

Briefing Room

DHS First Responder Communities of Practice

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The Department of Homeland Security (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate First Responder Communities of Practice Website is a vetted, professional networking, project collaboration, and resource-sharing platform for first responders and other personnel working in homeland security capacities. The site is focused on emergency response, preparedness, resiliency, planning, management, and homeland security-related matters. Site members can network with others in their fields and areas of interest; join or start new communities to collaborate “virtually” with others through wikis, blogs, discussion boards, real-time chat, and internal Website e-mail; find and share resources and contacts; store and access documents; and stay connected through e-mail notification of site activities. In addition to managing the site, the First Responder Communities of Practice Website also reports on the emergency response community’s broader efforts to use social media to improve disaster preparedness and resilience.

Go to <https://Communities.FirstResponder.gov> to request membership.

Agencies Work Together to Modernize National Alert and Warning System

The answer to the public’s question, “How can we receive alerts and warnings during an emergency?” is rapidly changing. Many are just as likely to turn to a Twitter feed on their smartphone as they are to seek out government Websites for important information, such as whether they need to seek immediate shelter. The American people consume information through a constantly growing array of media –television and radio, mobile phones, social media platforms – and officials need to be able to deliver life-saving alerts and warnings quickly across all of them.

Given this shift in the way we consume information and communicate, the Department of Homeland Security

Science & Technology Directorate (DHS S&T) and the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) are leading an inter-agency effort to modernize the dissemination of alerts and warnings in order to reach the maximum number of people. FEMA’s Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS), which includes the S&T-lead Commercial Mobile Alert Service (CMAS), will transform the nation’s alert and warning system into an integrated system that provides authorities with a range of message delivery options and multiple communications pathways.

Denis Gusty, the Alerts & Warnings program manager at DHS S&T, explained that CMAS will disseminate three primary types of messages: presidential messages; America’s Missing: Broadcast Emergency Response (AMBER) Alerts; and alerts regarding imminent threats to life and property to specific, geo-targeted, areas across the nation. This capability will be available

WHAT IS IPAWS?

IPAWS Program Vision

Timely alert and warning to the American people in the preservation of life and property.

IPAWS Program Mission

Provide integrated services and capabilities to local, state, and federal authorities that enable them to alert and warn their respective communities via multiple communications methods.

IPAWS Strategic Goals

Goal 1: Create and maintain an integrated interoperable environment for alerts and warnings.

Goal 2: Make alerts and warnings more effective.

Goal 3: Strengthen the resilience of the IPAWS infrastructure.

The First Responder Technologies (R-Tech) Bulletin is a publication sponsored by the Department of Homeland Security Science and Technology Directorate. The R-Tech Bulletin discusses technologies of interest to first responders that have received funding, in part, from the government. Mention of these technologies should not be construed as an endorsement of either the technology, or the entity producing it, by the Federal government.

DHS First Responder Communities of Practice (continued)

to support local, state, tribal, and territorial alert and warning authorities. Alerting authorities will use the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP) standard to disseminate their messages for the public, via the IPAWS Alert Aggregator. The IPAWS Aggregator will disseminate the message to citizens, making them accessible via several communications channels, including television, radio, mobile phone, internet, public signage, etc. “Ideally,” Gusty said, “CAP should allow an emergency manager to type a single message into a system that can push it through multiple media channels at once, including social media.”

Aware of the increasing popularity of social media as a form of communication during emergencies, Gusty and his team are developing best practices for the integration of social media into the IPAWS program. Gusty is leveraging another DHS S&T resource, First Responder Communities of Practice (<https://Communities.FirstResponder.gov>), as a centralized virtual location for the project team to store and share best practices that are collected and developed with partners across all levels of government. For example, the project team is currently using a wiki within the “Make America Safer through Social Media” Community of Practice to document best practices gleaned from interviews with public safety professionals across the country, to share and store case studies and recommendations, and to develop a roadmap for how social media fits into the alert and warning domain.

Gusty explained that emergency managers see great potential for social media as a two-way form of communication with the public. “It’s more than pushing out a message,” he said. “The emergency managers want the public to be able to provide information back – such as report of wildfires to these officials, who can then inform the broader public through a trusted communications source.”

An added benefit of using First Responder Communities of Practice is that through the site, programs such as IPAWS can connect with similar efforts around the country. For example, the DHS Virtual Social Media Working Group (VSMWG) uses the site’s wiki capabilities to collaborate and build a social media framework for first responders interested in using social media technologies in their organizations. Gusty sees the knowledge base the IPAWS program is creating regarding the role of social media in alerts and warnings as a component of this larger framework. Gusty hopes to leverage the expertise of VSMWG members to inform the development of the alert and warning architecture so that the architecture meets the requirements of those who will use the technology in the field.

“The original intent of emergency broadcasting was to blast these messages out,” Gusty said, “but we know from talking to first responders that preparedness issues are a huge component as well. Rather than simply telling the public that a storm is coming, we need to include how to prepare for it – and we are interested in using every tool available, social media or otherwise, to get the information out. People shouldn’t get caught up in the technology. It’s just another tool in the toolbox to communicate with more of the public.”

The conception of what it means to broadcast emergency information is rapidly evolving, and the Alerts & Warnings program hopes to develop systems that enhance the ability of the public to prepare for and recover from disasters.

