

Critical Considerations in Selecting an Emergency Mass Notification System

Emergency mass notification system needs vary across organizations. As a result, the selection criteria can change drastically depending on the size and location of a school district, college or university.

Despite the different challenges and solutions, there are a number of important factors that all educational institutions should keep in mind when selecting an emergency mass notification system.

Integration

Whether you already have an emergency notification system in place and are looking to expand or are considering longer-term future additions, considering the system's ability to integrate is essential.

If your institution already has one or more products or systems in place, it's crucial that the new system work well with those components, not only for cost effectiveness but to ensure a cohesive system overall.

Even if you're looking to implement a system for the first time, think long term. Your organization will more than likely expand the system at some point, whether it's with the same vendor or not.

The ability to integrate systems increases its effectiveness and extends its useable lifespan.

Notification Coverage (Multi-path Redundancy)

Mass notification systems can range from simple to elaborate, and it's easy to fixate on specific services or products when reviewing the different offerings.

Keep the big picture in mind, and always come back to your end goal. What are you looking to achieve with your emergency mass notification system?

In many cases the answer is comprehensive notification coverage.

Comprehensive notification coverage generally requires a variety of alerting methods to overcome obstacles that may prevent students, faculty, staff, or visitors from receiving an emergency alert. Where are students located when the emergency occurs? Do they have access to a computer or mobile device (and is it powered on)? Are they in an area where they can see or hear the alert? All of these are potential obstacles that can prevent your campus community from receiving an emergency alert.

The answer is to adopt a system that provides multiple communication channels for sending and receiving an emergency alert as quickly and as easily possible. Every Second Counts!

Alerting and Notifying

Ensuring that individuals are alerted to the fact that there is an emergency is important, but how do you go about providing specific information and instructions to students, faculty, staff, and visitors across multiple facilities?

Sounding a warning tone gets people's attention, but it does not convey information about the emergency at hand. *Consider an emergency notification system that does both—sounds emergency tones/visible strobes and displays or speaks an emergency message that notifies individuals of the emergency and appropriate steps to ensure safety.*

Code Compliance

Finally, be mindful of important mass notification codes and mandates when selecting an emergency notification system:

- The [Americans with Disabilities Act](#) specifies that emergency preparedness and response programs be accessible to people with disabilities, including emergency mass notification and access to information.
- The [Higher Education Opportunity Act](#) (HEOA) reauthorizes the Higher Education Act of 1965 (HEA) and mandates under federal statutes that universities and colleges issue emergency warnings. The HEOA further establishes requirements for timely warning and emergency notification.
- In addition to its core focus on fire alarm systems, the [National Fire Alarm and Signaling Code \(NFPA 72\)](#) includes requirements for mass notification systems. Specifically highlighted in Chapter 24 with respect to mass notification the Code States:

24.4.3.16.1 Where audible notification is provided, mass notification systems shall also provide visible notification information to serve the hearing impaired and for high-noise areas.

24.4.3.16.4 Transmission of visible notification and messages shall be simultaneous to audible notification and messages.

24.4.5.1* Overview. Distributed recipient mass notification system (DRMNS) alerting shall not be used in lieu of required audible and visible alerting mass notification systems but shall be integrated with mass notification systems whenever possible.

Some Other Compliance:

- [Executive Order 13407](#) specifically mandates that public alert and warning systems serve those with disabilities.
- [Section 508 of the Rehabilitation Act](#)
- [21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act](#) (CCVAA).

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