problematic in community-wide notifications because the phone switching network gets quickly overloaded. We believe as local governments effectively combining and utilizing all these methods of warning, we reach only about 50 per cent of the population. Once again time of day and day of the week will increase or decrease that percentage.

Another problem facing local governments is the ability to warn special populations, e.g. visually impaired, hearing impaired, impaired mental cognitive skills as well as the non-English speaking population. None of the current warning systems makes this type of warning easy and in most cases it is impossible to reach these types of citizens.

There have been proposals of utilizing SMS text messaging over cell phones as a means of warning. This method shares some of the drawbacks of the other systems – SMS messaging is expensive; and can be delayed (like the automated phone dialers) due to similar switching network overloads. Also most text messaging systems require the individual citizen to opt in for the alerts. Once again, local governments can only reach a small percentage of the necessary public for their warnings.

Technology can improve warnings, but it is not the entire answer

This brings us to the proposed Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS). This system purports to be an integrated activation of multiple alerting and warning systems each utilizing the common alerting protocol (CAP). If this is true, then our ability to warn a larger percentage of our vulnerable population will be realized and more lives will be saved. In this day and age we have to do better. Technology is such that we could reach out and touch a larger percentage of our population with the information that could save their lives.

However, systems and technology do not comprise the complete answer to the solution. Coupled with them has to be expansion and greater support of our existing public education programs on what to do when the warning is received. Not only do emergency managers perform multiple test, drills, exercises, and planning meetings throughout the year but for example we in Hillsborough County do over 200 public presentations a year. We speak to civic associations, business groups and homeowner groups in an attempt to convey what the average citizen needs to do when the warning is given. We work closely with the local media to produce video shows and written pamphlets that also convey the message of individual citizen action. Our annual Hurricane Guide is very popular and we distribute over 400,000 copies each year prior to the season.

The most technologically sophisticated warning system possible will fail if the person receiving the warning does not know what action to take to save their lives from the disaster. This life saving information has to be presented and repeated over and over until it is absorbed – and then also repeated at the time of the warning. The messages contained within these programs need to be coordinated through the local emergency manager for maximum effectiveness within the community.

Conclusion

IAEM supports the concept of an improved alert and warning system – if it is designed to support state and local governments in executing their primary responsibility for warning to the public. We do not want to see a system which adds more time to the process of issuing warnings.

IAEM has not had a specific position as to whether there should be a federal level message aggregator or not. However, our position has been that if there is one, it should be FEMA. FEMA is the only federal partner with an “all hazards” mission, and, further, we believe FEMA possesses the clear legislative authority to perform this function under Sections 202 and 611 of the Stafford Act. Therefore we were pleased to see the announcement last Friday that this issue has been resolved.

Other elements necessary to make a system of this nature successful will include the ability to reach a large percentage of the affected population; with a system that is easy to use; and, that is reasonably priced to maintain and operate. Finally, we need to continue and increase our long-standing education programs for citizens so they have the knowledge to do the right thing at the right time when danger is imminent. Once again, thank you for this opportunity to speak on behalf of IAEM.

IAEM Contact Information:

International Association of Emergency Managers, 201 Park Washington Court, Falls Church, VA 22046

President: Larry Gispert (GispertL@HillsboroughCounty.org)

Government Affairs Chair: Bob Bohlmann (rcbohlmann@co.york.me.us)

Policy Advisor: Martha Braddock (MSBraddock@aol.com)