



Hurricane Season: Communication Best Practices for Emergency Managers

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Emergency managers work year-round to help understand and communicate information about emergencies. Sometimes those crises are predictable, seasonal events — we know there will be hurricanes between June and November (just as we know there will be tornadoes in spring and wildfires in the summer). We don't need to look further than COVID-19 to know a disaster can come out of nowhere. And, sometimes, the predictable and the unexpected collide.

Emergency managers have vital communications roles to play before, during and after a hurricane. Here are some ideas to consider as you plan your 2021 hurricane season responses.

Before the Hurricane

Well ahead of time, be sure that you are actively monitoring structured (i.e., National Weather Service) and unstructured (i.e., social media) data channels to proactively detect impactful critical events. You'll also need to identify the channels you'll communicate through, the messages you'll send, and how you'll ensure your citizens will listen. Each piece is vital to a successful response.

Proactively Prepare with Actionable Intelligence

Data on critical events can come from every corner of the world — from federal agencies to the news to the neighborhood watch on social media. That's why it's vital to have a solution that continuously sifts through this vast pool of data, filters the noise and presents validated intelligence to help you understand critical events that will affect you directly. Empower your team with the right information so they can make fast, informed decisions that help save lives and mitigate risk.

Every Channel Every Time

The reliance on differing communication channels

The Impact to COVID-19

In this year's hurricane season we face a new threat to our response: COVID-19. It factors into almost every element of the 2021 hurricane season. From how you handle sheltering, to the equipment you will need, to protecting first responders: COVID-19 is pervasive.

Although I talk about mass notifications only in the context of hurricanes here, it doesn't mean that OnSolve doesn't understand the impact of the pandemic. You can read my thoughts on that in the article titled, [*We Face a Hurricane Season Like No Other. Communication Is Key to Our Response.*](#)

and media by various demographic groups has been studied extensively. Older folks watch TV, younger ones tweet. But you can't trust surveys and bar charts — especially when health and safety are on the line — to determine which media your citizens rely on. Nor, for that matter, can you predict which channels will be disabled by the hurricane. Use every avenue for your hurricane communications: print, broadcast, mobile, streaming, social — leave no channel disconnected.

Prepare Your Templates

Many of the messages you'll send out are predictable — especially to emergency managers who have been through hurricanes before. Three-day warnings. Shelter locations. Evacuation routes. But different channels and media have different requirements and best practices for presenting information. A tweet has character limits; a long SMS becomes difficult to follow; signage needs good design.

Here's where templates are vital. Create your critical messages, in all their variations and in line with all the restrictions of each medium, ahead of time. This lets you stay focused on important tasks at hand, and facilitates error-free messaging.

Think Like Marketers

In fact, bring your marketing team in to help you plan, prepare and send messages. They know how to attract an audience, how to target a message, the rules and the ins-and-outs of media and channels and content. Let them help with every aspect of getting all your messages out to the largest group possible. That's going to include expertise in signage, videos and social media content. Your marketing team brings all of the communications savvy, skills and experience that are their bread and butter.



During the Hurricane

When the storm hits, your communications goal is to reach everyone, with messages they can understand, in ways they can rely on.

Create a Communications Routine

People need routine in their lives when the sky is blue, and they definitely need it when a hurricane hits. As best you can, have your emergency communications occur at scheduled intervals; give people something to expect and rely on. Your Critical Communications system should reach everyone at the same times throughout the day.

Reach Out and Listen

Every time you reach out, open up and listen too. A critical event management (CEM) platform powered by AI offers capabilities that will help you build trust and gather information. For instance, Critical Communications offers an ideal way to create two-way interaction between you and the people you protect. You'll learn about the challenges your citizens face, get a better idea of the channels they use, obtain their feedback and even learn of new dangers before, during and after the storm. The data you gather from conversations and via social media using AI-enabled Risk Intelligence will be helpful now, as well as in next year's planning and broader studies over time.

Literacy Awareness

Lowest Common Denominator is a guiding principle in crisis communications. In one city battered by a hurricane, the literacy of more than a quarter of the residents was at the lowest level of the U.S. Department of Education's literacy scale. The CDC concluded that their materials were far above those citizens' reading levels. Always use the simplest words, the least-complicated syntax and the shortest sentences. Replicate the written information with well-designed pictograms and international symbols (another Marketing skill).

Plan for the Long Haul

While dealing with storm damage, other catastrophes can spring up, such as power outages, hygiene issues and infections. Keeping a constant eye on subsequent events as they unfold will help you avoid new threats. The CDC encountered that with Katrina: "Hurricane Katrina demonstrated the inadequacy of emergency communication response plans that fail to recognize the possibility of second (and third) scenarios and the certainty of subsequent health threats in extended disasters." (That's of course especially true in these times of COVID-19.) Having a solution in place that can alert you as soon as a critical event occurs will help you more effectively communicate the impact on an ongoing basis.

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In Touch. In Sync.

Stay connected and interactive with other emergency managers in city, county and state offices to coordinate consistent messages and procedures. A cohesive response depends on responders planning and training together — and respecting each other’s boundaries.

Partner with the Media

Emergency managers should also partner with local media to ensure that messages stay uniform and consistent. Make your local media a part of your response organization and bring them into the public information sector. They are a critical resource to put out this information. Here, too, your Critical Communications system is a perfect tool. Create a separate notification channel for the media, so you can provide additional, and maybe even early, information just to them.

After the Storm

When the storm is over, the actionable intelligence and communications are not.

Track the Impact

The challenges facing an impacted area don’t stop when the hurricane ends. You can leverage a solution that can sift through the latest reports from sources such as the National Weather Service, local news and social media to identify the information most important to you. With actionable intelligence automatically pushed to your team,

you save precious minutes when addressing events such as lingering storms, infrastructure issues and community health concerns.

Keep the Information Going

After the hurricane, communication is still essential. Reach out to let the community know that your agency is taking steps to repair damages and move forward. Give continuous updates. Let community members know when electricity will be restored, for example, as well as when another update can be expected. Let them know about food banks and other relief services. And stick to your word on when you’re going to bring them more information

Take Stock

The CDC’s analysis of what went wrong with its communications during Katrina was an important source of information for this article. It’s a blunt and honest assessment. Perform one just like it on your own response to your hurricanes. You’ll most likely find that you managed the expected things and some of the surprises fairly well, but there were other areas where your response needs improvement. The best way to prepare for next season is to learn all of the lessons from seasons past.



Communication Is Key to Good Outcomes

Successful hurricane responses are the ones where communications was strong. Effective communications keeps the community close and allows people to trust your agency has the situation under control. As an emergency manager, you play a critical safety role before, during and after a hurricane. And excellent communications is vital to your success.

About Don

Don Hall has 30 years of experience developing and implementing emergency plans and procedures. His public safety career includes 20 years as an emergency manager in Calvert County, MD, Jacksonville, FL, and Washington D.C. He has spent 10 years in law enforcement and 911 emergency communications and has a cumulative total of more than 42 years of active duty experience in Volunteer Fire and Rescue Service in Maryland.

Read More

[Record-breaking Atlantic hurricane season draws to an end](#)

[Emergency Communication Challenges in Response to Hurricane Katrina Lessons from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#)

[NOAA Risk Communication and Behavior Best Practices and Research Findings July 2016](#)



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