

Emergency Alert Systems Need a Rewrite: Clear, Consistent Language, Faster Warnings

Bay Area emergency leaders move to eliminate confusing messages and reach more residents before disaster strikes

REDWOOD CITY, CA, UNITED STATES, July 18, 2025 /EINPresswire.com/ -- With deadly floods sweeping the nation, the County of San Mateo convened a summit of Bay Area leaders to improve emergency alerts.

The unprecedented gathering included 37 organizations from eight counties — from San Francisco International Airport to rural fire departments — uniting around a sobering reality: flooding is America's deadliest weather hazard, killing more people annually than hurricanes and tornadoes combined.

Deadly Week Underscores Summit's Urgency

This week alone has seen catastrophic flooding across multiple states:

□ Texas: At least 145 deaths confirmed, approx 102 people still missing from devastating Hill Country floods that began July 4th. The Guadalupe River rose 26 feet in 45 minutes, with water surging up to 29 feet in some areas. At least 27 campers and counselors died at Camp Mystic alone.

□ New York/New Jersey: Flash flooding from Monday's storms prompted a state of emergency in New Jersey, with over 5 feet of water reported in some homes and 16 water rescues in Mount Joy, Pennsylvania. New York City set a new record with over 2.5 inches of rain on July 14th, flooding subway stations

□ North Carolina: More than 100 water rescues performed near Chapel Hill and Durham as remnants of Tropical Storm Chantal dropped up to a foot of rain, with multiple flood-related deaths reported

□ New Mexico: Flash floods in Ruidoso killed 3

"The devastating events we've witnessed this month serve as a stark reminder of why this work cannot wait," said County Executive Mike Callagy during summit opening remarks. "Natural disasters don't follow our timelines—they demand that we act with urgency and purpose now."

According to The Washington Post, there have been 1,203 reports of flooding across the country

this July, more than double the average of 563, marking the highest number of floods reported in over a decade.

California's Hidden Flood Threat

While wildfires dominate headlines, flooding poses California's most widespread risk:

- California ranks 3rd nationally in flood fatalities (340 deaths, 1959-2019)
- 1 in 5 Californians (7+ million people) live in flood-risk areas
- All 58 counties have severe flood damage history
- \$900+ billion in buildings at flood risk statewide

"Floods are getting flashier as our warming atmosphere holds more moisture," said Dr. Shruti Dhapodkar, San Mateo County Emergency Management Director. "Every degree of warming increases atmospheric moisture capacity by 3 to 4 percent, making flash floods more deadly."

Three Critical Alert & Warning Improvements Identified

The summit featured internationally recognized crisis communication expert Dr. Jeannette Sutton, whose research reveals how emergency communication systems can be transformed to save lives.

"When floodwaters can rise 22 feet in two hours — as they did in Texas — our communications must be immediately clear and actionable," said Sutton, founder of The Warn Room. "Technical jargon in moments that demand clear language isn't maximizing our potential to save lives."

Summit participants identified three essential improvements for alerts and warnings:

1. Clear, Consistent and Complete Messaging: Emergency alerts must eliminate confusion by using standardized language across all agencies. Currently, counties use five different terms to trigger evacuation, creating dangerous confusion when lives depend on immediate action.
2. Strengthened Coordination: San Mateo County has nearly 500 people with alert-sending authority across agencies. "We all need to speak with one voice," emphasized Dr. Dhapodkar. This requires an extremely high level of coordination and commitment to consistent, complete language that drives protective action.
3. Protecting the Most Vulnerable: Alert systems must reach beyond traditional channels to ensure people with disabilities, language barriers, and limited technology access receive life-saving information and assistance reaching safety.

Unprecedented Regional Collaboration

Wednesday's gathering represented rare unity across Bay Area emergency management, with participation from:

Key Participants:

- Cities: From across the Bay Area, ranging in geographic size and population.
- Regional Agencies: Bay Area UASI, CalFIRE, CalOES, SFO International Airport.
- Fire Departments: Central County, North County Fire Authority, San Mateo County, San Mateo Consolidated, Redwood City, South San Francisco'
- Law Enforcement: Atherton, Belmont, Burlingame, East Palo Alto, Hillsborough, Menlo Park, Pacifica, Redwood City, and San Mateo PD

"We succeed or fail together," Dr. Dhapodkar emphasized. "When any one of our alerts work better, that benefits all of us. When our communications are clear, that strengthens the entire Bay Area."

Evidence-Based Solutions Implemented

San Mateo County becomes among the first in the nation to implement Dr. Sutton's research-based alert framework and templated messaging that are available for free to any partner or county across the country to leverage in their own jurisdictions, featuring:

- 45 tested message templates for frequent hazards
- 112 protective action statements across 48 hazard types
- Elimination of technical jargon in favor of clear, actionable language

Unlike reactive disaster response, San Mateo County's initiative addresses communication gaps before crisis strikes.

"We didn't wait for a crisis to expose our gaps," Dr. Dhapodkar noted. "We proactively sought expert evaluation to become a model for how alert systems should work. That collective coordination is rare in emergency management, yet it's a necessity for effective alerting in the moments that matter most."

Advanced Training Planned for Fall

San Mateo County's initiative represents just the beginning of comprehensive alert and warning reform. Dr. Sutton will return in fall 2025 to provide extensive hands-on training for Bay Area emergency communicators.

As California enters its peak fire season, with over 4,195 fires already burning and 201,295-plus acres statewide, and climate change makes extreme weather more frequent and intense, the seminar represents the foundation for Bay Area emergency communication excellence.

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