A P T A   S T A N D A R D S   D E V E L O P M E N T   P R O G R A M

RECOMMENDED PRACTICE

American Public Transportation Association
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Emergency Communication Strategies for Transit Agencies

Abstract: This document establishes a *Recommended Practice* for transit agencies to follow in order to effectively communicate with their employees, the public, first responders, various government agencies, the media and others during emergencies.

Keywords: communication, emergency

Summary: An emergency event may disrupt transit agency communications in unexpected ways. Agencies should prepare in advance by ensuring that communications protocols are part of their emergency and/or continuity of operations plans.

Scope and purpose: This *Recommended Practice* provides guidance for managing internal and external emergency communications. It is intended for use by transit agencies to establish or improve their emergency communication protocols. In some cases, federal and/or state regulations may govern a transit agency's operations. In those instances, the government regulations take precedence over any practices recommended herein that are in conflict with any such government guidelines.

Summary of recommendations:
- Provide security and emergency preparedness information for employees, customers, and the general public
- Review recommended strategies to assist in efforts to communicate with employees, customers and the general public

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Emergency Communications Strategies for Transit Agencies

1. Types of emergency incidents

Transit agencies should consider the communication strategies outlined in this document for emergency incidents with a view toward implementing the recommendations where practical for individual agencies and incorporating them as supplements to their emergency plans as appropriate. Listed below are examples of some of the different types of incidents that are addressed within this *Recommended Practice*:

- terrorist attacks
- natural disasters
- increased HSAS threat level
- passenger/employee safety and or security issues
- incidents/accidents that entail mass injuries or fatalities
- catastrophic equipment failure or defects
- power failures/blackouts
- incidents resulting in evacuation/rescue from trains, buses and or stations
- virtually any incident causing major service disruptions and necessitating notification and timely, accurate updates to passengers, employees and the general public

2. Recommended measures

2.1 Pre-event

Agencies are encouraged to prepare for an emergency incident before one actually occurs. The following are some planning and communication strategies to consider implementing:

- Apply for Government Emergency Telecommunications Service (GETS) to help ensure that the transit agency's key safety, security, emergency management/response personnel and PIOs can maintain communications ability in general during natural disasters, power outages, cable cuts and software problems that can cripple the telephone services of an entire region.

  NOTE: The Federal Transit Administration has confirmed that virtually all U.S. transit agencies are eligible to receive GETS and should contact the National Communications System (NCS) directly in order to apply/register for the service. Contact information and instructions for registering can be found in Appendix A.

- Provide security and emergency preparedness information for employees, customers and the general public. For more information, see the FTA guidelines at http://transit-safety.volpe.dot.gov/Emergency/Emerman.asp.
- Develop a quick-reference emergency preparedness and response guideline for employees. Information should be designed to increase awareness of measures that employees, customers and the general public can take to increase the security and safety of their transportation system.

- Have pre-designated points of contact for employees (800 numbers, fax machines, e-mail, etc.); different and redundant technology will mitigate against a single point of failure.
- Establish relationships with local emergency responders and emergency volunteer groups, such as CERT and other similar organizations. Ensure that volunteers and emergency responders are well-versed in the emergency communication protocols of the transit agency.
- Develop specific SOPs for emergency communication protocols and consider making modifications to transit facilities and vehicles for the local disabled and special needs community, those who will most likely be hindered as a result of not seeing or hearing emergency/evacuation notifications, updates; evacuation instructions, and so on.
- Develop multiple ways of communicating with passengers, employees/contractors, first responders and others involved during emergencies or prolonged service disruptions.
- Educate employees about the need for personal contingency plans to provide for the welfare of themselves and their families.
- Develop a database of employee emergency contact information and next of kin for use during response and recovery activities.
- Develop having a point of contact phone number for families of employees who may need to get messages to their kin at work during an extended emergency (i.e., a Katrina type event).
- Direct employees to be alert and to immediately report any suspicious activity or potential threat. To the extent that resources allow, use surveillance systems to monitor for suspicious activity.
- Develop emergency communications plans for alternate operating facilities and document the plans within the agency's continuity of operations plan (COOP).
- Identify essential communications personnel and alternates by positions or titles rather than the names of individuals. Include the information within the agency's emergency plans or COOP.
- Cross-train appropriate essential personnel for continuity of operations from a communications perspective. This is done in the same manner as the agency would for personnel responsible for ensuring that essential functions, such as payroll, are uninterrupted during extended emergency situations.
- Network with local and regional law enforcement and security intelligence units, the Joint Terrorism Task Force, and the area TSA federal security director or surface transportation security inspector for assessments of current security-related information.
- Participate in the Surface Transportation Information Sharing and Analysis Center and Homeland Security Information Network.
- Have pre-designated points of contact for employees (e.g., 800 numbers, fax machines, Email, etc.); different and redundant technology will mitigate against a single point of failure.
- Consider If interoperable radio communications are not available, consider having radios provided from each key agency prepositioned with mobile command post vehicles, at key communications hubs, etc., in order to provide a means for communicating with any radio network from one or more locations.

2.2 During event

- The strategies listed below are recommended to assist transit agencies in their efforts to quickly communicate with employees, customers and the general public during emergency events. All preferred strategies of this nature should be incorporated into the agency's written emergency plans.
- Ensure that transit agency points of contact (POCs) or public information officers (PIOs) provide timely, accurate, consistent and unified information updates, both internally and externally.
- Continually update emergency evacuation signage posted onboard vehicles, within transit stations, in transit centers and in administrative and maintenance facilities.
- Post signs and/or make routine public announcements emphasizing the need for passengers to closely control baggage and packages.
- Strategically increase the frequency of public service announcements, especially during peak hours.

NOTE: FTA Transit Watch guidance suggests that announcements be repeated every 30 minutes during periods of heightened security concerns.

- Increase the distribution of security awareness materials to passengers in stations and onboard revenue service vehicles as appropriate.
- Communicate information continuously to passengers through multiple mediums during periods of heightened security alerts, as well as during and in the aftermath of emergency events.
- Communicate protective measures via all available mediums, encouraging passengers on vehicles and in stations to proactively engage in them. For example, request that passengers report unattended property or suspicious behavior to uniformed agency employees or to law enforcement personnel.
- To the extent possible under the circumstances and via all available media during an event, communicate realistic wait expectations (for those onboard disabled trains waiting for rescuers, for those waiting for the arrival of shuttle vehicles dispatched as a result of emergency events or stemming from major service disruptions, and so on).
- Instruct employees working alone at remote locations or on the right-of-way (ROW) to check in on a periodic basis. Minimize the number of employees working alone in nonpublic areas. Increase the frequency of call-ins for isolated assignments.
- Ensure that all essential personnel, including employees with access to building plans and area evacuation plans, are either physically available to return to designated work locations or remain reachable via the agency's emergency communications system or notification/call back to duty protocol.
- Brief staff and executive management as necessary on possible emergencies and protective measures being taken per the threat level condition.
- Periodically contact liaisons with each station or facility to maintain open lines of communication by using available security personnel in each location.
- Maintain fax numbers as an alternative means to communicate when other means are unavailable.
- When all electronic means are unavailable, human carriers/messengers are an option that may become necessary as a last resort.

2.3 Post-event

- Agency PIOs should develop announcements regarding restoration of service. For example, a simple explanation of damages, what's operational, what's not and reassurance that facilities/vehicles in service are indeed safe will help restore a sense of normalcy, public confidence in transit service and resumption in ridership.
- On a frequent and recurring basis, provide the public with useful information gleaned from internal briefings, as well as updates concerning operational status information.
- Use all available media to make frequent announcements about restoration of service, transit security and the transit system's state of readiness. Work to restore public confidence by reporting available ongoing and post-incident/recovery, law enforcement and safety information.
- Consider establishing a Disaster Recovery Center consisting of customer telephone hotlines. The center can be used as a backup customer service/control center with multiple transit employees serving as operators, or as a fully automated system that provides pre-recorded information/updates. Optionally, automated Disaster Recovery Center systems may provide interactive voice assistance.
- When a post-incident debriefing takes place, ensure that the effectiveness of communications is reviewed.

3. Training

Training of each employee's role and responsibility regarding the agency's emergency communication strategies is critical to everyone's safety and security. Refreshers and retraining for program participants should not be overlooked in the process of creating and implementing emergency communication strategies.

The following are some emergency communications training strategies to consider:

- Develop and disseminate emergency response, communications, contingency and recovery plans or procedures to all essential personnel.
- Review with appropriate employees and contractors the elements of security and emergency management plans and personal safety pertaining to implementing increased security levels.
- Reinforce employee and customer security awareness programs, such as Transit Watch.

4. Exercises

Transit agencies should make provisions to test internal emergency communication protocols, either by independent exercises or as part of regular emergency response exercise(s) to ensure that the protocols in place are effective.

Whenever practical; consider performing exercises openly in stations and/or on other appropriate agency vehicles or properties in order to remind customers of the potential for catastrophe and the importance of preparedness. Through PIOs, provide the media with press releases about upcoming exercises and invite them to be present as observers for the exercise as well. Be sure to have PIOs present to serve as liaisons for media members who accept the invitation.

The agency should also periodically update and test contact databases, calling trees and notification and recall lists. Verify primary and secondary employee telephone numbers on an annual basis. Test public emergency communications plans, perhaps by using tabletop drills and exercises.

Appendix A: National Communications System Contact Information

Phone and e-mail

- NCS Priority Telecommunications Service Center: 1-866-NCS-CALL, or in the Washington, D.C., metro area: (703) 760-2255 E-mail: gwids@saic.com

Web resources

- http://gets.ncs.gov GETS for priority treatment when using a landline phone
- http://wps.ncs.gov WPS for priority treatment when using a cellular phone
- http://tsp.ncs.gov TSP for priority provisioning or restoration of critical telecommunications circuits

Identify a single POC or preferably a trained PIO to manage all internal and external agency communications. The primary objective is to help ensure that every person with a need to know within the agency maintains equal and accurate situational awareness from beginning to end of an emergency via an orchestrated review and subsequent dissemination of incoming information. All outgoing information should be reviewed for accuracy in order to prevent inadvertent releases of certain information, such as names of victims or certain key facts that may compromise or law enforcement investigations if released prematurely.

References

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Definitions

Community Emergency Response Team (CERT): A program that educates people about disaster preparedness for hazards that may impact their area and trains them in basic disaster response skills, such as fire safety, light search and rescue, team organization and disaster medical operations. Using the training learned in the classroom and during exercises, CERT members can assist others in their neighborhood or workplace after an event when professional responders are not immediately available to help. CERT members also are encouraged to support emergency response agencies by taking a more active role in emergency preparedness projects in their community. See http://www.citizencorps.gov/cert.

Homeland Security Advisory System (HSAS): A system to provide a comprehensive and effective means to disseminate information regarding the risk of terrorist acts to federal, state and local authorities and to the American people and communicating protective measures within government and throughout the private sector.

personal digital assistant (PDA): A handheld or palmtop computer. Newer PDAs have both color screens and audio capabilities, enabling them to be used as mobile phones (smartphones), Web browsers or portable media players. Many PDAs can access the Internet, intranets or extranets via Wi-Fi or wireless wide-area networks (WWANs). Many PDAs employ touchscreen technology.

tabletop drill/tabletop exercise: A simulated response to a hypothetical natural or human-caused disaster.