

COMBATING EMERGENCY ALERT FATIGUE WITH PRECISION



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The shocking and tragic flash floods that swept New York City underscore what's at stake in the absence of an effective emergency notification system. The severity of the emergency wasn't communicated in a timely enough manner — certainly not in advance, and not urgently enough even while the flash floods were underway. Most New Yorkers, programmed to dismiss "typical" flood and heavy rain notifications, didn't realize the gravity of the situation until they saw the footage of flooding on the news or worse — were caught in it themselves.

Alert fatigue is real, but it's not because citizens don't care about their own safety. They've been desensitized by frequent, broad, and sweeping warnings thanks to outdated processes, an inefficient approach to deploying alert systems, and a lack of policies and governance that has led to over notification for incidents that don't rise to the level of "emergency."

The challenge isn't unique to New York — alert and warning fatigue and effectiveness is an important issue for all municipalities to address. To protect lives and mitigate harm, cities of all sizes must have targeted and impactful alert systems and messaging in place, especially as they are confronted with the reality of new and worsening climate-driven natural disasters affecting their streets and citizens.

You might wonder what exactly is behind the alerts you receive, and what would make them better? Developed in 2006 in the wake of Hurricane Katrina, the Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS) is FEMA's national system for state and local alerting that provides authenticated emergency and life-saving information to the public through mobile phones using Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA), and to radio and television via the Emergency Alert System, among other channels.

When cell broadcast capability was first introduced through IPAWS, local governments using the system found themselves in conflict with the technology available from wireless carriers, which at the time was not location-based enough. Naturally, local authorities worked within the constraints and built processes reliant on centralized authority and authentication to broadly distribute limited emergency information.

Today, however, wireless technology has improved to a remarkable degree, offering us the ability to target WEA recipients (basically, anyone with a mobile phone) down to areas within no more than 1/10th of a mile or 528 feet. Local authorities have the capability to use geo-targeting to get potentially life-saving information only to people who need it most, and rapidly communicate emergency severity levels and safety instructions without relying

on people to opt-in to and check subscription notification services like NotifyNYC. When citizens come to expect reliable, critical alerts that are hyper-relevant to them, they will be more likely to take proper precautions.

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Officials in states across the country must begin removing historical, procedural red tape and empower local authorities to use alert systems to their full potential. The utility and effectiveness of cell broadcast technology as a life saving tool must be accompanied by an expansion of authorized, local alerting operators. State officials should instill clearer processes for granting timely origination authorities to local jurisdictions. Federal officials should look to modify the criteria to allow institutional users, including places like private universities and amusement parks, to become alerting authorities.

In the days following the flash floods across the Northeast, New York City announced it will start targeting special phone alerts to neighborhoods, particularly in Queens where there are heavy concentrations of basement apartments prone to flood dangers. This is an important step in the right direction, but it shouldn't end with flood warnings or be limited by neighborhood boundaries and zip codes. The more targeted and specific local authorities can become with emergency alerting, the more trust they will build among citizens and the more lives they will inevitably save. The technology is there, and it's time to use it.