



MEMORANDUM

City Manager's Office

DATE: August 26, 2020
TO: Mayor and Council
THROUGH: Steve McHarris, City Manager *Steve McHarris*
FROM: Ashwini Kantak, Assistant City Manager
SUBJECT: Public Alert and Warning Notification Systems

Overview:

The SCU Lightning Fire Complex, which included the Reservoir Fire, impacted many residents of Santa Clara County, including residents in the unincorporated areas east of Milpitas. As part of its emergency preparedness, the City urged residents to sign up for emergency alerts through AlertSCC. This info memo is intended to clarify the uses of the various public information and warning systems for City Council and the public.

Key Updates:

What is AlertSCC?

In Santa Clara County and City of Milpitas, AlertSCC is the local alerting system for cell phones and email. The cell phone and email message delivery is an opt-in system, where individuals have to register for AlertSCC to receive alerts by cell phone or email address. They will then receive all relevant alerts for the address(es) they registered for.

How is AlertSCC delivered?

AlertSCC is delivered a variety of ways. All landlines phone numbers are automatically registered into the AlertSCC system to receive alerts via phone call, and no registration is needed for this. However, any community member must opt-in to receive mobile phone and/or email alerts. It is HIGHLY recommended that all community members register for text AND phone call alerts to their mobile phones. Often, people ignore phone calls from numbers they do not recognize, missing the urgent message. However, a text alert shares the message immediately so people can act on it. Additionally, when people are sleeping, they may miss text notifications, but might hear a phone call. For this reason, we highly recommend residents register for both phone call and text alerts. Email alerts are also available through AlertSCC; however, it is not the most time-sensitive method for receiving alerts.

What is IPAWS, the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System?

IPAWS is the federal alerting system. Every cell phone user is automatically registered with this system, unless they elect to disable these alerts in their phone settings. IPAWS uses your current location (cellular triangulation) to notify you of an emergency. For example, Amber Alerts are sent using IPAWS. IPAWS also sends TV and radio emergency alerts.

Both the City and County can use send IPAWS notifications in an emergency situation. In these instances, IPAWS (Wireless Emergency Alerts, or WEA) will be sent to all of the cell towers in the notification area and all cell phones within range of those cell towers will receive the notification unless

the feature to receive “Emergency Alerts” has been turned off on the cell phone. In this way, it allows the City to ensure everyone receives critical alerts, even if they are not registered through AlertSCC.

What is Everbridge?

Everbridge is the platform used to operate AlertSCC and IPAWS. It serves as the database of contact information, so that both systems can alert the appropriate groups when necessary. Everbridge draws on both cell phone and landline data from utility companies, so every user in a geographical area can be alerted through IPAWS in an emergency.

The City of Milpitas also uses Everbridge for internal staff alerts, including notifying staff to report into the Emergency Operations Center.

What is the difference between AlertSCC and IPAWS?

The difference in the systems is when alerts are received. IPAWS only notifies people if their cell phones are within range of a cell tower within the emergency notification area, whereas an AlertSCC notification is received if the registered alert address is in the AlertSCC databases (through E911, the white pages, or self-registered).

For example, a person who lives in Milpitas but is working in San Francisco at the time of an alert would NOT be notified of a local Milpitas emergency through IPAWS because their cell phone would not be located in the area of emergency. However, if that person is registered for AlertSCC for their Milpitas address, they will get the local emergency alert, regardless of their actual location at the time. This makes AlertSCC a useful way to know if there are any emergencies while a person is away on vacation, or for people who do not live in Milpitas but want to know if there are any situations impacting their loved ones here.

IPAWS will always alert everyone in the relevant geographical area of an emergency. This includes everyone who is visiting Milpitas and may not be registered for AlertSCC. This ensures that every single person in Milpitas will get an emergency alert through IPAWS when needed, and no one will be left out (unless they chose to opt-out of emergency notifications on their cell phone).

What are the benefits of AlertSCC?

One benefit of registering with AlertSCC is that no matter where you are, you will always be notified of local emergencies. Another benefit is that you can register for any address (up to five) in Santa Clara County. Thus if a family member works in Santa Clara, lives in Milpitas, and has a student attending San Jose State, they can register each one of those corresponding addresses to receive emergency alerts for their location.

Another benefit of the AlertSCC system is that it is not limited to a certain number of characters per message, so local emergency dispatch communications can give everyone more thorough information in an emergency. On the other hand, the IPAWS system is limited in character space. Whereas IPAWS may limit emergency alerts to say, “Evacuate this area,” AlertSCC will allow the City to share more detailed information, such as “Evacuate this area, avoid road X, and reunification at the Community Center.”

What are the benefits of IPAWS?

A significant benefit of IPAWS is that no one has to register to receive these alerts. That means that if you are visiting an area and are not registered for their local alert system, you will still be notified of an emergency because your cell phone registers the location, via cellular triangulation, in the area.

Does registering with AlertSCC sign me up for junk calls/spam texting?

Sign up information is stored in the Everbridge database and is not sold or used for any other purpose other than urgent and emergency alerts. Because AlertSCC is the local emergency notification system, the only individuals who access the AlertSCC Everbridge database are communications dispatchers, both local and county, and the emergency managers in Santa Clara County.

When can the alerting systems be used?

As a federally regulated program, IPAWS has strict use guidelines inherent to matters pertaining life safety emergencies. AlertSCC has less-stringent guidelines. This benefits local public safety agencies to use the system for other matters, such as, “Avoid an area due to police activity” or “Downed power lines in X area.” Local agencies can use AlertSCC for community notifications. In Milpitas, the AlertSCC system is used for communication about police and fire activities that may affect the neighborhood the event is located in and also for community notifications related to public health and safety emergency situations. It is not used for informational purposes because this will reduce the effectiveness of this system for true emergency notifications.

What is the PulsePoint app?

PulsePoint is an app used to notify people of local police and fire activity. When you set up the app, you set the parameters you wish to be notified of, such as “fires, car accidents, all activity, etc.”, then set the zip codes you wish to be notified of. The largest benefit of this app is that it allows locations that have automated external defibrillators, or AED’s, to register their locations. As a result, if a medical situation needs an AED before emergency personnel are on scene, it educates the public where the AEDs are for use to help in saving a life. While PulsePoint is an extremely useful app for providing AED locations for urgent medical care, its purpose does not take the place of the other emergency alert systems, it should not be used in lieu of the alert and warning systems described above.