

PROPOSED ALERTING SYSTEM SOUNDS PROMISING

Aug 6, 2009 1:19 PM, by Donny Jackson

While considerable focus has been put on the need for better communications within the first-responder community, communications with the public being served and protected also needs considerable attention. In an increasingly mobile society, traditional alerting tools like the emergency broadcast system may not get the message to the growing number of people who rely almost solely on a handheld device to stay in touch with the world.

With that in mind, last week's initial meeting of the Commercial Mobile Alert Service (CMAS) Forum is welcome news. Hosted by the Department of Homeland Security (DHS), 79 stakeholders — representatives of first responders, broadcasters, industry and academia, to name some sectors in attendance — laid the groundwork for an alerting system that would be used nationwide.

"We had great response and terrific levels of interest," said David Boyd, director of the DHS command, control and interoperability division. "Once the program is complete, we'll have a much more comprehensive alert and warning system than we do now."

Alerting technology has advanced considerably in recent years, but the effectiveness of alerting system has been limited by a couple of factors. For one thing, many alerting services rely on SMS technology, which has issues regarding security and timely delivery when capacity constraints are a problem — a common occurrence in an emergency situation. In addition, most alerting systems require users to subscribe to the service to receive alerts on their mobile devices, but it's rare for more than 10% of the population to take such action.

Although CMAS initially will be a text-based system (multimedia is a longer-term goal), it would not use SMS. Instead, 90-character messages will be distributed to users immediately using cell-broadcast technology, Boyd said.

"The carriers say they can handle this without any difficulty," he said.

Moreover, almost all mobile users would receive the alerts, because they would automatically be registered for the service unless they took the time to opt out, Boyd said. No user would be allowed to opt out of a presidential-directed alert — something that has never been issued to date — but they could opt out of lesser alert levels, he said.

"If we're able to design this the way we want, I can't imagine why anyone would want to opt out, because these are going to be life-or-death kinds of messages," Boyd said.

Indeed, a key to the success of CMAS is establishing a system in which alerts are only distributed when there is an imminent danger or threat — something that inherently requires the ability to target messages geographically, Boyd said. If the CMAS system is used for lower-level alerts, it risks being less effective, he said.

"We wanted to avoid the car-alarm problem — that is, the car alarm goes off so often that no one pays attention to it anymore," Boyd said, noting that delivery of a CMAS alert may be accompanied by a unique ring tone or vibration pattern.

Of course, using CMAS sparingly means greater levels of education will be needed on various levels. It must be clear who is authorized to initiate such alerts and that they are trained to condense the message within the 90-character limit. Meanwhile, a public-education campaign is needed, so citizens know what CMAS alerts are and that they must be heeded immediately.

It will be interesting to follow the development of the CMAS as more meetings are conducted throughout the fall. If the ultimate system is able to meet the guidelines established in this initial meeting, CMAS looks like a much-needed upgrade in the nation's alerting capabilities.