



Emergency Communications Planning

15 Points

New Action – May 2016

This action was developed in partnership with the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management.

Ask anyone involved in public information during an unexpected crisis or a planned special event and they'll say that advance preparation is the key to emergency communication effectiveness. If recent events have taught us anything, it's not whether a municipality will experience an event requiring emergency communication, but when.

Understanding that no one form of communication will get essential information to the entire community, municipalities must have a plan to use a broad array of methodologies to communicate during declared as well as non-declared emergencies, and create a registration procedure for the public to receive emergency updates. Towns will need to create internal communications procedures for key personnel during emergencies, and a process to test the system and train the staff on the system procedures and protocols.

To qualify for up to 15 points, a town must demonstrate that it has an emergency communications plan to utilize a variety of communication channels for both declared and undeclared emergencies, and has used them at least once during either a declared emergency or a non-declared emergency/major public inconvenience situation prior to applying for certification. The plan must be prepared or updated in the 18 months prior to the June submission deadline, which includes the use of the appropriate communication procedures and public notification system during an actual emergency or testing procedure, and ongoing implementation and promotion of the public notification sign up process in order to continue receiving points for this action each submission cycle.

Why is it Important?

Rapid technological changes in the area of communications have caused a “disconnect”

between the information dissemination methods of government agencies and those used by the public to receive information. Every municipality in NJ is required to have an Emergency Operations Plan (EOP), which typically focus on response personnel and resources. The communications portion of emergency response is often overlooked and rarely exercised. This action attempts to address this issue with a plan based specifically on emergency communications and recommends it be incorporated as appendices into either or both, the Emergency Support Functions (ESF) 2 (Communications Annex) and 15 (Standard Operating Procedures) of the municipality's EOP.

Note: In order to remain consistent with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) language, the New Jersey Office of Emergency Management (NJOEM) is now referring to annexes as ESFs. The related EOP annexes are the *Emergency Public Information Annex* and portions of the *Alert, Warning & Communications Annex*. For purposes of this action, we will refer to the documents as ESFs rather than annexes, as it reflects the current NJOEM requirements.

In a declared emergency, communication implementation will determine public perception about how an agency has handled a crisis, and more importantly, can save lives. Having residents informed on a timely basis about non-declared emergencies and public inconveniences, such as road closures, water shut offs, and other events that will impede their daily routines will help the public plan more effectively and build trust in local government. While first responders and government personnel know how hard they're working during an event, without timely and trustworthy messaging from local government, affected people will remain inconvenienced, increasingly anxious, wondering what to do and how to get help.

Effective emergency communication can contribute positively to public safety by:

- Including the public in readiness efforts through preparedness messaging;
- Keeping the public calm by sharing information about response efforts;
- Employing the public as "informants" by soliciting location-based details;
- Directing the public to appropriate and effective resources before, during and after a crisis.

Messaging or information dissemination failures can have significant negative impacts. Figuring out how to get messages to the public in the midst of a major event is not the best approach. It takes time to build media relationships, develop web pages, create and grow social media channels, and write appropriate messaging. This all has to be discussed, developed, planned and practiced in advance. Public safety and the appropriate government agency's reputation may depend on it.

Who should lead and be involved with this action?

The Office of Emergency Management, or for smaller municipalities, the Emergency Management Coordinator, should take the lead on this action.

Also participating should be the Deputy Emergency Management Coordinator, the Municipal Public Information Officer (for smaller municipalities that is likely the Business Administrator), the Police Public Information Officer, the Director of Public Works and the Business Administrator. The municipal web or digital media professional should be involved to handle digital communication channel implementation and/or updates. Fire and rescue squad chiefs may also want to have input on the communications process, and should at minimum be made aware of the plan for testing purposes.

A related municipal committee that can be an important resource during the development of this emergency communications plan is the Local Emergency Planning Committee (LEPC). Every municipality has been designated as a local emergency planning district and has an LEPC, which is tasked with developing and annually reviewing the district emergency response plan and providing the public with information about hazardous chemicals in the community. The LEPCs can be used to help get the word out about potential threats dealing with chemicals within the community during an emergency.

Timeframe

The time frame for this action is 3-6 months to create and prepare a plan and then ongoing effort is needed to maintain and update the plan and conduct drills to test the plan components.

State law requires all municipal Emergency Operations Plans to be updated every four years. While the implementation of this action does not impact this state review process, it does require knowledge of the current municipal EOP, more specifically, Emergency Support Functions 2 and 15.

Municipalities with limited use of digital communications methodologies, such as a website, email notification list, or social media, will need a longer period of time to implement those strategies.

Municipalities without any budget for public outreach may need to factor in the next municipal budget cycle for digital and/or print media costs.

Project Costs and Resource Needs

This action provides flexibility for a municipality to choose the methods it will use to communicate with its citizens in a crisis. It is recommended that municipalities study the demographics of their community (see the [Vulnerable Population Inventory for Emergencies action](#)) prior to making that determination, then design and implement a communications strategy that reaches those at-risk or vulnerable residents.

Resources needed for this action may include sign boards, advertising, print media, reverse 9-1-1 systems, web, electronic newsletter systems, cable TV or digital recording equipment, text

messaging systems, and social media dashboards as well as training for the chosen communications methodologies. It is not anticipated that additional personnel are required for implementation of this action.

What to do, and how to do it ("How to")

This section provides the requirements for earning points for this action. **It is highly recommended that towns view this in depth guidance for implementing the action and examples from around the state and nation.** A town does not need to follow this guidance exactly as long as it meets the requirements for earning points for this action.

This action focuses on the process by which a municipality will share information during an emergency. A town must demonstrate that it has a plan to utilize a variety of communication channels for both declared and non-declared emergencies, has used them **at least once** during either a declared or non-declared emergency or major public inconvenience situation **within the 18 months** prior to applying for certification.

Step 1: Develop an emergency communications plan outlining the steps the municipality will take to disseminate essential information both internally and publicly during non-routine events, declared or non-declared emergencies or natural disasters. Make the plan available to key staff.

This required plan should be based on Emergency Support Functions (ESF) 2 and/or 15 of the municipal Emergency Operations Plan (EOP). This will likely be similar to, but more procedurally detailed, than the list of information included in these ESFs. We recommend including this plan in either ESF as an appendix. We suggest conversation and coordination with the county's OEM Director during the development of this plan. This plan should be specific for both anticipated and unanticipated events, as well as specific for both local and multi-jurisdictional emergencies and disasters. And, it should differentiate between procedures for declared states of emergency and events that do not include a declaration.

Note: Related EOP annexes are the *Emergency Public Information Annex* and portions of the *Alert, Warning & Communications Annex*. For purposes of this action, we will refer to the documents as ESFs rather than annexes, as it reflects the current NJOEM requirements.

This emergency communications plan should include, but not be limited to:

- A section explaining declared versus non-declared emergencies and a list of the various types of non-emergency, non-routine operations to which this plan will apply, including road closures, water shut offs, water quality issues, boil water advisories, parades, festivals, and special events requiring high security.
- Directives and methodologies for communicating those directives during declared and non-declared emergencies to key municipal staff, stakeholders and special facility liaisons as

identified in the municipal EOP. Directives should be written in a boilerplate fashion so that they will be readily available in an emergency.

Local “templates” for such directives could include evacuation, road closure, boil water, and shelter-in-place notices. They must, at a minimum, be available in electronic format for ease of use. For purposes of this plan, the EOP contact list can be referenced in lieu of duplicating contact information. We also recommend including passwords for social media and other relevant communication accounts, and the names of account administrators.

- Methodologies for communicating essential information, alerts, and updates to the general public during declared and non-declared emergencies should be carried out via the following communication channels. A municipality is required to demonstrate that it has used, or is prepared to use, **the municipal website (#1) and at least two items each from a-d under #2, #3, #4, and #5 below.**

A wide variety of communication channels exist that municipalities can use to disseminate information in all cases of emergencies. Just listing those in an EOP is insufficient for effective crisis communication planning.

1. The municipal website. Dedicate at least one page specific for emergency information. It should include direct links to emergency communication channels that will be used by the municipality in an emergency and direct links to any social media and/or registration based systems used by the municipality. It is suggested that links to preparedness information (FEMA, NJOEM) be included as well. The municipality should also describe steps it has taken to ensure its website will remain online in the case of an emergency. **More guidance available.**
2. Media channels. (*select at least 2*)
 - a) Social media channels, including Facebook and/or Twitter
 - b) Print newspapers and/or online news sites, including regional and community newspapers and online hyperlocal news sites. Be sure to include the newspaper which the governing body has determined as the “official” print media source, for example where it prints official notices. Web or email addresses for press release submissions should be included. **More guidance available.**
 - c) The municipal public access TV channel, where applicable
 - d) A local radio station, where applicable
3. Direct notices to the public (*select at least 2*). Remember that “the public” includes non-English speaking populations, homeless, vulnerable residents included within the “NJ Register Ready” or similar municipal database, commuters, non-resident workers, and others as identified in an evaluation of municipal demographics. Consider using the school district communication channels as well.
 - a) Municipally controlled mailing and email lists

- b) Text messaging
- c) Land line phone calls (Robo calls, Reverse 911, etc.)
- d) Online community posting boards

4. Indirect physical notices at strategic locations (*select at least 2*)

- a) Electronic sign boards (solar powered or backed up by a solar system or conventional generator)
- b) Sandwich boards in strategic locations throughout the community
- c) Fliers
- d) Traditional community posting boards

5. Person to person connections via word of mouth: (*select at least 2*)

- a) Municipal advisory boards or agencies that service the socially vulnerable populations within the community
- b) The municipal Community Emergency Response Team (CERT), where applicable
- c) Community based networks. List the specific channels as well as how they would be contacted in the event of an emergency or disaster. Consider libraries, faith based organizations, civic associations, education based groups such as the PTO/A, Meals on Wheels, local businesses, organizations servicing the homeless population, and County Access and Functional Needs Liaisons
- d) Established route alerting systems where emergency vehicles will help disseminate warnings and alerts to public

- The emergency communications plan should include procedures for training staff and other key personnel about this plan, as well as the broader municipal EOP and crisis communications basics. It is recommended to include a county Access and Functional Needs coordinator in your training exercise to ensure proper access to citizens with access and functional needs during emergencies. **More guidance available.**

Step 2: Establish a process for the public to sign up for email, text message, and/or voice message notices regarding emergency warnings and alerts. Promote this process as a way to educate the public about the town's public notification system and use of the chosen communication channels. Include essential information for the public to understand the nature of non-routine or emergency events and the channels the municipality will use to disseminate information. **More guidance available.**

Step 3: Use of the chosen emergency communications channels (Step 1) and public notification system (Step 2) will need to be demonstrated either through an actual emergency, or by testing the system at least once during either a declared emergency or non-declared emergency/major public inconvenience situations.

What to submit to get credits/points

As long as the information contained in the plan is updated in the 18 months prior to the June submission deadline, in effect and accessible by key personnel as indicated, the public notification system sign up process is operational, emergency communication channels are used and kept current, the training program and promotion of the appropriate elements of the plan are underway, and the emergency communications channels and public notification system have been used during an actual emergency or testing exercise, a municipality may receive 15 points for this action.

The following documentation must be submitted as part of the online certification application in order to verify that the action requirements have been met, including a completed **submission checklist**.

1. Description of Implementation – Please use the text box provided on the submission page for this action to share of any details on what has been accomplished and the impact it has or will have on the municipality beyond what was contained in the submission checklist.
2. Upload the following documentation:
 - a) A completed **submission checklist**
 - b) OPTIONAL: A copy of the emergency communications plan. Please do not submit a copy of your EOP unless it specifically contains the emergency communications plan element related to this action.
 - c) OPTIONAL: Promotional materials shared with the public surrounding the emergency notification process and use of emergency communication channels

*Note: Your submission of this action does not reset or impact your EOP approval process with the state.

IMPORTANT NOTES: There is a limit of six uploaded documents per action and individual files must not exceed 20 MB. Excerpts of relevant information from large documents are recommended. All action documentation is available for public viewing after an action is approved. Action submissions should not include any information or documents that are not intended to be viewed by the public.

Spotlight: What NJ towns Are doing

While we have not yet found a town that is doing everything included within this action, there are several examples of towns executing certain portions, as listed here:

Washington Township (Morris County) - Following Superstorm Sandy, Washington Township (Morris County) developed a Communication Enhancement Plan. The plan included communication improvements, including a digital signboard, sandwich boards for paper updates to be displayed at 10 strategic locations throughout the Township, and a new wellness check program. The wellness checks are done periodically by Township staff and will be enhanced during storm events with help from the Community Emergency Response Team. A

web page now lists [Ways to Stay Informed](#) and a [brochure](#) was developed to highlight this information in print form. These methods of communication supplement the township's use of Nixle for email and text, plus the social networks Twitter and Facebook.

Robbinsville (Mercer County) - Mayor Dave Fried says on the website home page "All of the Township's communications tools, programs, department listings, press releases and breaking alerts can be found here on our website, and we are constantly striving to utilize the latest technology to make these communications more interactive. We are doing more than ever to reach residents and promote the accomplishments of our community through Facebook and our very popular Monday Newsfeed." Robbinsville's website was ranked #5 among municipal websites in the state in the 2013 Monmouth University study. Note the prominence of their "Nixle Alert Registration" under Services on their homepage. <http://www.robbinsville-twp.org/>

North Plainfield Borough (Union County) - North Plainfield Borough still maintains an AM radio station, 1630 on the dial. Typically used as a "Travelers Information Station", during Hurricane Sandy it provided a vital information lifeline to North Plainfield residents. Access to online communication channels, like Twitter and Facebook, was spotty or non-existent. The municipality turned to its radio station to broadcast critical information. Thinking outside the box, and utilizing an existing communications tool, North Plainfield officials were able to provide citizens with critical information. [Read more.](#)

Resources

ADA

ADA Best Practices Tool Kit for State and Local Governments - 9-1-1 and Emergency Communication Services

ADA Best Practices Tool Kit for State and Local Governments - Emergency Management under Title II of the ADA

People First Language - The Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities has a useful guide on understanding developmental disabilities and using person first language

Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 - a Federal law to ensure that federal agencies ensure that the electronic and information technology that it develops, procures, maintains, or uses is accessible to persons with disabilities.

[Read about](#) more resources to comply with the law

[FEMA's Access and Functional Needs Fact Sheet](#)

CHECKLISTS

Municipal OEM Terrorism Checklist for Emergency Operations Plans

Standard language for above checklist

Additional language when contractors are used

FEMA PIO Checklist

EPA's Water Utility Response On-The-Go Mobile Website (checklist) - This site consolidates, and makes accessible from the field, information and tools that water utility operators and their response partners may need during an emergency.

Jefferson County, MT ESF#15 Checklist

Pickens County, SC ESF#15 Checklist

CRISIS COMMUNICATION (General)

Jane's Crisis Communications Handbook - This is a very practical guide to crisis communications from the Texas Department of Public Safety. It includes templates, checklists, and extremely useful information about messaging and the media.

The Handbook of Crisis Communication by W. Timothy Coombs - A more theoretical and academic look at crisis communications. Written in 2012, it examines various events, looks at local crisis planning and communication, and what should be included in a plan.

Social Media Best Practices for Emergency Communications by the Center for Digital Government.

DEMOGRAPHIC RESEARCH

The Pew Research Center is an excellent place to get information about communications methodologies utilized by certain segments of the population. More resources: *How Social Media is Reshaping News*; *How People Get Local News & Information in Different Communities*; *Social Networking Fact Sheet*; *Closing the Digital Divide Between Latinos and Technology*

Other helpful articles:

How Americans Get News

Why Brands Need to Understand the Nuanced Differences in the Hispanic Market

FEDERAL EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT AGENCY

ESF #15: Emergency Support Function #15

ESF #15: Standard Operating Procedures

National Incident Management System (NIMS)

MEDIA

{List of Hyperlocal News Sites in NJ}(http://bit.ly/1EZ6pgf)

List of Public Access TV Stations in NJ

NJ Newspaper List

NJ Press Association

Columbia Journalism Review: Guide to Online News Startups

Patch.com

NEW JERSEY OFFICE OF EMERGENCY MANAGEMENT

Connect with NJOEM - a brochure highlighting the various channels the NJOEM uses to share information about emergencies, including phone numbers, social media accounts, etc.

Preparedness Information (for all)

New Jersey Civilian Defense and Disaster Control Act

Directive 61

Subject: Duties And Powers of Municipal Emergency Management Coordinators and County Emergency Management Coordinators

Directive 101

Subject: Rules and Regulations for the Development, Submission and Approval of Emergency Operations Plans

Directive 102

Subject: Standards for Municipal Emergency Management Coordinators

Public Information Officer Field Guide

ORGANIZATIONS

Government Web Professionals of New Jersey – a group focused on using the web to effectively communicate with constituents, while keeping up with the latest technology, and meeting citizen demand for more e-government - Robert Charkowsky, President - rcharkowsky@ucnj.org

Jersey Access Group – a membership group of cable access television and radio stations; a list of member stations is provided, though not every station in N.J. is a member - jaginfo@jagonline.org | 732-887-8581

Municipal Research and Services Center (MRSC) – a nonprofit focused on supporting local governments through consultation and free resources; provides a comprehensive list of best practices, tools, case studies and research geared around effective communication and public participation, from using technology to reach the citizenry, to engaging volunteers, to communication strategies, and more - mrsc@mrsc.org | (800) 933-6772

National Association of Government Web Professionals - a national non-profit of local and state government web professionals working together to share knowledge, best practices, and

innovative ideas to improve our capacity to provide value across the web to our communities -
Katya Wowk, Northeast Region Director - katyaw@nagw.net

NJ-GMIS Chapter - an association of government IT leaders - Executive Director Mitchell
Darer, mdarer@mresc.k12.nj.us

TRAINING

FEMA National Incident Management System (formerly ICS) (online)

FEMA Public Information Officer Awareness (online)

CDC Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication (CERC) (online)

Public Information in an All Hazards Incident(TEEX)