



Guide to Establishing Local Coordination of Emergency Communication Systems

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Executive Summary

In a world at risk to terrorist attacks, tsunamis, chemical spills, floods and more, local media outlets bear enormous responsibility to disseminate information to the public before and during emergencies. To do so successfully, they must work effectively with public safety officials, local governments and with each other. In 2002, the Federal Communications Commission created the Media Security and Reliability Council (MSRC) to make recommendations that, when implemented, will assure the optimal reliability, robustness and security of broadcast and MVPD facilities throughout the United States. After months of analysis and work, council members have produced a recommended local coordination process that will foster one aspect of MSRC's stated objectives. In summary, it is:

Organize

Assemble a group of leaders from media, public safety, government, telecommunications, public utility and other key constituencies who understand the need and urgency for improving the local emergency communications systems, including critical warning capabilities. This core group will set initial goals and then organize a larger committee to analyze and plan for better local communications.

Develop Goals and Objectives

The expanded committee should generate a common vision of where its local emergency communications system needs to be. In some cases, required changes will be incremental, in other cases, dramatic. The ultimate objective is to create a public/private partnership that will effectively deliver emergency information to citizens as quickly as possible to mitigate the impact of major emergencies and disasters. The process should cover multiple subjects, including existing resources and technologies; existing arrangements and roles; proactive and reactive measures; strengths and weaknesses of participants; short-term, low-cost fixes; potential challenges and barriers, and new information delivery technologies.

Develop a Plan

It should detail concrete, workable, consensus guidelines that generate progress and change. Among other things, the plan should assign responsibilities to participants; create organizational relationships; design coordination procedures; identify key personnel, equipment, facilities, training, supplies and other resources; review public needs, including disability and language concerns; include monitoring and testing and overall system requirements, expectations and priorities.

Implement the Plan and Evaluate the Results

The work is not over once a plan is written. Local leaders should establish a timeline for implementing system improvements and to test and evaluate them continuously.

For more information and case studies, visit www.mediasecurity.org.

INTRODUCTION

On September 11, 2001, New York City was in chaos. Residents were panicked and confused by the attacks on the World Trade Center. Public safety officials scrambled to make sense of the disorder, to communicate with government leaders and media outlets and even to talk to each other. Newsrooms across the city could offer the public little more than voice-over commentary on the events unfolding at Ground Zero. “There was no way we could do anything,” one observer said. “We were just waiting to see if we could help.”

On January 6, 2005, Graniteville, S.C. was in chaos. Nine people died and 250 were injured when a Norfolk Southern train hit a parked railcar. It ruptured a chlorine tanker that spread a yellow toxic cloud over the textile town. Some 5,400 residents were evacuated from their homes for at least a week. “‘What in the hell is going on?’ is what I was thinking,” one citizen said later.

On March 23, 2005, Texas City, TX, was in chaos. Explosions rocked a BP oil refinery, killing 14 people and leaving scores more injured. Hundreds of people called 911 to report the blast, more than 90 in the first two minutes. “Can you tell me if we’re safe?” one caller asked. “The plant just blew up!”

The people in these emergencies had many things in common, but one thing above all: They were desperate for guidance from public safety officials, government leaders and the media on what to do, where to go for help, whether they were still in danger. They needed concrete, real-time, usable information. But as experience suggests, they don’t always get it. Further, in cases in which authorities and the media know of circumstances that could lead to emergencies (such as approaching storms or hurricanes), all parties acknowledge the necessity of better coordination in warning and informing the public.

In March 2002, six months after the attacks of September 11, the Federal Communications Commission established the Media Security and Reliability Council, or MSRC. The council is made up of leaders of media companies, emergency response organizations and other entities. The FCC asked the council to make recommendations of best practices that, when implemented, will assure the optimal reliability, robustness and security of broadcast and MVPD facilities throughout the United States. Since September 11, many local authorities have independently taken steps to improve the reliability of their communications systems. But as the media workshops conducted by the Radio and Television News Directors Association suggest, more work needs to be done, both in proactive and reactive systems and procedures. (A report on the workshop findings can be found on the MSRC website, www.mediasecurity.org.) For the protection and safety of our citizens, and to minimize damage and disruption to local economies, MSRC members believe it is essential to establish local public/private partnerships in those communities that don’t have one—and strengthen partnerships in those communities that already do—to prepare for future emergencies, with local media managers and government authorities adopting appropriate policies and best practices for emergency communications.

To address these critical issues, the Council created two working groups. The first one studied

how local leaders, agencies, emergency responders and media could work better together to get information to the public in imminent and actual emergencies. The second one reviewed the issues relating to the ability to maintain communications systems and networks in operation during emergencies.

Background

In a December 2003 report, the MSRC I working groups identified four channels of information flow:

- Government to Public (the need for emergency communications)
- Government to Media (rapid and unambiguous contacts with media)
- Media to Media (media cooperation to deliver emergency messages)
- Media to Public (message reaches as broad an audience as possible)

The working groups organized dialogues among media companies, industry associations, federal and state emergency management officials, citizens' representatives and emergency management experts. The groups established a common understanding and appreciation of the difficult and multifaceted nature of emergency communications with the public, including that:

1. Warnings, reports and alerts originate from a variety of official public and private sources.
2. Most warning systems are hazard specific, to warn about natural disasters, inclement weather and infrastructure emergencies, and were developed by a technical community that has the greatest knowledge of and monitoring for each specific hazard.
3. While information may often flow from federal agencies, the recipients are usually local, whether they are emergency responders, organizations or private individuals.
4. Risk communication and warning is a complex process that is usually focused, organized and implemented on a local level.
5. For the foreseeable future and until new emergency warning technologies are developed and proven, local governments and responders will have to rely on current technology and existing mediums--radio, over-the-air television, cable TV, the Internet, cell phones, sirens, personal communications devices, community infrastructure and word-of-mouth--to relay warnings, emergency information and instructions.

Council members agreed that the best approach to developing effective, robust emergency communications is through local public/private partnerships, with each system organized and tailored to local needs. The council noted that recent federal government actions have embraced and advanced this approach. The council also unanimously agreed that while the media must cooperate and coordinate with government in creating pre-eminent emergency local

communications systems, government agencies are ultimately responsible for risk communication and warning. (A copy of the MSRC report can be found at the MSRC website, www.mediasecurity.org.) The council noted that local leaders need to ensure that public/private partnerships and best practices remain consistent with maintaining healthy and competitive news coverage and operate within the scope of the First Amendment.

This guide offers local broadcasters and their potential partners a suggested approach to creating a local public/private partnership to ensure optimal communications and warning systems and procedures. Supporting materials and case studies will be posted to the MSRC website, at www.mediasecurity.org.

Step 1: Organize

The first step in creating or improving a local emergency communications system is establishing a leadership committee. MSRC believes that given their critical role in information distribution, local broadcasters are best positioned to take charge of this process.

Since 9-11, government officials at all levels have proposed many new warning systems. But most are expensive and some of the technologies, untested. So for the time being, the most effective and least costly means of disseminating emergency information to the widest possible audience is broadcast. Initially, broadcasters should assemble a small group of other media, public safety and local government officials to lead the effort. Leadership committee members should represent core groups that the public relies on for information and safety before, during and after a crisis. In some communities, a core team is already in place and plans for communications systems have been in development for some time, with some steps already executed. Whatever the status, the most important qualification for membership on the leadership team is a strong desire to improve emergency communications. The second step, creating a larger group with more representation across the community, comes later.

Among stakeholders and entities that should be considered for representation in the initial organizing committee are:

1. Local Media
 - Broadcast television (commercial and non commercial)
 - Radio (commercial and non commercial)
 - Cable television
 - Local internet news and information sites
 - Daily and weekly newspapers
 - Other news organizations (wire services, media bureaus, etc.)
 - Local (and state) media associations
 - Direct Broadcast Satellite

2. Telecommunications
 - Telephone
 - Wireless telephone

- Internet service providers
 - HAM radio operators
3. Public Safety
 - Department of Homeland Security
 - FEMA
 - City, county and state public safety
 - City, county and state transportation
 - Emergency management
 - Members of relevant trade groups, such as the National Law Enforcement Telecommunications System
 4. Government and Public Sector
 - Mayor or county executive
 - City council or county commission
 - State legislature
 - Governor's office
 - Federal Communications Commission regional office
 - NOAA/National Weather Service
 - U.S. Postal Service
 - Park service/land management agencies
 - Military installations
 - Native American communities
 - Schools, college and universities
 - Prisons and correctional facilities
 5. Critical Infrastructure
 - Power (electric, nuclear, natural gas)
 - Water
 - Health Care
 6. Public Advocacy
 - Disability groups
 - Religious groups
 - Consumer groups
 7. Other Business
 - Major companies
 - Chamber of Commerce

Some of these stakeholders may appear out of place or unqualified for participating. But expertise in emergency response is widespread and sometimes not apparent to outsiders. For example, because of anthrax incidents in recent years, the U.S. Postal Service has implemented one of the nation's most advanced early detection systems for biological threats. Whatever the selection process, MSRC advises that representatives of the leadership committee include

technical experts, especially from media companies and emergency management agencies. Their experience, observations and counsel could be critical to the committee's initial analysis, organization and goal setting.

In assembling the leadership committee (and later, the larger, working committee), organizers should keep in mind that they should seek members over a wide geographic area. While media markets are defined by A.C. Nielsen and other media ratings organizations as DMAs (Designated Market Areas), a television or radio broadcast signal can extend far beyond the boundaries of a DMA—in the case of television, not only over the air, but also through cable TV transmission. A broadcast signal may reach more communities and local governments than organizers realize when reviewing a DMA.

The principal task of the leadership committee is to draft a set of goals, compile an initial list of problems in the existing local communications system, create a preliminary agenda and address other organizational issues. The work of the leadership committee could take several meetings, over weeks and months.

Once the leadership committee completes its tasks, its next job is to create a larger, full committee of local representatives. Its members will do the hard work of researching the local system, making recommendations for specific steps needed to strengthen it, monitoring the execution of those recommendations and the testing and oversight that will follow. The list of entities above is a starting point for identifying full committee members. MSRC advises that to ensure the viability, diversity and success of the larger group, recruiters should:

- Reach out to people who represent groups from different racial and cultural backgrounds and those with special needs.
- Invite existing Amber advocacy coalitions and/or regional and/or local EAS partnerships.
- Think “outside the box” to identify representatives who could bring a valuable and market specific point of view to the discussion. These groups might include leaders in border control or trucking and international commerce, depending on the community.
- Select people who offer different skills, particularly in writing, organizing and communicating plans among groups and within communities.

The council suggests that it will not be possible to sustain improvements in emergency communications without broad-based ownership and support of the effort. Inclusiveness is not just a goal, but a process requirement. Council members also envision the larger group as a “standing committee” that will remain in existence after it prepares and presents its plan. Ensuring effective emergency communications will require continuous oversight and monitoring—it is not a one-time job.

Note about people with special needs: MSRC wants to emphasize the importance and necessity of including people with special needs in local leadership and in working committees. Some needs are obvious, as with people who are visually impaired and need audio warnings in emergencies. But other needs may not be so obvious. A hearing-impaired person watching a small, hand-held television, for example, may not see closed-captioning text about an approaching storm because manufacturers of televisions with screens smaller

than 13” are not required to install captioning technology. Including protocols in communications systems targeted to people with special needs could be critical to their safety in emergencies.

MSRC also advises that as communications systems expand and improve from market to market on a state or regional basis, representatives from each area should communicate with each other and coordinate programs to determine and share best practices.

Step 2: Develop Goals and Objectives

Goals and objectives of the full committee should be practical and attainable. At the same time, the communications improvement plan it produces should reflect the real needs of the community, incorporating the best thinking of all stakeholder groups. To find the right balance between simplicity and completeness, the committee should gather information from all quarters of the community, openly discuss opportunities, identify barriers and seek consensus while recognizing that not all communications issues can be resolved. Because each media market is different, each plan will be different. There is not a right or wrong set of goals and objectives – only goals and objectives that fit the needs of a particular community. The result should be a common vision for improving emergency communications warning systems. Possible information sources for committee members as they pursue their objectives can be found at www.mediasecurity.org.

Getting Started/Suggested Committee Agenda

Introductions

At the first meeting, identify participants. Members should elect a chairperson and fill other positions. They should also agree to times and dates for regular, future meetings and set timetables and deadlines. They should produce a contact list.

Emergency Communications Goals: An Overview

At the first meeting, the chairperson/facilitator should hand out copies of the “best practices” recommended by MSRC I in its 2003 report. Then he or she should provide a brief overview of the initial goals determined by the original leadership group and their origins and relate them to the meeting and the agenda. Additionally, the facilitator should charge the committee with its responsibilities in the weeks and months ahead, which include:

- Enhancing current systems that work
- Reviewing existing communications and relationships and their strengths and weaknesses.
- Creating a comprehensive inventory of existing technologies and systems
- Identifying short term, inexpensive fixes to the local system
- Agreeing on common needs

- Building accountability to regularly measure and report on progress toward the goals over time
- Setting specific performance benchmarks to mark progress along the way and guide the change process
- Making a common long-term commitment to the goals
- Continuously re-evaluating accomplishments and shortcomings so that strategy can be modified as needed
- Identifying all local stakeholders, especially if they are not represented on the committee

Depending on the size of the committee, the responsibilities might be addressed more efficiently and effectively through a subcommittee structure.

To facilitate discussions, committee members may want to consider some of the following questions:

- What are local, state and government officials expecting from the media?
- What do media entities expect from local, state and federal government officials?
- What common ground can government officials and media entities agree upon? Who manages and creates guidelines for coverage? Who calls whom?
- What should citizens expect from federal, state and local governments and the media?
- What should state, local and federal governments expect from their citizens?
- What unique local circumstances should be considered?
- What do local governments need from their state government? From their federal government?

Review of Goals

Returning to the 2003 MSRC recommendations, participants should discuss the question, “How do these recommendations relate to our needs?”

Setting Priorities

The committee should identify short-term solutions to existing problems that could improve emergency communications quickly. Participants should then decide which of the MSRC emergency public information and communications goals are most important to the community and identify any additional goals that have not been mentioned.

Identify Barriers

Participants should identify barriers and other obstacles that might prevent implementation of the goals. After they identify barriers, they should discuss strategies for overcoming them.

Review of Goals by Subcommittees

If necessary, subcommittees should review and evaluate goals for more in-depth analysis. Respective experts in their fields could lead analysis; subcommittees could report to the full committee when their work is complete.

Adoption of Goals

After thorough analysis and presentations by subcommittees, committee members should vote on goals, to move to the execution stage of the process.

Step 3: Develop a Plan

The local plan should, among other things:

- Assign responsibility to organizations and individuals to carry out specific actions in an emergency at designated times and places.
- Establish lines of authority and organizational relationships and show how all actions will be coordinated.

Identify Resources

All parties should understand that there will be a need for investment in time, money, and other resources to ensure a collaborative effort. In preparing a plan, committee members may want to consider the following:

1. There are emerging technologies that may help improve communications.
2. During reconstruction projects, opportunities may exist to incorporate disaster plan elements into a project at little additional cost. Adding or expanding that functionality later is usually more expensive and time consuming.
3. Local broadcasters can make creative use of other resources such as audio channels, data channels, digital channels and more to improve an existing system. Often, retired or reserve equipment from local media can be placed into operation for use in a disaster plan.
4. EOCs (emergency operations centers) may be connected directly to newsrooms. Station transmission equipment may be located in EOC facilities, expanding the ability to reach the public quickly with incident management systems requirements.
5. Human resources are potentially the most critical element in an emergency communications plan. Public entities are likely to have a more extensive list of dedicated personnel to respond to disasters. Private sector manpower can often be “phantom.” This occurs because in planning, the planners assume key personnel will be available or will volunteer. Unfortunately, when an event occurs, authorities discover that a volunteer was not adequately prepared or trained or available. Local leaders must take steps to assure

that all personnel, including volunteers, are trained for their jobs and are available.

6. There are multiple sources of government funding to improve systems. Local EOC managers are often aware of them. Government funding has been made for low power radio stations, for example. Such funds could potentially be used to create shared emergency facilities for the local media outlet and incorporated as part of an internal disaster plan. Sources of information regarding funding can be found at www.mediasecurity.org.
7. It is also necessary to meet the communications challenges of reaching a diverse population that includes non-English speaking, visually impaired, hearing impaired and other people with special needs.

MSRC has posted information on its website, www.mediasecurity.org, about developing a local warning plan using the Emergency Alert System (EAS).

Execution

Finally, the committee should write its plan, which should include supporting documentation, then distribute it, invite comment and feedback from the community at large and, if necessary, revisit and rewrite it to incorporate criticism and suggestions.

Step 4: Implement the plan and evaluate the results

Create a Timeline

The committee should adopt a timeline for implementing improvements in an emergency communications system. A timeline is essential to measure progress and to achieve the goal of preparedness. Depending on local circumstances and resources available, it may take one or more years to develop a complete plan from scratch.

Points of Contact

The committee should designate points of contact for the plan, its participants, its execution and for disseminating information and accepting feedback.

Oversight and Evaluation

The committee should establish a method for monitoring the implementation of its plan and, once implemented, its effectiveness. One approach is to create an oversight group made up of key stakeholder representatives to conduct ongoing, regular, structured reviews of the system; it would brief committee members on findings from time to time. Its responsibilities should include conducting regular tests of the system and simulations and making recommendations for any training among the organizations participating in the system. It might also be helpful to select an ombudsman from the committee to address complaints about the system from critics and opponents in a community.

Other

The committee may consider creating a website for the community to post its recommendations and other information and to collect feedback and criticism.

MSRC suggests that state broadcasting associations may be strong organizations for disseminating information, sharing local plans and ensuring that recommendations are implemented in communities.

Conclusion

Creating or improving a local emergency communications system is a process that will require commitment and dedication by broadcasters, media companies, local stakeholders and community leaders. It will not end with a list of recommendations; rather, it will require constant oversight, training, testing, evaluation and improvement. The next chemical accident, refinery explosion or terrorist attack should not test our preparedness again. The safety, security and lives of our fellow citizens, our children and grandchildren will depend on our readiness.

Information Resources

Getting started	
www.fcc.gov/eb/eas	Federal Communications Commission
http://www.fcc.gov/eb/eas/plans.html	Many State and Local EAS plans are listed
www.fema.gov	Federal Emergency Management Agency (click on Preparation & Prevention)
www.nws.noaa.gov	National Weather Service - (click on Weather Radio)
http://www.nws.noaa.gov/os/hazcollect/	HazCollect, the NWS All-Hazards Emergency Message Collection System
http://www.stormready.noaa.gov/contact.htm	NWS Local Office Contact Information
www.itl.nist.gov/fipspubs/fip6-4	Federal Information Processing System (FIPS)
www.nemaweb.org	National Emergency Management Association (NEMA)
www.sbe.org	Society of Broadcast Engineers (SBE) - (click on EAS Information)
www.scte.org/standards	Society of Cable Telecommunications engineers (SCTE) - (click on standards subcommittees - eas)
www.missingkids.com	Amber Plans

Getting started - Continued	
www.ctia.org	Cellular Telecommunications & Internet Association
www.edis.ca.gov	Emergency Digital Information Service (EDIS)

Resources on People with Special Needs	
http://www.nod.org/index.cfm?fuseaction=Page.viewPage&pageId=11	Emergency preparedness page for the National Organization on Disability
www.tdi-online.org	Community Emergency Information Preparedness Network for deaf, hard of hearing, late-deafened and deaf-blind individuals, funded by the Department of Homeland Security
www.jikl.com/disaster	Webpage of disability consultant June Isaacson Kaile on disaster preparedness
http://www.ncd.gov/newsroom/publications/2005/saving_lives.htm	Report from the National Council on Disability on emergency communications and response for the disabled

Possible resources for funding	
www.cops.usdoj.gov	COPS grants for technology and training
www.FedGrants.gov	Searchable database of federal grants

Possible resources for funding - Continued

www.Grants.gov	Register and apply for federal grants
www.justnet.org	Justice Technology Information Network, National Institute of Justice
www.cfda.gov	Catalogue of Federal Domestic Assistance
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/odp/grants	Office of Domestic Preparedness
www.ojp.usdoj.gov/BJA	Bureau of Justice Assistance
www.usfa.fema.gov/fire-service/grants	Federal Emergency Management Agency assistance to Fire Departments
www.ntia.doc.gov/top/grants	National Telecommunications and Information Administration, Technology Opportunities Program supports innovative use of technology in the public sector
www.dhs.gov/grants	Department of Homeland Security