

Preparing for the Unexpected with Emergency Mass Notification Systems

CSUSM meets danger face-to-face

by Jamie Underwood

Being prepared for the unexpected is top of mind for most colleges and universities these days—and rightly so. According to a recently released FBI study on active shooter incidents in the United States, 160 such events occurred between 2000 and 2013, averaging 11.4 incidents annually (an increasing trend). As if that number weren't staggering enough, casualties from these events included 486 killed and 557 wounded.

Potential Gunman Threat

In August 2014, CSUSM put the campus on lockdown following a possible gunman threat. "Our dispatch center received a call that there was a man on campus with a weapon," says Robert Williams, emergency manager at CSUSM. "The decision was made to lock down the campus, and the emergency notification was sent to the campus using our emergency alert button to dispatch."

The CSUSM emergency notification system follows a simple activation process that provides comprehensive and immediate emergency alert notification across facilities. "When we installed our new emergency notification system, we wanted a system that could be easily deployed in case of emergency," says Williams. "One function of that was to install an emergency alert button

for active shooter situations. One push of the button and all of our emergency-alert devices activate." Notification points check in with the Alertus server periodically to determine whether an alert has been initiated. When CSUSM dispatchers pushed the panic button, the system

disseminated the active alert to multiple emergency notification modalities simultaneously, including spoken alerts via the public address speakers; computer desktop and phone alerting; digital signage display; text, cell phone, and email messaging; and automatic door-lock activation.

A series of emergency alerts was sent out during the search for the potential gunman, with each message providing updated information on the situation at hand and instructions for students, faculty, and staff to shelter in place.

- 1st alert: Lockdown, shelter in place
- 2nd alert: Remain locked down, law enforcement on campus, subject description
- 3rd alert: Remain locked down, law enforcement entering last known area where subject was seen
- 4th alert: All clear

These messages were broadcast and displayed using wall-mounted alert beacons installed throughout the campus, full-screen computer alerting, digital signage display, desktop phone notifications, and cell phone alerting.

"People were saying that while they were locked down, it was nice to continue receiving timely updates," says Williams. "Depending on where they were in lockdown, some said they had access to digital signage, some desktop alerts, some could hear the phone notifications, and most were getting the information via their cell phones (call, text, and email)." Fortunately in the case of CSUSM, the potential gunman was



Figure 1. The CSUSM campus was evacuated in May 2014 due to wildfires in the vicinity. More than 29,388 acres across San Diego County were burned as firefighters continued to fight the fires for 17 days.

Among the worst threats, the unfortunate truth is that active shooter scenarios are becoming more common; and in an effort to prepare for such threats, many colleges and universities—like California State University, San Marcos (CSUSM)—are researching possible solutions.

actually an employee of the university who was carrying a long umbrella that someone had mistaken for a rifle.

In discussing CSUSM's emergency notification process, Williams stresses the importance of having a comprehensive emergency notification system. At CSUSM, a number of emergency alerting devices are installed throughout the campus that allow for comprehensive and immediate emergency alert notification across facilities. Comprehensive notification coverage generally requires a variety of alerting methods to overcome obstacles that may prevent individuals from receiving an emergency alert. Where are people located when the emergency occurs? Do they have access to a computer or mobile device (and is it powered on)? Are they in an area where they can see or hear the alert?

"It was extremely beneficial to have so many options for getting information out to our campus community," says Williams.

Williams also highlights how essential timeliness is when alerting people, noting that the panic button allowed CSUSM to activate a full campus lockdown in a matter of seconds. "In an active shooter situation, you're talking about the difference between people getting notified in a matter of seconds versus minutes when, according to statistics, most active shooter incidents are over in 12 minutes."

Campus Evacuation

Emergency notification systems improve safety and security on campus. Being prepared for the unexpected is important and often includes things such as weather-related threats. Depending on an organization's location, this can

range from hurricanes and tornados to snow and ice storms. CSUSM recently faced a different type of weather-related emergency.

In May 2014, California was suffering from one of the worst droughts in recent years. That, combined with low humidity, high temperatures, and winds that reach 50 to 60 miles an hour, resulted in several wildfires and evacuations. "Out here in California we have these winds called Santa Anas," says Williams. "They're very hot, dry winds that come off the desert and blow toward the coast. So when you get a spark that starts a wildfire, it can spread in a matter of minutes."

Williams explains that CSUSM's emergency management team had been monitoring the news carefully that day because wildfires were popping up all over the county. Soon they started receiv-

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ing calls reporting smoke coming from behind the campus. “Sure enough, the hillside was on fire. You could see the flames start coming up over the hill,” says Williams (see Figure 1). After assessing the situation, the campus chief of police ordered a campus evacuation, and the dispatch team launched an emergency alert.

“Some of the areas around us were also being evacuated, so roads around us were totally impacted,” says Williams. “It took us about an hour to get everyone off campus.” The campus was closed for a week due to local wildfires. Areas surrounding the school were impacted; however, the campus itself did not suffer any fire damage.

Basic Security Features

The challenges universities face are not limited to active shooter scenarios or weather-related emergencies. So what do organizations need to know when

researching and selecting a mass notification system? Williams explains that CSUSM was looking for a system that could not only integrate with its existing emergency notification components but also tie everything together under one solution. “We wanted something that would integrate with our digital signage, door-lock system, and desktop alerts, and interface with SMS alerting to send out text, email, and phone calls.”

Having a system that is compatible with inbound integrators, such as Common Alert Protocol, FEMA’s Integrated Public Alert and Warning System, and alert feeds like ThreatWatch, is useful when exchanging public warning and emergency data among commercial and government third-party alerting systems, sharing data across affiliated organizations and state/municipal alerting authorities, or monitoring the National Weather Service’s alert feed. Likewise,

compatibility with outbound integrators such as third-party emergency notification systems, SMS capabilities, RSS/ ATOM syndication, and social-media platforms is important to ensure complete, seamless coverage in the event of an emergency.

Conclusion

Ultimately emergency notification systems provide a feeling of safety and security even though every school hopes it will never have to launch an emergency alert. It is important to have an emergency notification system and set of protocols in place should an event take place. Emergency preparedness is the first step, and emergency notification systems help schools reach that goal.

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Snapshot



Univ. of New Mexico
Mark Reynolds

At the University of New Mexico we have collaborated with many different agencies, establishing partnerships that proved invaluable, with a concentration of efficiencies and cost savings. This has expanded to regional partnerships that have provided the same efficiencies and costs savings. Three examples are the following:

- ABQ Giga POP – connecting the universities for high-speed peer-to-peer traffic
- WRN (Western Regional Network) – connecting New Mexico, Colorado, and Utah, for high-speed peer-to-peer traffic

- State of New Mexico and other agencies to bring better services to our higher-education agencies – bandwidth, telehealth, programs, and resources.

Value adds that we look to ACUTA for are collaboration on projects, lessons learned, savings, resources, funding models, and peers that can help us avoid reinventing the wheel. Not many associations have this level of personal collaboration and mutual respect, which sets ACUTA apart from all the rest.