Communicating with Residents
During COVID-19

A Question and Answer Session
with Troy Harper

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Troy Harper is OnSolve's General Manager, Public Sector. He joined OnSolve in 2013, bringing more than 20 years of emergency services experience to the team. That included a 13-year tenure as the Emergency Management Chief for Flagler County, FL, a coastal county with 100,000 residents and one of Florida's fastest-growing communities.

His career includes extensive planning, response and recovery activities for twelve federally declared disasters, weather emergencies, manmade incidents and wildfires, including one of Florida's most devastating wildfires. Harper also served as the appointed County 911 Coordinator and managed a multi-jurisdictional Public Safety Radio System. He served in the United States Air Force and holds multiple certifications. His experiences with emergency management, law enforcement, fire rescue, public health and search and rescue bring a discipline-specific approach to the OnSolve methodology.

Among his many strategic responsibilities, Troy defines the strategic direction and product enhancements for CodeRED, OnSolve's flagship product for crisis communications and notifications to the public and other groups served by all types of government agencies.

We spoke to Troy about public sector responsibilities and communications during COVID-19. Here is a transcript of that session, edited for clarity and conciseness.

Q
A
WITH

TROY HARPER
ONSOLVE'S GENERAL MANAGER

Q:
Troy, to start us off: In your experience and opinion, what would you say are the biggest concerns among state and local government agencies currently regarding handling this pandemic besides, obviously, the health of their citizens?

A:
Two words: unified communication. Because this is a global issue, there are no corners to hide in. There are no significant differentials across the population, whether by race, religion, or wealth status. So, a unified message shared from all levels of government starting at the federal level — really at the World Health Organization, the global organization — all the way down through the states, through the governors, to the counties, the commissioners, the cities, down to even the smallest town, village, or borough is critical. You shouldn't cross a county line and instantly face different rules and regulations. There should be standard messaging, whether it's on TV, a telephone call, a text, an email, a mobile app, or even the media just picking it up.

Q:

Can you share some insights into how the government can best communicate with citizens about COVID-19 information and updates?

A:

All emergencies, regardless of size, start and end at the local level, the smallest unit of government. Government exists to manage the infrastructure for the residents and the people, the resources and the services. And so, citizens want to hear from their governments. Citizens want to know that their governments are a) prepared, and b) responding in the best interest of the community. Governments should be engaged at a regular interval to keep their citizens informed.

And government can't be communicating just through the media. The outlets do a great job, but we've got to remember the media is advertiser-driven, so there are frequent times where the news may be exaggerated slightly or they may play the same story over and over. And so, getting that direct message from the government to the citizens, unbiased and unfiltered, is critical. And the best way for that to happen is for the government itself to deliver that message — by telephone, text, email, mobile alert apps, or in their social media pages — on a routine basis.

We've seen some of our largest clients, some of the largest cities in the country, in fact the largest county in the country do some incredible messaging. A large metropolitan city in California issued an IPAWS alert regarding protective actions for COVID-19. The most populated city in Massachusetts has been doing daily updates on a customized text to keyword program where they've had nearly 100,000 people subscribe in just over a week in a city of about 600,000 people. People are subscribed just to this COVID group, so they're targeting the content very specifically, so, the ability to communicate directly from any unit of government is a paramount issue.

And it's not just size. Some of our smallest clients, gated neighborhoods or gated communities, communicate to their 600 residents, 800 residents very, very effectively. And so I think that is the most critical step: local governments communicating down.

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Q:

What are some best practices on how agencies can approach educating their employees and what's expected from them during this time?

A:

Specifically, in the public safety field, we see regulations in government, we see best practices and policies. They're issued for a lot of things throughout the year and this is just another one of those items that should be taken very seriously. Now, how do you communicate that? How do you put information out, say to the workforce of the city with 80,000 employees?

Government, especially the largest of governments, must have an efficient, streamlined way to communicate with their staff. It's critical to have accurate data and good contact points. By that I mean not just work emails, but actually engaging with the staff and encouraging them to subscribe to specialty SMS or media groups, to provide their personal cell phone information, their personal email addresses — that's how government can be sure it's reaching everyone with every message. And I know a lot of employees are hesitant to provide personal information to the government because then you're never hidden, but in this day and age, information changes so fast it's critical that we maintain constant communication with our workforce.

Key Takeaway

Q:

The last question that I have just if someone read this and got all your information, what is your one key takeaway you'd like someone to walk away with?

A:

There's so many sizes of government. I mean, how do I talk to a small town versus large metropolitan city and give the same message? And I think if I had to generalize it across all of our clientele or anyone reading the article, it would be to use your communications tools. Use the tools to communicate the information to the citizens. There are ways for citizens to opt-out. You're not going to over-communicate with good content and a planned schedule of release, you're not going to create an over-abundance of information. Use these systems as your communications connection to the world, to your citizens, whether it's your neighbor, someone across a town, or on the other side of the city. This is your tool as a government and the best tool you have in your toolbox, by far, to communicate day-to-day, critical information to your staff and citizens.

About OnSolve

OnSolve delivers critical event management solutions designed to help enterprises, organizations and agencies of all sizes create the most successful outcomes when critical events occur. The OnSolve Platform for Critical Event Management™ combines leading risk intelligence, critical communications and incident management into one SaaS-based global portfolio. Our AI-powered platform is purpose-built to deliver fast, relevant and actionable intelligence, enable vital communications and allow response teams to react calmly and confidently.

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