



COUNTY OF ERIE

MARK POLONCARZ

COUNTY EXECUTIVE

Daniel Neaverth Jr.
Commissioner

DEPARTMENT OF EMERGENCY SERVICES

45 Elm Street – Buffalo, NY 14203

716 858-6578 – FAX 858-7937

www.erie.gov/emergency

Gregory J. Butcher
Deputy Commissioner
Civil Defense/ Disaster Preparedness

Gregory Gill
Deputy Commissioner
Emergency Medical Services

James McCullough
Deputy Commissioner
Fire Safety

TO: Erie County Emergency Alerting System Users
FROM: Commissioner Daniel J. Neaverth Jr.
DATE: January 25, 2016

In 2006, Erie County Emergency Services embarked on an aggressive project to create a public-safety grade emergency responder alerting project based on county owned radio towers and equipment, and county-provided alpha-numeric pagers as a secondary means of emergency alerting – and it has proven to be highly reliable!

However, ten years later we find ourselves in a situation where most of the equipment is nearing end-of-life and/or is no longer upgradable to current operating systems. Furthermore, with the advancement of text-to-phone sharing of dispatch data, we estimate that less than 10% of the users are utilizing the system as it was designed by carrying the high-reliability alpha-pagers.

A NEW APPROACH:

We are pleased to share that we are in the final stages of evaluating modern third-party solutions that will far exceed the capabilities of our current system while providing a similar level of reliability as a secondary means of emergency alerting. We plan to procure and implement this system by the end of Q1-2016.

While we can't share all the details for a few weeks yet, what we can tell you is that the new system will offer the ability to receive emergency alerts and non-emergency messages via simple text, email or smart phone app –and– it will offer the ability for the end user to acknowledge receipt of the alert and identify their availability and mode of response – a significant enhancement over our current one-way paging system.

Integrated directly with Computer Aided Dispatch (CAD) systems currently operating in Erie County, this solution will also offer robust display and reporting capabilities on hand-held and mobile devices, at the fire station and at your dispatch center.

COSTS:

To the benefit of everyone, this system will employ the most modern technology while offsetting the significant operating costs of our current system including tower leases; hardware monitoring and maintenance; and phone line charges. Furthermore, the cost of implementing this new solution will be far less than the estimated hundreds of thousands of dollars it would cost us to upgrade or replace the existing paging system in its current form.

As with users of our current system, there will be no cost to your agency, your responders or your dispatch center for the core two-way alerting solution and CAD interface. We are still working to identify if there will be any initial or ongoing costs for enhanced capabilities outside the current scope of services; additional display, annunciation or external device activation equipment; or customized solutions similar to those we have or have not previously provided with our current system.

We suggest that agencies in the process of evaluating similar solutions consider holding off on making purchase or extended subscriber commitments for a short while as our negotiations with vendors include a provision to pro-rate current contracts, provided we select the same vendor you're selecting or already using.

SYSTEM LIMITATIONS:

Keep in mind that even with this new and improved system; this is still only a secondary means of emergency notification, supplementing but not replacing the tone and voice pagers your responders already carry, alerted by your dispatch center.

And, although the convenience of receiving alerts to one device worldwide can offer many benefits, relying on private cellular carriers for email and text messages is not the most dependable solution. As we are all aware, one of the first things to fail or get overloaded in actual disasters are the cell phone towers. That's why our original Public Safety Grade Emergency Alerting System was built on a stand-alone county owned and operated network.

Another important point to be aware of is the fact that there could be an inherent delay from the time the emergency message leaves the CAD and works its way through your cell phone carrier's system and arrives to your phone as a text message or email. However, you will note that it could take several additional minutes before the message appears on your cellular phone. This inherent delay is beyond the control of Erie County and lies solely upon the capacity of your carrier's system.

Nonetheless, we are evaluating solution providers who minimize the time it takes to get the emergency alert from the CAD, through their alerting network and to the cellular carrier within an acceptable timeframe; such as with push notifications.

STAY TUNED:

We are excited to announce this significant evolution of secondary emergency alerting capabilities in Erie County and we look forward to sharing more details with you as they become available. And, we will operate and maintain our existing alerting system until the new solution is installed and tested.

We know you'll have lots of good questions, so please be patient until we have more specifics to share and stay tuned to all of our normal outreach channels (www.erie.gov/alert, fax, email, and social media) for frequent updates as this system is implemented. Thanks.