EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION CHEAT SHEET

When an emergency happens, institutions of higher education, schools and healthcare facilities must quickly notify students, patients, staff and visitors so they can protect themselves and the individuals in their care. Emergency notification systems are an excellent way to inform everyone in a campus community when there is a dangerous situation that requires an immediate response on their part. That response could be sheltering in place, locking down, evacuating or some other action step.

Here's a breakdown of the more commonly used emergency notification systems. Many of these solutions can be integrated so critical information can reach more individuals on or near a campus, as well as other stakeholders, such as family members who could be in another state or country. Additionally, today's top emergency alert systems can be integrated with other security and life safety equipment.

Because no one solution can reach everyone during an emergency, multiple types of systems should be deployed. This approach allows the strengths of each system to compensate for the weaknesses of others.

Be certain to test the systems regularly, and account for the hearing and sight impaired, as well as community members who don't speak English. Train students, faculty, staff, medical personnel, parents and other stakeholders on what to expect and what to do after an alert has been issued. Many campuses train their populations to refer to the institution's Web site for additional information and instructions.

Other mass notification solutions include the Commercial Mobile Alert System, radio announcements, television announcements, toll-free phone numbers and weather radios. For information on these solutions, visit CampusSafetyMagazine.com.

Popular Mass Notification Systems

FIRE ALARM PULL STATIONS

Fire alarm pull stations are placed throughout campus, allowing anyone who detects a fire or other type of emergency to activate an alarm and prompt building occupants to evacuate to safety. To prevent malicious false alarms and vandalism by pranksters, install protective polycarbonate coverings over fire alarm pull stations. Some coverings even make a noise when they are lifted, which draws attention to the illicit activity. Additionally, install security cameras to monitor the pull stations as a deterrence and to enable campus security personnel to investigate and identify individuals who mischievously activate a fire alarm.

STROBES

Strobe lights are usually installed in conjunction with fire alarms systems but can also be added to other solutions such as call boxes/blue-light phones. They are an effective way to alert the hearing impaired about an emergency, as well as others who might be listening to loud music on their smart phones and can't hear audible alerts. Be sure to install protective coverings over your strobes to prevent vandalism and environmental damage.

VOICE EVACUATION SYSTEMS (CONNECTED TO THE FIRE SYSTEM)

Voice evac systems are highly regulated by codes and function even when other mass notification systems fail. Because they are connected to fire alarms, they are fully supervised so campus personnel are informed immediately when the system or a portion of it is not functioning. Voice evac also has backup power, so it will work during a blackout. It is mainly deployed indoors and can be combined with strobes to reach the hearing impaired.

LOUDSPEAKERS

These systems can be in a fixed position or portable, are inexpensive, cover a large area and get almost everyone's attention during an emergency. They are also effective at reaching visitors because they don't require registration for message recipients to be alerted. Consider combining them with strobe lights. Also be mindful of the topography of the area where the speakers will be deployed so messages reach their intended targets. Loudspeakers are particularly useful at athletic events. Be certain to address any text-to-speech challenges.

SIRENS

These devices are inexpensive, cover a large area, effectively reach visitors because no sign-up is required for them to be notified and can include strobe lights for the hearing impaired. Sirens can and should be mixed with voice instruction for improved communication of specific information.

CALL BOXES (BLUE-LIGHT PHONES)

Traditionally, call boxes have been used by individuals on campus to contact campus law enforcement/security, but loudspeakers can be installed on these towers to push-out information during an emergency. No sign-up is required to receive alerts from call boxes, so this type of system can reach guests who don't regularly visit campus. Consider installing call boxes in parking lots, intramural fields, bike trails and other remote areas.

DIGITAL DISPLAYS & CHANGEABLE MESSAGE SIGNS

Because no sign-up is required to receive alerts with digital signage, this solution is appropriate for visitors, as well as the general campus population. Digital displays also reach the hearing impaired. As long as the displays don't disrupt classes, medical treatment or research, they can also be used for general announcements. Be certain the emergency alerts stand out from routine messages with different colored lettering and light flashes. The system should also emit a tone during emergencies. Consider deploying digital signage for traffic control, crowd control and alerts during major events like football games and concerts. They can also be deployed inside cafeterias, student unions, hallways and classrooms.

TEXT MESSAGING

Text messages are one of the most effective ways of communicating with students, parents and off-campus constituents because the alerts reach them almost anywhere (as long as the phones are turned on). Be certain to test the system regularly and maintain the credibility of it by only using it when appropriate. Also, use the opt-out approach for registering students and employees to encourage participation in the program. Messages should originate from the institution, and campuses should quickly delete individuals from the database who are no longer affiliated with the institution.

INTERCOMS & IN-BUILDING COMMUNICATION DEVICES

These provide two-way communications for emergencies and non-emergencies, and are particularly effective in healthcare facilities because hospital staff are accustomed to using this solution every day. Some in-building communication devices even include small message signs for the hearing impaired. Be mindful of text-to-speech issues.

POP-UP COMPUTER MESSAGES

This solution allows messages to be displayed on computer screens even if the user has not logged into E-mail. This relatively inexpensive approach is effective at getting the attention of individuals who are at their computers or sitting in class watching presentations. It is particularly good for sending messages to staff and faculty who have computers that are controlled by the campus. Additionally, alerts can be discreetly targeted to individuals or groups.

SOCIAL MEDIA

Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, Snapchat and other social media portals are free and extremely popular with students and their parents. There is the potential for hacking, but social media sites generally don't have bandwidth issues. Administrators and executives can use these sites for rumor control, for the delivery of non-emergency information and for communication to individuals not directly affected by a crisis. Be certain to cater your messages so they are most effective for each medium.

5 Reasons to Reduce False Fire Alarms

False fire alarms are no joke and could be costing your campus more than you realize.

BY JAMIE PAUL FOR STI

STI's protective polycarbonate covers, like the Universal Stopper® pictured in the upper right corner of this photo, fit over manual pull stations and have helped stop false fire alarms without restricting legitimate ones. When the cover is lifted to gain access to the actual pull station, a piercing warning horn sounds.

FALSE FIRE ALARMS continue to be a problem for the fire service, schools, businesses and the public. Malicious false calls are among building administrators' biggest fire safety challenges. U.S. fire departments responded to 2,622,000 false fire alarms in 2016, according to Statista, and malicious false calls increased by 3.9 percent from 2015, accounting for 172,500 of all false calls.

Those numbers are unacceptable. Failure to take meaningful action will have disastrous consequences for citizens, building owners and security officers. Officials will question whether they need to increase personnel and resources to respond to and prevent these chronic false alarms. Here are five important reasons to reduce false fire alarms:

➤ ***Reason 1: The Cry Wolf Syndrome.*** To cry wolf is to sound an alarm frequently when nothing is wrong. Unfortunately, some fire departments report that they respond to one or two false alarms per day. False calls tie up valuable resources and can cause complacency by students and employees. If students and staff become desensitized to fire alarms because so many are being called unjustly, they might not react to a real alarm and evacuate a building that is on fire. This puts their lives and the lives of others in danger and reduces the confidence of the general public in the fire alarm system, which is dangerous.

➤ ***Reason 2: Lost Revenue.*** If a false alarm is activated, a building must be evacuated. This causes loss of productivity from students and employees. The building owner might also incur a charge from a municipality for the expense of the fire department responding to a false alarm when they were needed somewhere else.

➤ ***Reason 3: Disruption.*** False alarms cause unnecessary disruption to school and business effectiveness, efficiency, profitability and services. When a building is cleared, the potential of students, staff and visitors losing focus or wandering off increases.

➤ ***Reason 4: Inconveniencing the Fire Department.*** The fire department is critical to public safety. If they are responding to a false alarm, they are unavailable to help in a real fire, emergency or rescue situation. This could come at the expense of a life or reaction time, or endanger first responders or prevent department resources from arriving on a scene where they are legitimately needed. It also places a considerable drain on the fire authority's resources and disrupts other activities, such as training and community fire safety work.

➤ ***Reason 5: Unnecessary Risk and/or Panic.*** A false call puts the lives of emergency responders at further risk, creating the possibility of fatalities resulting from traffic accidents while fire trucks rush to attend to false alarms. It also causes public panic on the road or in a building, which can lead to unnecessary injuries or health issues.

COMMUNITIES DEPEND ON YOU

Become a better community member because it is the conscientious thing to do. Display respect towards society and authorities by not allowing individuals on your campus to pull false fire alarms. Additionally, campus leaders should report any suspicious activity and lead by example. Children, teenagers and even adults are always watching, learning and imitating others' actions. If you set a high standard, they will imitate and teach someone else, who will pass what they learn on to another.

One way to reduce false fire alarms — and sometimes completely eliminate them — is with STI's protective polycarbonate covers. Their unique cover fits over manual pull stations and has helped stop false fire alarms around the world for more than 35 years, without restricting legitimate alarms. When the cover is lifted to gain access to the actual alarm, a piercing warning horn sounds. Immediate attention is drawn to the area, and the prankster will either run or be caught before a false alarm is pulled.

Jamie Paul handles marketing communications for Safety Technology International, a manufacturer in the fire and safety industry. For more than 35 years they have proudly created covers, cages, alarms and custom buttons to help prevent theft and vandalism. STI continues to strive to make public buildings of every kind a safer place to live, work and play. Rely on STI.®

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