

Details Emerge on Planned Nationwide Cell Phone Alert System

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A nationwide alert system that will send text messages to cell phones and other mobile devices when an emergency occurs is beginning to take shape. The alert system is expected to interact with existing state, local and tribal alerting systems to allow targeted warning messages to be sent out to cell phone users in situations such as natural disasters, college campus shootings, child abductions or terrorist attacks.

It could also be utilized in rare disaster situations that impact the health and safety of all Americans, in which case the president can authorize a national alert to the country.

Under the new system, expected to be operational by 2010, each state will be responsible for authorizing certain emergency managers to send alerts for specific local jurisdictions.

In the event of an emergency, authorized city, county or state emergency managers would send notice to the federal contact point, which in turn notifies wireless service providers, who then transfer the message to those currently in the affected geographic area. Ultimately, cell phone users in the area would hear a unique cell phone ring and receive a short text message regarding the emergency.

Local first responders across the country have been continuously looking for better ways to send out emergency alerts to a local audience as quickly as possible. In that spirit, many law enforcement agencies have created local text message-based warning systems. However, the systems have many drawbacks. The largest issue has been that residents must sign up for the service. In addition, this opt-in form of service generally misses visitors to the area and tends to clog wireless networks so badly that the message often comes far too late.

Under the new system, cellular service providers would be required to opt in to the alert system. So far, all four major cellular service providers – AT&T, Verizon, Sprint-Nextel and T-Mobile – have indicated they expect to participate.

Although Congress urged these enhancements to the system several years ago, visible signs of progress only began recently. In addition to the Federal Communications Commission outlining technical details of the new system, the Federal Emergency Management Agency has indicated that it will serve as the

gateway for state and local responders accessing the system and that the Department of Homeland Security will work with stakeholders to design the system.