MOVING WEA FORWARD

WHAT IS WEA?

Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) is an emergency communication system that allows customers who own certain wireless phones and other enabled mobile devices to receive geographically-targeted, text-like messages alerting them of imminent threats to safety in their area.

Wireless companies volunteer to participate in WEA, which is part of public/private partnership between the FCC, FEMA and the wireless industry to enhance public safety. Most major wireless companies participate in WEA.

Alerts from WEA cover only critical emergency situations. Consumers may receive only three types of alerts:

1. Alerts issued by the President
2. Alerts involving imminent threats to safety or life
3. AMBER Alerts

TERMS TO KNOW

- **Alert Originator:** Public safety or emergency management official that is authorized by the FCC to send a WEA message for their jurisdiction

- **Alert Origination Software Provider:** Software used by an approved alert originator to send a WEA message via the IPAWS system.

- **Carriers:** Cell phone service providers

- **Geo-targeting:** Ability to select a specific area that a WEA message will be sent to

- **IPAWS:** Integrated Public Alert and Warning System. System maintained by FEMA for the purposes of collecting and disseminating alerts from a wide variety of inputs to a wide variety of outputs, including WEA.

WHERE WE ARE

Currently, a WEA message:
- Can contain 90 characters
- Be geo-targeted to reach a target area based on wireless network towers covering a particular area
- Can contain URLs and telephone numbers
- Carriers are required to:
- Produce regular reports on errors that occur when delivering a WEA message

To increase awareness, government agencies will:
- Develop PSAs that use the WEA/EAS signals to help the public understand these systems

WHAT IS COMING

- **Improved Geo-Targeting:** Using device-based technologies WEA messages will be able to be sent to a specific area and limited to 1/10 of a mile of overshoot (11/30/19)
  - *WHY:* To reduce warning fatigue but ensuring only the people who need the information receive it.
  - *Real World Examples:* During Hurricane Harvey county officials could only send a countywide WEA message (4.7 million people/1700+ square miles) which limited the ability to reach specific areas that were facing different types of emergencies. During the California wildfires, messages could not be targeted to the rapidly changing areas that were in danger from the blaze. When a second IED was found in Manhattan following the initial bombing a WEA that was targeted to several square blocks was received miles and miles away.

- **Increased Character Count:** Alert originators will be able to send up to 360 characters of text (5/1/19)
  - *WHY:* Social science research informs us that 90 characters is not sufficient to tell people what's going on, what they should do, why it's important, and who is providing them the information.

- **Spanish Language Capability:** Alert originators will be able to send information in Spanish as well as English (5/1/19).
  - *WHY:* To ensure the Spanish-speaking community is able to understand and take action on emergency messages.

FOR MORE INFORMATION, CONTACT:

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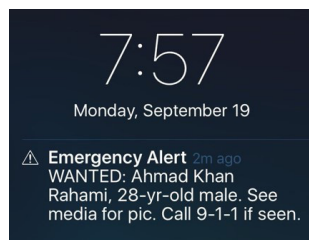hallie.frazee@oem.hctx.net
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MOVING WEA FORWARD

A Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA) Primer and Policy Update

MARCH 2018

WHAT IS COMING

- **WEA Testing:** Alert Originators will be able to send out "live" WEA test messages (5/1/19).
  - **WHY:** Like tests of the Emergency Alert System, alert originators will be able to send messages that are received by devices. This may increase emergency management/public safety's confidence in using the system and make the public more familiar with messages. It is highly recommended that alert originators use this capability sparingly.

- **Alert Message Preservation:** Cell phones will be required to preserve WEA messages for at least 24 hours (11/30/19).
  - **WHY:** In certain situations, an alert message recipient may want to refer back to information provided in the WEA message after initially reviewing it.

- **Consumer Choice:** Carriers will be required to disclose at the point of sale if a device or network does not fully support WEA.
  - **WHY:** Empowers consumers to decide if they want to purchase a device or service on a network that won't provide them information during an emergency.

WHAT STILL NEEDS TO BE DONE

- **"Many-to-One" Feedback:** upgrading the WEA system to support capturing feedback from WEA recipients via simple polling questions.
  - **WHY:** Will allow alert originators to quickly aggregate information and utilize that information to deploy scarce resources more efficiently.

- **Multimedia-Based Alerts:** allow images and/or graphics to be included in a WEA message
  - **WHY:** Will allow for better communication/ understanding of WEA messages by recipients, including those with limited English proficiency.

  7:57
  Monday, September 19

  ⚠ **Emergency Alert** 2m ago
  WANTED: Ahmad Khan Rahami, 28-yr-old male. See media for pic. Call 9-1-1 if seen.

  - **Real World Example:** In the 2016 Chelsea Bombings in New York City,

NYCEM was unable to include a photograph of the wanted terrorist, instead needing to direct WEA recipients to "see media for pic." Only 45% of WEA recipients took that extra step.

SEEKING INFORMATION
AHMAD KHAN RAHAMI
Explosion
New York, New York
September 17, 2016

- **Multilingual WEA Messages:** Languages other than Spanish.

- **Earthquake Messaging:** Require carriers to transmit earthquake messages within three seconds of receiving a message from a federal sensor.

- **System Reporting:** carriers provide data that allows alert originators to understand where, if any, gaps in WEA coverage exist in their jurisdiction.

- **User Choices:** cell phone users can set restrictions on when and what type of messages they would receive.

WHAT'S NEXT
- Forthcoming Public Notice from the FCC
- Bills introduced in Congress

WHAT YOU CAN DO
- Send comment letters to the FCC urging them to take action
- Participate in WEA-related webinars and discussions
- Help draft and get op-ed stories published
- Learn more about WEA and educate others in your organization

Join the National Public Safety Organizations in support of WEA Enhancements:

iAEM
International Association of Emergency Managers

THE UNITED STATES CONFERENCE OF MAYORS

BIGCiTY
emergency managers

NEMA
NATIONAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

APCO International
Leaders in Public Safety Communications™

NENA
THE 9-1-1 ASSOCIATION