CEPIN
Community
Emergency
Preparedness
Information
Network

Public warnings and technology

By Stephanie Clark

The New England region recently experienced serious flooding with nine straight days of rain. The town of Taunton, Mass., implemented a door-to-door notification system where first responders ordered residents to evacuate due to a potential dam break that would flood the entire city. Deaf and hard of hearing residents successfully evacuated; however, door-to-door notification methods would not have worked had an actual emergency taken place. For instance, if the dam in that town indeed did break, the first responders wouldn't have been able to reach local residents due to flooding.

This is where alerts using technology come into the picture. Not one single notification method can reach everyone, so you will need to determine what works best for you or in your area.

Text emergency alerts

Text emergency alerts are a popular choice among deaf and hard of hearing people, especially since many have e-mail, pagers, and cell phones that can easily receive text messages. You can sign up to receive alerts at the national, state, and local level by researching to see which alerts you'd like to receive.

For example, the Emergency E-mail Network (*see page 4 for website address*) is a free service covering all 50 states, and sends alerts related to natural and weather emergencies. You may also want to check your local television

station's website to sign up for free text message services on breaking news, weather warnings, Amber alerts, and other alerts. If there is no such service available, work with your local emergency management agency to develop free emergency warnings.

Reverse 9-1-1

Some towns offer Reverse 9-1-1, which can make hundreds of calls in a short time with a recorded or live message about an emergency. Work with your local 9-1-1 agency to see if TTYs, VRS, and CapTel can be used with recorded messages via Reverse 9-1-1.

Television

The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) mandates closed captioning for all emergencies via satellite, cable, and off-air newscasts. If your television station does not provide captioning, especially in small towns, work with the station to provide open captioning, scrolls, or crawls with essential information. You may want to do research on portable televisions to see if they are compatible with patch cords and neck

loops for hard of hearing people, hearing aid users, and cochlear users. Captioning is always a plus with portable televisions. You may also want to work with your local deaf and hard of hearing agencies to advocate for an American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter when announcements are made by public officials on television in addition to the open captions.

Sirens

Work with your local community to set up visual strobe lights in areas that have sirens, such as nuclear plants.

NOAA weather radios

The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) can send emergency warnings related to weather to 90 percent of the population nationwide. Some NOAA weather radios offer optional accessories, such as strobe lights, bed shakers and auditory receivers.

Electronic billboards/highway signs

Emergency messages can be posted on highway electronic variable boards, such as Amber Alerts. Work with your state and local highway department to increase the use of these boards. Messages should be easily understood without referring to radios or toll-free telephone numbers.

Public transportation

Collaborate with your local and state mass transit agencies to install vi-

This month: EMERGENCY ALERTS

Information is what??

By Jim House

Some of you have heard this phrase, "Information is power." A specific television network often begins its public service announcements on different topics with this jingle, "The More You Know…" These examples illustrate the value society places on information.

Deaf and hard of hearing people are witnessing an ongoing transformation in telecommunications. Some of us can remember when we had to depend on others to use the telephone or understand the television. Thanks to digital technologies, it is now possible to receive information independently in the format we choose from many sources.

During a disaster, information can mean the difference between life and death. Several years ago, one deaf woman in North Carolina did not understand that the river near her home had flooded until her living room floor was covered with water. She climbed on her roof and was rescued by a helicopter. If the emergency news bulletins had been accessible, viewers like her would have been evacuated early from an oncoming flood along with the neighbors. Today, in spite of a backlash from broadcasters, the Federal Communications Commission is enforcing these accessibility rules.

Hurricane Wilma was the 21st tropical storm/hurricane to form in the Atlantic Ocean this year. Hurricane season officially ends on November 30. In mid-September, Taunton, Mass., was under high alert because heavy rain had strained a dam upstream near its bursting point. This threat appears to have subsided for now; yet more disasters will strike. Each one of us may be affected by a disaster in our lifetime.

Not everyone watches television all the time. And only some of us carry pagers that are registered to receive breaking news warning us of an impending disaster. During an emergency, information changes rapidly and it is vital that everyone is up to date. For that, technology provides part of the answer.

The other part of the answer is public policy. On July 22, 2004, President George Bush signed Executive Order #13347, which requires that emergency officials incorporate input from people with disabilities in their disaster planning activities. There have been numerous hearings in Washington, D.C., on emergency preparedness; some events have thrust the spotlight on the needs of people with disabilities.

The U.S. Senate recently introduced the S. 1753 bill, the Warning, Alert, and Response Network (WARN) Act. Among its many provisions is the establishment of an all-hazards alert system that includes "mechanisms and technologies to ensure that members of the public with disabilities are able to receive alerts and information provided through the System." Please write a letter to your senator today and let him or her know that you want full support for the WARN Act because having access to information can save your life.

Remember, information is POWER.

House is the national coordinator for the CEPIN Project at TDI. He may be reached at jimhouse@tdi-online.org.

This newsletter is available in text format upon request. Let us know if you'd like a text-only version by sending e-mail to:
cepinpr@tdi-online.org

Get text alerts in your community

By Lise Hamlin

When Hurricane Katrina broke the levees in New Orleans, one deaf man didn't know about it until the water started lapping around his bed. When an emergency hits your neighborhood, how will you learn about it?

Text alert systems are now available not only in the U.S., but in places as far away as Hong Kong, the Netherlands and Kenya. Where I live - in Montgomery County, Md. - we don't see too many tornados, but they do hit occasionally. One day at work about two years ago, I was looking out my office window and noticing the sky turn an odd color of yellow. I turned to my co-worker and asked, "Do you remember what we are supposed to do if a tornado hits?" Just then, my cell phone vibrated, announcing that I was receiving an emergency text alert. Sure enough, it was a tornado warning. Seconds later, our office building management announced on the public announcement system that we should all take shelter in the hallways.

Because I was receiving a text alert, I was the first to know of the tornado alert, and first to know when the all clear was sent. Knowing was a big help at work – and had I been alone in my car, it would have been they only way I would have gotten the news. I was grateful that I had signed up for the text alert system.

Warning, Alert and Response Network Act

Senators Jim DeMint (R-SC) and Ben Nelson (D-NE) have introduced the S. 1753 bill in the U.S. Senate, the Warning, Alert, and Response Network (WARN) Act, that proposes to "establish a network for the transmission of alerts across a broad variety of media." This includes cell phones, pagers, PDA, and computers - any device that receives text messaging or other possible alerting systems as well. The proposed legislation also states that the system shall "include mechanisms and technologies to ensure that members of the public with disabilities are able to receive alerts and information provided by the System."

Recently, it was announced that the U.S. Senate Committee on Commerce, Science and Transportation approved the WARN Act. However, it's not clear whether it will become law. Apparently a similar bill was introduced in 2003 but it never got anywhere. That doesn't mean that you have to

SEVERE TORNADO WATCH IN EFFECT FOR MONTGOMERY CO. UNTIL 7 PM

wait for federal legislation to be enacted to get text alerts in your part of the country.

Montgomery County in Maryland has gone online with their own alerts, as have almost 20 other local governments in the Washington, D.C. area. Some communities are spending local funds to make it happen. For other communities, like Washington, D.C., a $3.3 million grant from the Department of Homeland Security is footing the bill.

What can you do?

If your community doesn't have a text alert system established yet, talk to your local Office of Homeland Security agency and find out if they are planning to set up a text alert system. If they have not, send e-mail or letters, or meet with your city or county legislators, or even first responders, to get them to help to get a text alert system for your community. It's a good time to ask because the recent hurricanes has taught us all to be alert to emergencies. Your work on this issue could not only benefit you and your family, but the whole community.

Hamlin is the regional specialist for the Mid-Atlantic and Southeast region. She works with the Northern Virginia Resource Center for Deaf and Hard of Hearing Persons, and may be reached at lhamlin@nvrc.org.

Model of good practice: Dane County, Wis. (near Madison)

www.co.dane.wi.us/ems/popwarn_deaf.htm

Don't be left out!

By Christine Seymour

When disaster strikes, the first place to get information is usually from the television, radio, Internet, or a pager/e-mail alert. If we don't get the information as soon as possible, we may miss important instructions for staying safe. However, it is our responsibility as deaf or hard of hearing people to ensure that we stay informed.

Getting information

When we receive information, we need to know a few things: What is happening? What do we need to do? Evacuate? Seek shelter? Stay indoors? How long to do we have to be ready? Should we act now? Do we plan for the emergency to happen in a few hours or days?

There are several ways we can find this information out even if we cannot hear instructions shared via radio. They include watching captioned television shows, having pagers that can receive and send messages, using cell phones with Short Message Systems (SMS) capacity, having working computers connected to the Internet, and/or using NOAA weather radios that also have text display and visual/tactile alerts.

Notifications and alerts

Even if you have any or all of these devices, you may need to sign up to receive alerts or notifications. There are several resources for this (*see box at right*). Check your local newspaper or television station's websites to see if they have an option for sign-up of emergency alerts.

Knowing where to get information and what information to look for is the key to surviving in a disaster.

Seymour is the regional specialist for the West and Hawaii region. She works with the Deafness Counseling Advocacy and Referral Agency (DCARA) in San Leandro, Calif., and may be reached at christine.seymour@dcara.org.

Online news resources

ABC News: www.abcnews.com
Click E-mail & News Alerts for e-mail registration, or Downloads for software.

CNN Breaking News: www.cnn.com/email

My-Cast: www.my-cast.com/faq_email.htm
Scroll down to "Email Weather Alerts."

National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA): www.noaa.gov

The New York Times: www.nytimes.com.
Click E-mail Options on left after free registration.

USA Today Weather:
www.usatoday.com/weather/wsafe0.htm

The Washington Post:
www.washingtonpost.com
Register first, then see E-mail Updates on right side.

Weather Bug: ww3.weatherbug.com

The Weather Channel: www.weather.com

Yahoo!: alerts.yahoo.com
Sign in at Yahoo!, then choose your preferences.

Also check your local newspaper, television station or radio station websites for e-mail or weather alert resources.

Public warnings and technology

Continued from front page

sual text displays at stations with breaking news and emergency announcements.

Remember, you need to determine for yourself the best way to receive emergency alerts when you're sleeping, in your car, at work, outdoors, traveling, in rural areas, and so forth. You're responsible for your safety 24 hours a day.

Check out articles published in TDI's GA-SK Newsletter, avail-

able for download at www.cepintdi.org under "National Resources." http://tap.gallaudet.edu/Emergency-Resources.htm is another resource for information about emergency notification technology.

Clark is the regional specialist for the New England and Great Lakes region. She is with DEAF, Inc., in Boston, Mass., and may be reached at sclark@deafinconline.org.

OK-WARN serves as model program

By Kristina Hakey

Thanks to new technology, people can take advantage of different options using creative methods to establish a special emergency alert program designed for the deaf and hard of hearing communities using pager, e-mail, text telephones, weather alert devices, and/or many other types of equipment. These alerts can save people's lives, especially during extreme emergencies or disasters.

Often local, state, and regional emergency preparedness management and local National Oceanic Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) offices do not have enough exposure or resources to work with local deaf and hard of hearing communities. It is critical that local or state agencies for deaf and hard of hearing people and community leaders partner with the local, state, and regional emergency management and local NOAA offices to develop a specialized alert communication system for deaf and hard of hearing individuals.

Rather than reinventing the wheel, people may want to look at model emergency alert programs already existing to see what works and won't work for individual states. Fortunately, such a model program exists in Oklahoma. Deaf or hard of hearing Oklahomans can receive hazardous weather or disaster information alerts directly from the National Weather Service through pagers as part of program called OK-WARN (Oklahoma Weather Alert Remote Notification). OK-WARN has proven to be very popular system for deaf and hard of hearing Oklahomans, who receive timely notification of weather hazards or disasters that occur in Oklahoma.

Vincent "Bim" Wood, a deaf research meteorologist at the National Severe Storms Laboratory in Norman, conceived the idea for OK-WARN after conducting a nine-month survey following a tornado outbreak on May 3, 1999. His survey found that 81 percent of deaf and hard-of-hearing people had experienced fear about being unprepared for weather emergencies.

Vincent "Bim" Wood helped establish the OK-WARN emergency alert program in Oklahoma.

OK-WARN is a customized database program that sends out critical weather information to alphanumeric pagers and e-mail addresses. When the National Weather Service issues weather alerts, a program automatically sends a message to all participating pager and e-mail addresses, so notification is nearly immediate. Deaf and hard of hearing Oklahomans can sign up for the free program by going to www.ok.gov/oem/programs.php?view=article&id=42 .

If anyone would like to learn more about the OK-WARN program in order to use it as a model for their localities, they may contact Paul Spencer or Putnam Reiter at the Oklahoma Department of Emergency Management, Operations Center at (405) 521-2481 voice.

Hakey is the regional specialist for the Midwest and Southwest region. She works with CSD of Oklahoma in Tulsa, and may be reached at khakey@c-s-d.org.

ATIP of the Month: Know your resources!

In each issue, we will provide you a tip of the month that focuses on one of four areas: Action, Technology, Information, Policy, or ATIP.

• Check your local 911 center and television stations to see if they have an emergency notification system.
• Check with your local or state homeland security or emergency management's website to find information about their emergency notification programs.
• Test your devices (pager, computer, etc.) often to ensure it is in proper working order.
• Be aware!

Making emergency information accessible to people with disabilities

By Marcia Brooks

The WGBH National Center for Accessible Media (NCAM), a division of Boston's public broadcaster WGBH, is uniting emergency management professionals, emergency alert providers, local information resources, telecommunications industry and public broadcasting representatives, and consumers in a collaborative effort to research and disseminate approaches to make emergency warnings accessible. This three-year project is funded by the Department of Commerce's Technology Opportunities Program (TOP).

"Access to Emergency Alerts" addresses an urgent need – to develop and encourage adoption by industry of standardized methods of presenting content needed by people with disabilities leading up to, during and after emergencies.

People who are deaf or hard of hearing and who rely on captioned television news alerts are often left out when emergency broadcasts are not, in fact, captioned. And people who are blind or have low vision watch television to stay informed, but are at a loss when on-screen graphics or text crawls are used to convey information. The use of wireless systems-- the Web, cell phones and other personal devices-- promise greater freedom, independence and even safety when traditional electronic media fails or service is interrupted, but these technologies hit the market with access barriers which present new challenges as well.

NCAM is identifying the gaps that exist between existing and developing alert systems, and the unrealized potential of these systems to serve the entire population.

A public reference repository at http://ncam.wgbh.org/alerts/resources.html has been established for summary documents of user needs, design requirements for accessible products and services, usability research and subject-related news articles and conference announcements.

The project concludes in September 2007. Project findings will be shared with the public warning and disabilities communities, as well as with the FCC and the Department of Homeland Security to help inform an inclusive and universal design for the nation's information and emergency alert systems.

The project established a national forum, the WGBH Access Alerts Working Group, of which CEPIN national coordinator Jim House is part, within the emergency alert community for discussion of accessibility needs and solutions. Through the participation of the Access Alerts National Advisory Board, of which TDI executive director Claude Stout is a member, the project ensures that consumers are active participants in defining the need and determining how solutions are evaluated.

For additional information and to contribute information or expertise to this effort, please contact NCAM at access@wgbh.org or visit http://ncam.wgbh.org/alerts.

Marica Brooks is the project director for Access to Emergency Alerts at the WGBH National Center for Accessible Media.
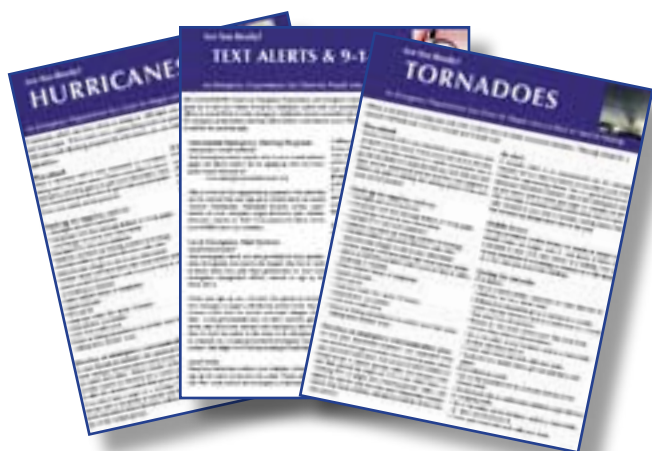
Fact sheets available for free!

The CEPIN Project team has developed fact sheets for you. They focus on how deaf or hard of hearing people can be prepared for a variety of emergencies or disasters, and other emergency-related resources.

To download the fact sheets, go to:

www.cepintdi.org

(Click on National Resources)

For more emergency preparedness information, visit

www.cepintdi.org