

The
Broadcasters' Desktop Resource
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... edited by Barry Mishkind – the Eclectic Engineer

EAS ALERT

Using EAS In A Public Health Crisis




By Ed Czarnecki and Bill Robertson

[March 2020] Statistics are pointing this to be like a bad flu season, with many wondering what the political (and economic) fallout is going to be in the end. Meanwhile, we are pretty much still "sheltering in place."

These are sure interesting times!

This historic global coronavirus pandemic is dramatically impacting how many of us are performing our jobs – even the nature of our jobs. We wanted to take a moment to reflect on what this major public health crisis might mean for station operations – internally (remote working and security) and externally (using EAS).

SECURITY AND REMOTE ACCESS

We have heard some stations have been planning to dramatically reduce staff presence and limit access during this public health emergency. Even engineers are choosing to do more work remotely, if they can.

For those who are planning to access station systems remotely, please do so in a secure environment – such as using a VPN to access the station network. Please (*please!*) do not put any of your key station equipment on the open Internet – even if this, in theory, would make remote access easier.

That includes EAS equipment: *never put EAS gear* directly on the Internet. It should always remain behind a firewall in a secure network environment. The last thing any of us needs during this major public health emergency is for stations to expose EAS and other systems to the Internet and potential security breaches.

With that in mind, this would be a good time to double check that your EAS devices are using the latest software, as most EAS manufacturers have issued major software updates over the past couple of months. These may include critical security patches, as well as EAS functional improvements (and in some cases actual FCC compliance updates). Keeping your EAS software up to date is an essential task.

EAS READINESS

So far, we are hearing most of the alerts and advisories about coronavirus have been going out over mobile phones, as local authorities send out public safety messages via IPAWS' WEA.

At least one originator – Rhode Island – has sent out a message using the Civil Emergency Message (CEM) event code. If this public health emergency grows it is at least possible that more local authorities try to issue COVID-related advisories via EAS as well.

As you likely are aware, there are no specific EAS codes for public health emergencies in the U.S. While CEM has already been used, it is up to local authorities which codes – if any – actually may be used, but it could include a Local Area Emergency (LAE), Civil Danger Warning (CDW), or even a Shelter in Place (SPW).

SMART PREPARATION

So, what should you do, as a broadcaster, to be ready for any the coronavirus or any other possible scenario?

- Using the State EAS Plan as your initial guide, verify that your equipment settings match the requirements. (Alerting authorities would expect adherence to this plan to determine which event codes are currently defined as being in use.)
- Check with your LECC and/or SECC for any additional guidance on which event codes to enable (and to see if they have any information on what your state/local authorities plan to do).
- Double check your EAS device. Make sure it is working and monitoring IPAWS and your EAS monitoring assignments.
- Using the information gathered above, make sure the right event codes are enabled in your EAS device.

If you are a DASDEC™ customer, you can take the following steps with your Alert Agent™ to monitor a wide range of event codes (but not forward them unless you want to):

1. Make sure you to include desired or necessary event codes in an EAS Code Group list *(Setup > Alert Agent > EAS Code Groups).* For example, you might create an EAS Code Group list of civil warnings containing the following event codes:

a. ADR : ADMINISTRATIVE MESSAGE
b. CDW : CIVIL DANGER WARNING
c. CEM : CIVIL EMERGENCY MESSAGE
d. EVI : IMMEDIATE EVACUATION NOTICE
e. LAE : LOCAL AREA EMERGENCY
f. LEW : LAW ENFORCEMENT WARNING
g. SPW : SHELTER IN PLACE WARNING

(Not all of these codes relate to the current coronavirus scenario, but this would be a handy "group" to have at the ready.)

2. Once the group is complete, you can apply this group to an Alert Node.

a. If you want to treat any event code in a special way, simply create a new Alert Node *(Setup > Alert Agent > Manage Alert Nodes*) to control the desired action.
b. Using this logic, you can build a stacked order of operation, defining actions for each node. You can even change the node order to create a form of prioritization.
c. It is a good idea to experiment and test the functions by using the Test Node feature, which simulates the actions without triggering an event.



d. Finally, when setting the node action, be sure to activate the Triggered CAP Polling feature. This feature ensures that if the alert has a CAP message equivalent, the full scope of the message will be passed on rather than a potentially truncated EAS version.

Again, thus far, most local authorities have been focused on WEA as a tool for sending COVID-19 messages. But that does not rule out the possible use of EAS in the broadcaster's role as a First Informer.

SETTING YOUR EAS GEAR FOR UNATTENDED OPERATIONS

Some engineers have been informed that their station facilities might have limited access during this emergency – and some stations (such as college campus radio) have even temporarily gone off the air.

For those looking at limited access, it is an especially good time to review automated EAS operation.

QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Aside from double-checking critical emergency alert event codes (as discussed above), we have also been asked about automatic forwarding and logging of RMT and RWT messages.

Of course, the DASDEC supports these features, and if configured to auto-forward the alert, it will do so. Most users already have their EAS systems configured to auto-forward the Required Monthly Test, but it would be a good idea to double check that the configuration to auto-forward and log the rest is correct.

As to the Required Weekly Test, most broadcasters simply log the RWT when received. As long as the configuration for the RWT is properly set up (which it should be), the RWT will be received and logged automatically.

Another question has been posed about the generation of the Required Weekly Test. The DASDEC can be set to auto-generate an RWT on a randomized schedule for testing compliance purposes (and, of course, it will log the operation). Users should just double check that this function is enabled under *Setup* > *Station* > *Global Options.*

EAS can be an important tool in the Emergency Manager's toolbox during an emergency situation. Broadcasters just need to take the time to ensure their EAS gear is set up correctly. If DASDEC users have any questions, they can contact tech support at:
support@digitalalertsystems.com for assistance.

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