EAS SENSE
EAS Status 2013
A Discussion in Texas

By Richard Rudman

[August 2013] Among the best-planned state broadcast conventions, the Texas Association of Broadcasters has a reputation for planning timely and informative sessions, which usually draw strong attendance. Among the sessions this year was a general update on the state of EAS in Texas – and nationally.

My first intro to TAB years ago was through Ann Arnold, whom I consider one of my mentors in learning about the barriers to improvement of the public warning process.

Ann was a driving force in making TAB second to none as a state broadcaster association. She became a national evangelist pushing for training, funding, and coordination geared to public warning improvement with her work for the National Alliance of State Broadcaster's Associations (NASBA).

So, I was honored to be asked to present a session during the Texas Association of Broadcasters (TAB) annual convention in Austin, Texas to an attentive and involved audience.

KNOWLEDGE AND EXPERIENCE

Joining the session was Broadcast Warning Working Group (BWWG) colleague, David Ostmo, a Texas television engineer employed by Sinclair.

Ostmo reached out to broadcast engineer Lance Parr, a self-described EAS evangelist in his own right, and Pete Baldwin the emergency manager (EM) for Travis County, Texas to give the panel local input. This panel of Ostmo, Parr, Baldwin. and myself could not have worked out better.

We were even able to relay a message to the attendees from FEMA headquarters in DC.

Just before the EAS session, I got an email from Wade Witmer in the FEMA directorate responsible for IPAWS OPEN. Wade's message was that *"...FEMA appreciate(s) your help and support!"* He wanted us to: *"Please also help relay that we here at FEMA IPAWS always consider the broadcast community to be a vital and critical component in emergency communications.*

"Even if the EAS is not officially activated, the daily capability of keeping communities informed of situations in the area is a valuable resource not just to emergency managers, but to all public safety officials.

"As an example, during the manhunt for the Boston Marathon bombing suspects, broadcast radio and TV was the most used form of public communications used by officials even though EAS was never activated," Witmer said.

IPAWS OPEN GROWING

Witmer also told me that as of August 8th, 168 agencies are certified to originate warnings through IPAWS OPEN, with another 100 being processed, so warnings from local agencies that will be originated and distributed through IPAWS OPEN are on the way.

Baldwin explained his Travis County Emergency Operations Center management software, WebEOC, should shortly include a certified IPAWS OPEN origination tool. WebEOC is in use at many emergency management agencies throughout the country.

This tool can really leverage the ability of many emergency management agencies to originate through IPAWS OPEN.

LOOKING DOWN THE IPAWS ROAD

The point was made to the TAB audience that the current implementation of FEMA IPAWS, important as it is, it is only a first step on a long road to create a coherent, orchestrated, unified national public warning strategy.

Such a strategy must provide for training for all warning stakeholders (and the public) and mandates close cooperation and coordination between all viable public warning modes to provide for better and more effective outcomes. This means that all those in charge of managing emergencies involving mass public safety will, as a core resource management duty and responsibility, coordinate a series of origination and

follow-up messages that are now employed by a growing number of warning systems and social media.

In order to make the be effective, the entire series of warnings and updates issued by emergency management should tell the unfolding story of the emergency to the public and other interested parties, as well as provide those impacted by the emergency with timely and informative protective actions they should take.

EACH ENTITY DOES ITS PART

One way to look at it is that the relationship of warnings within the topic of Emergency Public Information (EPI) is like the relationship of headlines in a newspaper to the body of a story.

If the headline responds to the needs and interests of a newspaper reader, the more likely it is for a reader to delve into the body of that story. Arguably, a warning loses some of its value to motivate people at risk to take protective actions without the support of a "story." Put another way, warnings are a subset of a superset commonly called EPI.

Baldwin could not have agreed more with the path I outlined, and he gave me further hope when he explained that he has already taken positive steps to make EPI an integral part of emergency management training and practice in Travis County.

PROPERLY TAILORING EPI

Baldwin also reinforced the fact that coordination of EPI is now more important than ever since some of the new means to distribute warnings are truly "short form."

For example, Twitter only allows 140 characters. Weather Emergency Alert messages (WEA, Formerly CMAS) can contain just 90 characters. And sirens are one-note warning systems. It should be obvious that these forms are really warning headlines that require more information before people at risk (1) are motivated to take

action and (2) have enough information to know what actions to take.

There are exceptions. In the case of a WEA or Twitter message about an impending tornado or flash flood, those at risk may have already received enough prior information and education on what to do. Because of such training and education for risks like tornadoes and hurricanes, much of the public at risk from those hazards are sufficiently motivated by past local events to take protective actions to protect themselves and their property in time to make a difference.

However, consider the almost infinite number of risks and regions where the public has received little or no training on what to do when they receive a "short form" warning. Conclusion: The American public needs to receive more coordinated and timely follow-up information through EAS and other "long form" sources so they can protect themselves.

WORKING TOGETHER

What can coordination/orchestration of EPI do to improve overall emergency response?

If we make the assumption that there is something that emergency managers would like the public to do (or not do) during every stage of response, the improvement should be obvious. This explains precisely what Baldwin is trying to do, not only as the emergency manager for his County, but to offer his and his staff's support to smaller governmental entities which do not have his resources, a prime example of mutual aid at work.

Baldwin also talked about the virtual national bible of emergency management, the National Incident Management System (NIMS). He agreed that while there are significant challenges to integrate EPI as a first line immediate response function within (NIMS), the result will be worth it.

Another significant challenge we discussed and agreed upon is that the personnel most often charged with EPI dissemination usually have "day jobs" as PIO's (public information officers) who are trained to carry out information dissemination to the public *after* an incident initial response phase.

MORE OPTIONS THAN EVER

At that point, I took a few minutes to explain how the Partnership for Public Warning (PPW) came into being after the events of September 11, 2001, leading to the development of the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP).

The reports written by PPW for FEMA, the FCC and the Weather Service not only called for such a strategy, but also outlined what has become a warning tool that now makes it possible for originators to formulate a single Common Alerting Protocol (CAP) warning message that can be parsed and propagated by CAP-aware warning systems.

These now include, but are not limited to, the venerable siren, Twitter, Nixle, WEA, Reverse 9-1-1, and the EAS.

While CAP itself is now an international open, non-proprietary warning origination standard, using the full potential power of CAP is very much a work in progress. If we care about public warning improvement with planning, commitment and some dollars, the wish can become a reality.

POINTS TO TAKE HOME

Some points were then brought out to the TAB audience that help to show some of the factors that, when implemented, will make EAS more effective for all stakeholders:

• The United States still lacks an overall coherent, coordinated strategy to manage Emergency Public Information (EPI)

• The speed and variety for modern EPI delivery to the public now can influence the outcome of events, for good or bad

• EPI itself needs to be considered a manageable response resource in its own right

• At any given time in an emergency, the agency in charge should be able to tell the public what to do *or not do* – helping to manage the event to a more successful outcome

• Absent accurate information from those in charge, media speculation, rumors, and even planned disinformation can and do weaken – or even undermine – effective emergency management's response

THE LARGER PICTURE
VERSUS LOCAL NEEDS

Providing more effective EPI for a region facing imminent danger is definitely a case where we need to consider the trees, as well as the forest and the region.

While using social media adds a new and valuable capability, let us not forget all emergency public information (EPI) dissemination must be carefully coordinated to allow EM response resources to be more effective. For example, as noted, a WEA (formerly CMAS) message consists of up to just 90 characters.

There has been some agreement that WEA should convey a "tune to local media" message for details impossible to communicate in a short message. Twitter has a slightly larger message payload, but still insufficient for detailed protective action information, so the "tune to" directive should still apply.

Something else very important is required when these sort form messages are sent. Unless that "local media" is kept in the loop by emergency managers and their spokesmen, WEA and Twitter may promise detailed protective action information that the media does not have,

running the risk of confusing or even misdirecting the public during an emergency.

USING ALL THE TOOLS

For an immediate risk warning such as a "Shelter In Place" order, EM's should use all means at hand to notify a public at risk.

This is now technically possible with the Common Alerting Protocol (CAP). The list of warning channels certainly includes social media that now can be tightly geo-targeted. However, at the same time, there is a danger of overlooking the benefit of issuing shelter messages that cover a wider area to limit the number of people who could cause problems at check points, or try to enter an area using means and directions that could bypass checkpoints.

A wider geo-evacuation order message could prevent evacuation routes from becoming clogged with panicked traffic.

THE JOB AHEAD

As the session closed, we offered a checklist for the group to consider as some ideas for a better public warning future:

- Identify Emergency Public Information (EPI) as a core emergency management response resource throughout the entire emergency management (EM) community.
- Provide for mutual aid to support the EPI function.
- Carve this concept in stone within the National Incident Management System (NIMS).
- Define the role of SECC's within the FCC's Part 11.

- Reach out to the national EM community, primarily the National Emergency Management Association (NEMA) and the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM).
- Assure coordination between the EM community and all telecom warning paths, including social media and cell phone service providers.
- Support legislation to provide Congressional oversight for the warning process.
- Provide for funding for public and emergency management education on the human and economic values and roles of public warnings in the abovementioned legislation.
- Memorialize the name of the late Ann Arnold, guiding light for TAB for many years, as the guiding spirit and mentor

for improving emergency public warnings in legislation, training efforts and future projects

All in all it was a very productive session. Perhaps one measure of the success of the program is that interest was so high that only one person left the room during the session.

Other state broadcast associations would do well to plan and execute EAS sessions such as this during their state conventions.

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