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Brevard County reaches more people with targeted emergency alerts

Expanded contact data helps Brevard County, Florida, to deliver fast-changing emergency information to more residents and visitors.

Highlights

- The number of contact records in the statewide system tripled due to the data accessed via Everbridge Resident Connection.
- Full deployment of services only took two days because Everbridge services are cloud-based.



Challenges

When a hurricane threatened a major hit on Florida, emergency officials knew they'd need to use all available methods to alert citizens. However, they were seeing declining effectiveness for two key communication methods.

First was information broadcast by local media. "Our county has been impacted by a hurricane in three of the last four years, so people may be experiencing hurricane fatigue and tune out media announcements," said the Director of Emergency Management for Brevard County, FL.

Second was phone calls to residents in affected areas. The ability to reach citizens through voice calls from a mass notification system has declined as more people replace landlines with internet-based telephone service and mobile phones.

As part of the preparation for the hurricane, the Florida Division of Emergency Management (FDEM) addressed these challenges with a single solution. The department added the Everbridge Resident Connection service to its AlertFlorida mass notification system, which is hosted on the Everbridge platform and used by nearly every county and local jurisdiction in the state.

The Resident Connection service provides verified landline, voice over IP (VoIP) and mobile phone numbers, as well as addresses for more than 29 million Florida residents. This data nearly tripled the number of contact records previously stored in the statewide system. Everbridge delivers the service as a cloud-based subscription with monthly updates to the records.



"With the addition of the cell phone data, we were able to exponentially increase our reach to notify residents of evacuations and provide them with a telephone number to call for information or assistance."

Director of Emergency Management
Brevard County, FL.

Solutions

Better targeting for alerts

Up-to-date contact information helps Florida officials quickly and efficiently reach people in a local area with relevant alerts and instructions for a hurricane, wildfire, or other event that creates a community emergency.

Residential and business phone users receive alerts automatically, while visitors can opt in to receive notifications for a specific locale.

For landlines, messages are delivered as a voice recording and for cell phones as a text message. Individuals with multiple telephone lines will receive messages on each, increasing the likelihood they will notice and act on the alert.

The Federal Communications Commission rules allow the AlertFlorida system to deliver emergency messages without requiring an opt-in, which expands reach during critical situations. Additionally, residents and tourists can opt to receive non-emergency messages, such as for community events that may impact local traffic or other conditions.

As cloud-based services, the Everbridge data and mass notification systems are adaptable to the varied communication needs of the state, local or community government. Alerts can be targeted to a specific list of phone numbers, or geographically for a certain ZIP code, radius from a specific point or a defined area.

The AlertFlorida system complements other notification methods, including the FEMA Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS). IPAWS allows county officials to send push notifications to cellphones through WEA (wireless emergency alerts) and to TV and radio through EAS (emergency alert system). By taking

a true multi-modal approach to emergency messaging by also transmitting voice, text, email and TTY/TDD messages, the Everbridge solution avoids common constraints such as limited character counts, imprecise geo-targeting and uncertainty over whether messages were received by all intended recipients.

Fast access to updated contact information

The AlertFlorida system already had landline phone numbers, but this data was updated only once a year. FDEM leaders recognized that having more citizen contact information would be essential for public safety.

The department made the decision to purchase the Resident Connection service, and it was ready for use by counties shortly afterwards. This speed of implementation was possible because both the mass notification system and the Resident Connection service are hosted by Everbridge in the cloud.

With Resident Connection, information is updated monthly, removing records flagged as outdated or duplicative. This data maintenance activity reduces confusion and eliminates the need for citizens or local officials to update phone numbers manually.



Improved communication for citizens with special needs

A comprehensive registry within the AlertFlorida system also supports the complex communication capabilities required to serve citizens with special needs. Local emergency managers can tailor alerts to individual clients, such as providing information on suitable shelters and transportation for evacuation. In the past, this communication often required direct voice phone calls, which were time consuming for public safety staff and not always successful in reaching clients.

With mobile numbers, emergency managers can send tailored alerts as text or voice messages and require a response from each recipient. If no response is received or if the client needs help, the system will route and escalate the contact for additional action by emergency personnel.

Reach beyond opt-in

Emergency alerts must reach citizens who use only a mobile phone and rely more on social media than broadcast television for news. Public officials address this challenge in part by encouraging citizens to opt-in for these alerts. Yet opt-in rates are typically low, making it hard to reach everyone in the community. By adding up-to-date phone numbers to their mass communication system, counties and cities can increase the likelihood of delivering vital information to everyone who needs it.

Maximizing the value of alerts in Brevard County

In conversation with the Director of Emergency Management for Brevard County

As an area prone to severe weather events, Brevard County emergency officials have to communicate frequent updates to the public.

“When a hurricane is approaching, it’s vital to have the ability to reach residents and provide them the information they need to ensure their safety,” said Director of Emergency Management. “Having the mass notification system and more phone numbers enables us to directly contact our residents and let them know when they need to take action to protect themselves and their families.”

The addition of more contact numbers significantly increased the county’s capabilities to reach out to citizens.

“With the addition of the cell phone data, we were able to exponentially increase our reach to notify residents of evacuations and provide them with a telephone number to call for information or assistance.”

In any emergency, the Brevard team will continue to issue alerts using traditional and social media and FEMA IPAWS as appropriate. In addition, ongoing promotion of the AlertFlorida system notifications is a key strategy for the county.

“We continue to publicize the signup for emergency notifications because communication is so critical. We’ve even recently added custom graphics to our emergency management vehicles to encourage people to sign-up for the alerts.”

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