

Report from Subcommittee on Government to Media to the Public Communications and Safety Working Group of the Media Security and Reliability Council

May 28, 2003

Executive Summary

Introduction

The Media Security and Reliability Council charged the Public Communications and Safety Working Group with studying methods of “ensuring consistent, reliable, and accurate communication among the media, government, and the public when a public safety emergency is declared.”

To effectuate this mission, the Public Communications and Safety Working Group met on June 25, 2003 and broke into four subcommittees:

- (1) Media to Media,
- (2) Government to Media,
- (3) Government to Public, and
- (4) Media to Public.

The Subcommittee on Government to Media’s primary focus was “the means by which the government and the media communicate emergency and public safety information to the general population.” The subcommittee decided quickly that more data was needed about the status of the existing Emergency Alert System. The subcommittee decided to focus its agenda first on what is needed to make EAS fully operational as the initial step toward giving the nation an effective emergency warning system. The discussion of potential EAS enhancements, expansions or replacements was set aside for subsequent study.

Chaired by Ann Arnold, the subcommittee grew to 24 members¹ representing a broad cross-section of government, media and non-governmental organizations concerned about the success with which the government delivers emergency warnings to the public. The subcommittee held 12 meetings in a nine month period deliberating on how government disseminates emergency information to media and how that process could be improved.

To compile the needed information about the status of EAS throughout the nation at the state and federal levels, the subcommittee conducted a nationwide survey of state EAS systems. To review the study and attempt to reach consensus on what needs to be done the committee hosted a federal meeting in Washington, D.C., on February 21, 2003.

¹ See Appendix I for Members of the Subcommittee on Government to Media

State Survey

The nationwide EAS survey was conducted from January to April 2003.² The subcommittee compiled results from all 50 states and the District of Columbia and subsequently issued an 86 page document.³

SECC Chairpersons were asked to respond to the following nine questions.

1. What governmental entity is primarily responsible for implementing the plan?
2. How fast are EAS messages typically turned around?
3. What additional use is made of EAS? (Amber? NWS? Other uses?)
4. What is the method of delivery? (How are EAS messages disseminated?)
5. How often has EAS been activated in your state?
6. How many Local Plans have been developed?
7. What are some problems with system?
8. Can the state entry point(s) monitor a PEP station? If so, which?
9. If your state entry point(s) cannot monitor a PEP station, can your state entry point(s) monitor a station that in turn monitors a PEP station?

The purpose of the survey was multi-pronged.

First, the survey provided an outlet for broader participation in the process. State Emergency Communications Committee (SECC) chairpersons, state broadcast associations and cable operators were given opportunities to comment.

Second, the survey provided invaluable information to subcommittee members, government officials and an array of individuals interested in emergency warning operations. Field data from the various respondents concerning dissemination methods, common problems, usage data and government involvement were collected. By comparing and contrasting this information, the subcommittee was able to compile a list of successes and failures and make recommendations for improvement of EAS.

Third, the survey provided a reference point for emerging innovative ways of expanding capabilities across the nation and improving the system. The survey highlighted, for example, that California is using an Emergency Digital Information Service (EDIS), an advanced digital tool that allows California's emergency managers to alert and inform the news media and the public. EDIS is like a combination of a website, newswire and 24-hour broadcast service. Authorized agencies release text, pictures and sounds over EDIS using their own existing information networks.

Finally, survey results prompted other organizations to join the subcommittee's discussion about particular EAS problems and emergency warning in general. The Primary Entry Point Advisory Committee (PEPAC), for example, utilized data collected from the survey to make recommendations for improving Primary Entry Point (PEP) operations.⁴

² See Appendix II for the State Survey Results Summary

³ See Appendix III for entire survey results

⁴ See Appendix IV for PEPAC response to state survey

The Primary Entry Point Advisory Committee coordinates efforts of 33 radio stations that are intended to be a method of last resort for the President of the United States to communicate with the public in the event of a national emergency. The stations were chosen during Cold War days (under the old Broadcast Station Protection Program) based on coverage, distance from known nuclear targets and cooperation of station management.

Despite vast changes in the ensuing four decades, those 33 PEP stations are expected to cover the entire nation. That assumption may be reasonable during nighttime hours, presuming all other radio stations are off the air. How effective the PEP system would be in communicating with the American public during daytime hours is less certain. (Most PEP stations are on the AM band; Hawaii uses an Emergency Operations Center.)

The system is tested regularly by closed circuit, but there has never been an actual on-air test, according to the PEP Advisory Committee. In past years the PEP Advisory Committee has sought approval to increase the number of stations, but there has never been sufficient interest or funding. An example, of the lack of interest in such issues was the almost overlooked decision during the Clinton Administration to cut emergency phone links to the major national networks as a measure to save the cost of the phone lines. PEPAC has attempted to expand its potential coverage through an agreement with National Public Radio (NPR).

NPR can augment distribution of national emergency information by forwarding federal alerts from a PEP station via the NPR satellite cue channel. Arrangements must be made at a local level, however, for specific NPR affiliates to carry PEP alerts.

Federal Meeting

The subcommittee brought together key stakeholders at a national meeting held in Washington, D.C. on February 21, 2003 in what many believe was an unprecedented collaboration among interested parties and key government agencies involved in EAS.

Thirty-three individuals were present at the meeting, including key representatives from the following:

- Federal Emergency Management Agency,
- National Weather Service,
- Federal Communications Commission,
- Homeland Security Department,
- Society of Broadcast Engineers,
- Partnership for Public Warning,
- National Alliance of State Broadcast Associations,
- National Association of Broadcasters,
- National Center for Missing and Exploited Children,
- first responders and equipment manufacturers.

The Subcommittee on Government to Media reviewed the tentative state EAS survey results at this meeting. The results provided a springboard for much of the discussion with the lack of any clearly defined federal leadership role in EAS as the major topic of discussion.

Some of the key agreements reached at the meeting include the following findings:

- Federal leadership is the missing key to an effective program.
- Coordination among federal and local emergency agencies and broadcasters is lacking.
- National reliance on only 34 primary entry point stations to reach an expected 99 percent of the population is unrealistic and contains many deficiencies.
- EAS units need to be upgraded to accommodate new codes approved by the FCC in 2002.

Report

The subcommittee's initial recommendations are incorporated in the report from the Public Communications and Safety Working Group. Further work is needed to implement those recommendations. MSRC approval of the recommendations is vital. Additionally, an assertive program needs to be agreed upon and implemented to make sure those recommendations come to fruition.

The subcommittee concluded that there are four basic issues fundamental to the health and effectiveness of EAS:

1. Putting someone in charge of EAS at the federal and state level
 2. Getting all state and local plans operative and up to date.
 3. Improving access to EAS entry points by and EAS training for local emergency personnel.
 4. Upgrading all installed EAS equipment with new codes approved by the FCC in 2002.
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