Town expands avenues for communicating with residents using CodeRED notification

Getting a message out in severe weather is never easy, and finding ways to reach people means that every mode of communication must be used.

CUSTOMER PROFILE:
Hamburg is a town in Erie County, New York, located just south of Buffalo and with a population of 58,000.

PROBLEM:
Subject to natural disasters that range from snow to tornadoes, officials in Hamburg needed a way to reach residents with information.

SOLUTION:
Using CodeRED, officials can now reach townspeople by phone, text, mobile app, TTD and more with important news.

BENEFIT:
Phone calls to the town’s public safety dispatch offices have been dramatically reduced and residents now have up-to-date information at all times.

A snowstorm blankets New York

In November of 2014, the blizzard known as Winter Storm Knife dumped seven feet of snow in just 19 hours, blanketing the nearby town of Hamburg. The storm was responsible for a large number of abandoned vehicles, house-bound residents, food shortages and road closures, and threatened to bring flooding, building collapses and other challenges in its aftermath. Officials in Hamburg needed to share what they knew about the storm and its dangers with the townspeople to keep them safe.

Regular communication saves lives

Hamburg has a large commuter population in addition to the usual residents with the New York State Thruway running through the town. Thousands of motorists travel the section that runs through Hamburg each day; many of which are tractor trailers and tour buses.

Emergency Manager Sean Crotty in the Office of Emergency Services in Hamburg is responsible for notifying everyone in town of events like travel advisories, driving bans, boil water notices, severe weather warnings and more. Most events are layered and require multiple messages, like in the case of storms that brings traffic to a halt. Crotty knows that residents still need to take care of medical needs, plan around school closures and be aware that others are in similar straits.

The Solution: CodeRED

When Winter Storm Knife hit Hamburg, Crotty and other town officials were prepared to issue snowstorm warnings and did so, both in advance of the storm, as well as throughout it. When snow levels got so high that heater-venting systems were likely to be blocked by snow, a notification with potentially life-saving advice was sent to all residents to alert them to keep vents clear to avoid carbon monoxide poisoning.

“Proactive communication affords us the opportunity to communicate during the many phases of a crisis and to provide timely and potentially lifesaving information. Over the course of the storm, which lasted five days, we sent out a series of alerts to remind people to take safety precautions to avoid hazards like carbon monoxide poisoning,” said Crotty. “We wanted to reach people in as many ways as we could, so we used Twitter and Facebook to alert those who use social media, and we used CodeRED to reach individuals by email, recorded phone calls, TDD and text alerts. It allows our Emergency Services to tell residents what is occurring, what to expect, what is being done and what they can do to help.”

At the onset of the storm, dispatchers in the town’s 911 center handled hundreds of calls per hour. Over the 155-hour duration of the blizzard, the emergency services offices handled an average of over 57 phone calls per hour from concerned residents; Crotty says without CodeRED that number would have
been much higher. Many of the phone calls were looking for information on the driving ban, wondering where snow plows were and asking for assistance. With CodeRED, officials were able to deliver timely information to residents throughout each day and allow them to stay informed, reducing the need for them to call 911 seeking information.

Getting people to register for CodeRED is an ongoing endeavor as people leave the area while new ones move in, and cell phone numbers can change frequently. Crotty solicits new subscribers via social media, the local paper and by inserts in yearly tax bills. At the same time, as people leave or change phone numbers, the system is regularly purged of old unused data.

For many residents who leave the area for the colder months, homeowners are able to get alerts and updates about the area to inform decisions on having someone check in on their house. In addition, if there’s an incident in Florida, they can use the same CodeRED Mobile Alert app to receive alerts.

How emergency managers and others use CodeRED:

- Issue automated emergency alerts to apprise residents of water or power status after systems are interrupted
- Activate evacuation plans and guide and direct residents to safety in the case of hurricane or other disaster
- Provided timely local information from a trusted source to reassure and inform anxious residents

The end result

Crotty says he and other town officials are extremely satisfied with the CodeRED notification system. The training has been very helpful, the customer service excellent and the product has all the features his office was looking for. And by using the mobile app, he can send an alert from wherever he is when the need arises—even if that’s from the ski slopes.

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Sean Crotty
Emergency Manager
Hamburg Office of Emergency Services

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