



A L E R T U S
UNIFIED FACILITY NOTIFICATION

Emergency Notification

Best Practices in the Health Care Industry

Hospitals and medical centers face a number of challenges related to ensuring a safe environment for patients, staff, and visitors. Health care facilities must therefore plan and prepare for emergencies of all kinds, including bomb threats, active shooters, hostage situations, infectious disease epidemics, and inclement weather or natural disasters.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services recently released a guide for health care facilities on how to prepare for an active shooter incident. The report, titled “Incorporating Active Shooter Incident Planning into Health Care Facility Emergency Operations Plans,” explains that having emergency notification reporting methods and lockdown procedures in place are important to ensuring everyone’s safety.

The guide goes on to emphasize the importance of developing an emergency notification system that can alert everyone across facilities when an emergency occurs. According to the report, “while there is a sense in the popular culture that a clear warning may induce panic, research shows that people do not panic when given clear and informative warnings. Research also shows that people want to have accurate information and clear instructions on how to protect themselves in the emergency.”



Boston University faces a number of unique challenges that led emergency management personnel to seek a campus-wide notification solution.

Most organizations acknowledge the need for an emergency alerting system, but putting together something comprehensive can be an overwhelming process as it involves multiple disciplines within the health care environment. “Organizations may have email, they may have overhead paging, but then you get to the point of saying ‘how do we begin this whole process of looking at emergency mass notification,’” says Peter Lester, National Account Manager for health care at Alertus Technologies.

Boston University, affiliated with Boston Medical Center and located in the heart of Boston, faces a number of unique challenges that led emergency management personnel to seek a campus-wide notification solution. Steve Morash, Director of Emergency Response Planning at Boston University, explains that the first step in the process of establishing an emergency mass notification system was sitting down to determine the university and medical center’s needs and priorities. “We needed to develop a common operational picture among our two organizations.” Establishing both clear processes and communication between the two entities would be essential in establishing a solid emergency notification plan and solution. “Boston Medical Center receives a lot of urban trauma cases, which means we need to let people know what’s going on from a safety perspective,” says Morash. “This is something we take very seriously for our nurses, our doctors, and our patients.”

Morash also discusses the pros and cons of often relied upon on paging systems associated with call directories. Many hospitals use call directories to issue emergency notifications to staff; however, Morash explains that these directories are not comprehensive and often exclude individuals such as patients and visitors. “You’re going to have people on your campus and in your hospitals who are not on those call directories, and how do you let those people know what’s going on,” says Morash.

To solve these challenges, Boston University and Boston Medical Center turned to Alertus Technologies for a comprehensive unified facility notification system that would allow them to instantaneously issue a facility-wide emergency notification. “The Alertus solution allows us to connect multiple command centers so that if someone



Boston Medical Center installed Alert Beacons in its National Emerging Infectious Diseases Laboratories (NEIDL) to establish better communication between the university and the medical center.



Carolinas HealthCare System implemented Alertus' innovative fire alarm control panel interface to improve emergency response times and communication between departments.

issues an alert for an emergency, either at the university or the medical center, the message can be set to go to all or select individuals so that everyone is informed of the situation,” says Morash. “Among most organizations that common operational picture becomes very important.”

Boston University is also in the process of building the National Emerging Infectious Diseases Laboratories (NEIDL), which is dedicated to the development of diagnostics, vaccines, and treatments to combat emerging and reemerging infectious diseases. These high containment areas and buildings also require special emergency notification solutions. “In our high containment labs, we have no real way of notifying our workers in those labs of what may be happening at the university,” says Morash. The medical center has since installed 30 wall-mounted Alert Beacons in the NEIDL. These devices sound, flash, and display a message when an emergency notification is dispatched, which has established better communication and coordination between the university and the medical center.

Carolinas HealthCare System, a network of hospitals located throughout North and South Carolina, is another example of a medical institution that found an innovative way to establish an effective, automated Code Red emergency mass notification system. Upon initial review, Carolinas HealthCare System found that its system was complex and consisted of a manually intensive process. “When we analyzed it, the time it took from alarm to overhead page and email notification was too long, and the message was not consistent and concise,” says Bret Martin, Director of Fire, Life Safety, and Utilities at Carolinas HealthCare System. Many medical centers follow “defend-in-place” procedures, which means patients aren’t immediately evacuated in the event of a fire alarm, and trained staff are directed to respond as soon as possible to the alarm origination. So concise, timely notification is a very important factor in an emergency situation.

In an effort to elicit a quicker response, Carolinas HealthCare System partnered with Alertus to create a solution that would monitor the fire alarm panel, receive fire alarm events, and activate an immediate emergency alert. “The system had



Alertus' fire alarm control panel interface and text-to-speech functionality provided Carolinas HealthCare System with comprehensive emergency notification.

to have the capability to read a truncated message from the fire alarm panel, convert it to an intelligible plain text language, and distribute it through all the multi-modality means of communication that we currently used—one of which was digital, in-house paging,” says Martin. This would allow for immediate, comprehensive emergency notification to all emergency response individuals through multiple alerting devices including smart devices, text messaging, email, pagers, and computer pop-up screens.

Text-to-speech was another component that Carolinas HealthCare System needed to make its emergency communications more effective. “We wanted the Alertus system to use existing overhead paging systems in each of the facilities so that it would broadcast the Code Red message in accordance with the criteria established by our authorities having jurisdiction,” says Martin. “All of these components were critical to making sure that the system increased the reliability, responsiveness, and accuracy over what we had with a manual process.”

As both Morash and Martin will attest, identifying organizational needs and existing gaps in emergency communication are the first steps in establishing a comprehensive emergency notification process. From there, building a system with components that meet those needs will help organizations develop a more secure and methodical process for notifying everyone in an emergency.

About Alertus

Alertus Technologies® leads the industry in unified facility notification. For more than a decade, Alertus has engineered innovative emergency alert systems for colleges and universities, K–12 schools, corporations, medical centers, military bases, and government organizations—some of our customers include Virginia Commonwealth University, Boston University Medical Campus, and the U.S. Department of Defense. The Alertus system is a customizable array of emergency notification products, including the wall-mounted Alert Beacon®, computer desktop alerting, USB panic button, LED marquee display, text-to-speech interface for public address and giant outdoor speaker systems, fire alarm interface, digital signage and cable television override, and VoIP phone alerting.

For more information, visit www.alertus.com.