



NEWS RELEASE

COUNTY OF LOS ANGELES

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June 18, 2009

County Implements Mass Alert System

Los Angeles County officials today announced the implementation of an emergency mass notification system to alert residents and businesses by phone, text, and e-mail of emergencies in their area.

Called Alert LA County, the system will allow the Sheriff's Emergency Communications Center to activate local and regional alerts by drawing the boundaries of the area to be notified on a computer map. Recorded and written alerts will provide information on the nature of the emergency and necessary actions, such as evacuations.

The system is so precise it will allow the exclusion of a single home, useful in situations involving hostages or crimes in progress.

The County's 7.1 million land-line phone numbers are programmed into the mass notification system, but the public must register Voice over IP lines, cell phones and e-mail addresses. Registration of this information can be done on the County's Alert.lacounty.gov website. Each telephone number and e-mail can be associated with only one street address.

Board of Supervisors Chairman Don Knabe said the system was tested in areas of each of the five supervisorial districts on May 18, and the results were impressive. Tests were conducted in South Whittier (First District), Ladera Heights (Second), Topanga Canyon (Third), a portion of Lakewood (Fourth), and The Meadows and Chaney Trail (Fifth).

The test included approximately 15,000 phone numbers, and a review was conducted to determine the number of calls that were completed and the disposition of each call, whether there was a live answer, answering machine, or busy. The test results were validated by calling a small sampling of those receiving the calls and getting their feedback.

If a call is picked up by an answering machine when an alert is being issued, a recorded message will be left. If the number is busy or does not answer, the number will be redialed twice. The system has the ability to detect and communicate with telecommunication devices for the deaf (TTY/TDD).

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The Alert LA County system project, approved by the Board of Supervisors on Feb. 17 at a \$1.97 million cost over five years, was developed by the Sheriff's Department, Fire Department, Chief Information Office, and Chief Executive Office's Office of Emergency Management. The cost includes the purchase of the 911 data from the local telephone companies.

Sheriff Lee Baca cautioned that while the notification system is considered effective and efficient, people should not wait for or rely exclusively on a call for evacuation directives if they believe they are in danger.

Supervisor Zev Yaroslavsky said similar systems have worked well in other areas, including in San Diego County where more than 500,000 people were evacuated during the 2007 wildfires. "This alert system will be particularly valuable in areas of my district in the Santa Monica Mountains that are vulnerable to fast-moving fires during high-risk weather conditions," he said, noting that in November 2007 a wildland fire threatened more than 2,000 homes and destroyed or damaged 98 dwellings and 45 outbuildings in Corral Canyon.

The County presently has no consistent way to contact residents and businesses in case of regional or local emergencies, so the new system will assist in making the communities safer, said Supervisor Mark-Ridley Thomas.

The notification system, said Supervisor Gloria Molina, will improve the County's ability to communicate faster, better and more reliably, providing the ability to target messages and follow-up information to residents in affected areas, and reduce the potential for miscommunication by distributing accurate and consistent messages.

Supervisor Michael D. Antonovich said the new system will improve public safety for all residents and those in the more rural areas of the County in case of regional or local emergencies.

Fire Chief P. Michael Freeman said wildfires have been increasingly threatening in the County, and the fire season is now a year-round reality instead of just several months, so he welcomes implementation of Alert LA County. "It will give us one more tool to keep the public safe," he said.

John Fernandes, director of the Office of Emergency Management, stressed that the new alert system is a component of the overall emergency notification plan and is not meant to replace existing systems. The County will coordinate its efforts with cities, and those having their own systems may continue issuing alerts in their area independent of the County.

Alert LA County uses geographic information system maps and polygons that correlate geo-coded information into telephone numbers and addresses. Acting Chief Information Officer Richard Sanchez said the land-line numbers will be refreshed on a monthly basis to ensure accuracy and numbers registered on the website will be added to the database on a nightly basis.

Knabe said the County will evaluate the notification system in four years to determine its value and usefulness and whether it should be continued.