



How to Write Emergency Messages That Work

5 key components of an effective
alert & warning message

PEASI

p: (888) 400-5661
e: info@peasi.com

Table of Contents

Introduction	1
Background	1
5-Key Components of an Effective Alert & Warning Message	2
Part 1: Source	2
Part 2: Threat	3
Part 3: Location	3
Part 4: Guidance	4
Part 5: Followup	5
Further Information to Include	6
Conclusion	8

Introduction

Are you responsible for keeping your community, workforce or school informed during emergencies? Have you ever found it challenging to determine what information should be included in an emergency alert? Do you feel the pressure of time constraints when crafting and sending out notifications? If so, we're here to assist you.

Public, workplace and campus safety managers play a crucial role in safeguarding the well-being of residents, visitors, staff, students and faculty during disasters and critical situations. By familiarizing yourself with essential aspects of crafting effective alert messages, you can better achieve your objectives of minimizing the impact of these events.

As stated by FEMA (2014), "Thoughtfully constructed and efficiently disseminated emergency messages can enhance public safety, safeguard property, streamline response efforts, foster cooperation, bolster public confidence, and facilitate family reunification."

Background

"The single most important thing that an emergency manager can do to motivate effective public protective action is to provide the best emergency messages possible." (Meleti et al, 2015)

SOURCE Say who the message is from
THREAT Describe the event and its impacts
LOCATION State the impact area boundaries in a way that can be easily understood (for example, use street names, landmarks, natural features, and political boundaries)
GUIDANCE/TIME Tell people what protective action to take, the time when to do it, how to accomplish it, and how doing it reduces impacts
EXPIRATION TIME Tell people when the alert/warning expires and/or new information will be received.

An emergency alert serves as a critical notification, informing individuals about hazards currently impacting or potentially affecting their community or workplace. It outlines the nature of the hazard, its potential consequences, and actionable steps to mitigate risks. Such alerts are instrumental in empowering people to safeguard themselves, their families, employees, students, communities, businesses and schools.

Access to timely information during emergencies is paramount to saving lives and preserving businesses and schools. While initial details may be limited, prompt dissemination of alerts is crucial. Start by sharing available information and provide regular updates as more details emerge. As emphasized by the Australian Government's Department of Home Affairs (2018), "Effective warnings significantly contribute to reducing the enduring impact of disasters on households, businesses, and communities."

Effective alert messages comprise five essential components. These include identifying the trusted source issuing the alert and specifying the nature of the threat or hazard. Delineating the

Source: Milet & Sorensen, 2015

affected location ensures easy comprehension while offering guidance on necessary actions to maximize health and safety. If required, instructions on how and when to execute these actions should be provided. Lastly, managing expectations by outlining update procedures, alert duration, and signaling the conclusion of the threat is imperative.

5-Key Components of an Effective Alert & Warning Message

Part 1: Source


Each notification "ought to distinctly identify the official source and authority (or authorities) behind its issuance. This aspect is crucial for bolstering the credibility of a message and may enhance the likelihood of prompt action" (Australian Government; Department of Home Affairs, 2018).

A credible source is pivotal for ensuring that individuals respond to alerts and adhere to provided instructions. Establishing trust in the sender's reliability, credibility, and competence is essential. Clearly stating your organization's name or another recognizable identifier, such as your emergency program's name, facilitates a connection with the sender. Additionally, incorporating your organization's logo not only lends an official air to the alert but also enables quick recognition of the issuer.

The source should be prominently featured near the beginning of the notification, be easily comprehensible, and come from an organization that inspires trust within the community. If the source is elusive, comes from an unfamiliar organization (avoiding acronyms), or is associated with negative experiences, the likelihood of the alert being fully read and acted upon diminishes.

In Alertable, the source is consistently and prominently displayed to facilitate the identification of the responsible party. For instance, a banner across both the app and website notification includes details such as the type, level, affected location, issuance time, and source, ensuring accessibility and comprehension. Furthermore, the inclusion of your logo serves to reinforce the sender's identity, aiding swift recognition by the community and increasing the likelihood of attention and response.

Freshet Advisory
Parts of Fraser Valley Regional District, BC
Issued Jun 10 at 4:06 PM
Source: Fraser Valley Regional District


ADVISORY


In or near your chosen location: British Columbia

Description

Fraser Valley Regional District has issued the following freshet advisory ONLY for a) properties in the Nicomen Island and Harrison Bay areas that are not protected by a dike; b) unprotected areas along the Harrison River; c) properties that are partly

[expand](#)



Affected Areas (1)


Parts of Fraser Valley Regional District

Action To Take

- For more information and updates visit fvrdd.ca
- Please read the attached freshet advisory for details including locations and maps.

Attachments

[Freshet advisory - June 10, 2022](#)




Fraser Valley Regional District

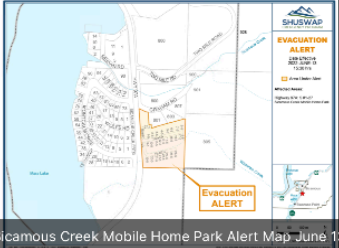
Part 2: Threat

What's the threat in your area right now, and how might it affect people? How likely is it to happen?

Severe Weather
Sicamous Creek Mobile Home Park, BC
Issued Jun 13 at 3:33 PM
Source: Columbia Shuswap Regional District

CRITICAL


In or near your chosen location: British Columbia



Description
Sicamous Creek Mobile Home Park - an Evacuation ALERT has been issued at June 13 at 15:30 Hours. The threat of a landslide near Wiseman Creek in the District of Sicamous is increasing due to forecasted rainfall. Due to the potential danger to life, health or property, an Evacuation Alert is in effect for the following areas:

Sicamous Creek Mobile Home Park - All residences # 1 through #27 - 5 Highway 97A

An Evacuation Alert is a warning about a potential threat to life and/or property. It is intended to give you time to be ready for a possible evacuation. Residents will be given as much advance notice as possible prior to an evacuation, however, you may receive limited notice due to changing conditions.

When you talk about the threat, be clear and avoid using fancy words that might confuse people. Only use everyday words unless they help explain things better. If the message isn't clear, people might waste time looking for more info instead of doing something about it.

Sometimes, you might need to send a really serious message with a loud sound and a vibrant colour to grab everyone's attention. But be careful, because this can make people worried or upset if they think it's not necessary.

It's easier for people to understand a threat when it feels personal to them. For example, saying "The area south of Red River will have water higher than rooftops moving fast. Staying away from there will keep you safe" is better than just saying "Some parts will have fast-moving water."

With Alertable, you can show how serious a problem is right in the message title. The alerts have a traffic-light colour scheme to show how bad the situation is, and there's a written message to confirm this. You can include all the info you need in the description. And if things get worse, you can update the alert to make sure everyone knows how serious it is.

Part 3: Location

"Effective warning messages explain who should and who should not take protective action in terms that the public can readily understand. Specifically, effective messages describe the physical, geographical boundaries for the location where people who need to take protective action are located." (FEMA, 2014).

Good warning messages tell you clearly who needs to act to stay safe and who doesn't. They also show exactly where the danger is. This is super important because people need to know if they're in trouble or not.

Adding a map to your alert helps people see the danger zones right away. You can also list the specific places affected by the alert.

A good location description makes it easy to figure out which areas are in danger. For example, saying "The southwest part of CSRD Electoral Area D, including Falkland and Sweetsbridge, and all places along Chase-Falkland Road to Joyce Lake" is better than just saying "a part of Electoral Area D." If you need to give more details, you can add them in the alert description.

In Alertable, you get both a map and a written list of the affected areas so you can understand the danger easily.

Part 4: Guidance

"Effective warning messages tell people what actions they should take to maximize their health and safety, exactly how to perform those actions, and by when they should begin and complete those actions." (Bean, Sutton, Liu, Madden, Wood & Milet, 2015)

Make it clear what you want people to do and when. This not only makes them act faster but also helps them understand how to stay safe. The more specific you are, the better. People are more likely to follow instructions when they're clear and concise. Keep your instructions simple and to the point, with just one or two sentences per action. Put these instructions in the main part of your message, and add extra details like images or documents if needed.

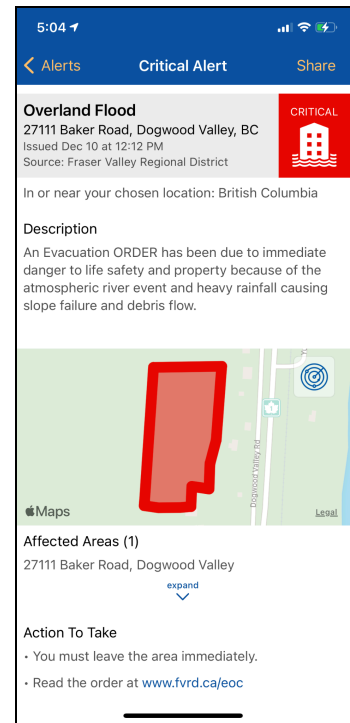
Which message do you think would make you act faster?

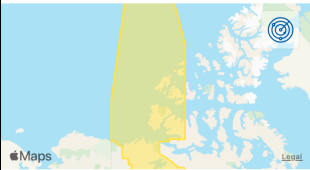
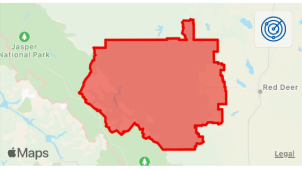
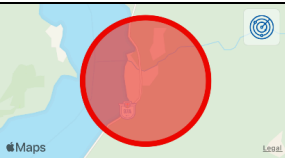
"Start evacuating now, don't wait. Get to higher ground than the tallest buildings by 4:15 p.m. today, May 22, 2022." (Bean et al., 2015)

or

"You should leave the area to avoid the flood."

In Alertable, you can easily see when the message was sent and what actions you need to take. The time is at the top of each message, and all instructions are clear and easy to understand in the main part of the alert.



<p>911 Service Northwest Territories Issued Jun 11 at 1:19 PM Source: Northwest Territories</p> <p>ADVISORY</p> <p>In or near your chosen location: Northwest Territories</p> <p>Description There is an incident that has caused a disruption to 911 Service. People are asked to use an alternative means of contacting local emergency services.</p>  <p>Affected Areas (1) Northwest Territories</p> <p>Action To Take</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> If you cant reach local emergency services or 9-1-1, please go directly to the RCMP detachment or Health Care Center. You can also reach the RCMP and Health Cenetr on their direct lines. 	<p>Wildfire Clearwater County, AB Issued Jun 3 at 2:42 PM Source: Clearwater County **WIRELESS PUBLIC ALERT**</p> <p>CRITICAL</p> <p>In or near your chosen location: Alberta</p> <p>Description There is a wildfire north of Crimson Lake, north of TWP 41-0. Alberta Wildfire has begun to evacuate north of the Ferrier Gas Plant on Buster Creek Rd (TWP RD 4-10), north and north west 5kms. To evacuate heading north travel on Buster Creek Ro...</p>  <p>Affected Areas (1) Clearwater County</p> <p>Action To Take</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Everyone must evacuate immediately following the designated route and obey road blocks. Follow the directions of local authorities. <p>Audio</p> <p>0:00 -1:01</p>	 <p>Affected Areas (1) Sicamous Creek Mobile Home Park</p> <p>Action To Take</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Locate your grab-and-go bags for you and your family. Gather essential items such as medications, eyeglasses, valuable papers, immediate care needs for dependents. Replenish any items that have expired or need replacement, ensure you and your family members have enough clothing and incidentals for a 72-hour period and have these items readily available for quick departure. See www.preparedbc.ca for details. Contact family members, advise them of the situation and determine a meeting location outside of the evacuation area where you can safely reconnect should the area be evacuated. Accommodation in the area can be limited. Arrange to stay with family or friends, if possible. Take care of your pets or any other animals by moving them to a safe location. Make plans for their care if you will not be at home. Arrange transportation for all household members. Prepare to move any disabled persons and/or children. Fill the gas tanks of personal vehicles. Members of the public are advised to stay out of the area until the Alert is rescinded.
---	---	--

Part 5: Followup

"Just as it is important to warn, it is equally important to advise community members when a threat has passed" (Australian Government; Department of Home Affairs, 2018)

It's important not only to warn people about dangers but also to let them know when the danger is over. This helps keep everyone informed and reassured that they can rely on you for timely updates that affect their safety.

Make it clear when the notification was sent or last updated. Put this information near the top of the message to make it easy to find. By doing this, you help people follow the emergency from start to finish and reinforce your role as a trusted source of information.

While most alerts mention when the danger started, many forget to include when updates will be provided or when the danger has passed. A good alert message not only mentions when it was issued but also when to expect updates or when it's safe again. This helps people know what to expect and encourages them to stay informed.

For instance, "A two-day heat event is expected today and Tuesday... Please keep an eye out for updates from Environment Canada" (Environment and Climate Change Canada).

If you don't have all the details at first, follow up with more information as soon as you can. Don't assume that people will automatically know when the danger has passed. If you don't mention

how long the alert will be in effect or when to expect updates, you might miss the opportunity to let people know when it's safe again.

Description

Please be advised that there will be water disruptions today on Park Street, between Cliff Street and Forest Street, and on Cumberland Street, between Park Street and Williams Street, at 10:30 am. The disruption will last approximately one hour to replace a water valve. We apologize for any inconvenience, as we make this important infrastructure repair.

With Alertable, you can easily add an estimated end time or request that your community stay tuned for updates within a specific timeframe directly in the main body of your notification.

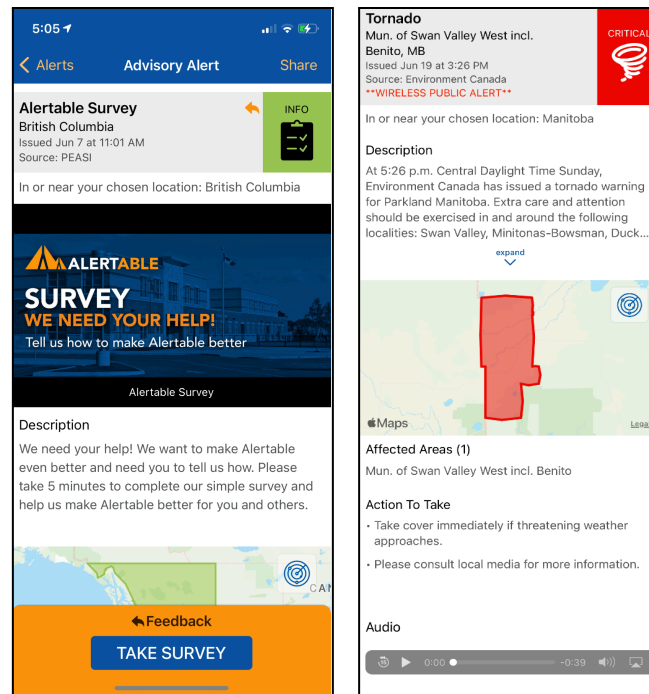
Further Information to Include

While the content of a notification and the accompanying map are crucial, there are additional features and capabilities that can enhance the value and effectiveness of your alert beyond the essential 5 key components. Consider the following:

- **Visual Aids:** Including images of a lost child or a person being pursued by the police can improve recognition and understanding compared to written text alone.
- **Video Footage:** Providing videos showing the extent of damage or current water levels can offer visual context for better comprehension.
- **Audio Messages:** Adding audio recordings allows those who cannot read the message to access information effectively.
- **Informational Documents:** Including documents detailing evacuation preparations can offer practical guidance and better equip the community for potential evacuations.
- **Feedback Mechanisms:** Obtaining feedback on the number of recipients and their engagement with alerts provides valuable insights into the effectiveness of your communications.
- **Automatic Alerts from Trusted Sources:** Integrating alerts from other reliable sources saves time and ensures comprehensive coverage of critical information.
- **Diverse Notification Channels:** Offering a variety of notification channels increases community engagement and ensures broader dissemination of alerts.

Alertable offers numerous features to convey emergencies effectively to your community. For instance, it enables the inclusion of images in a scrollable carousel and audio recordings for

accessibility. Additionally, it facilitates two-way communication, allowing recipients to respond to alerts and participate in polls or surveys.



Furthermore, Alertable integrates with various trusted sources such as Alert Ready and Environment and Climate Change Canada to streamline information dissemination. It also supports integration with emergency management software like WebEOC and GIS systems from ESRI, simplifying the process of delivering critical updates.

A robust notification system provides multiple communication channels to reach the public effectively. Utilizing various channels increases the likelihood of message retention and encourages prompt action. “The more different channels of communication are used to communicate the warning message to the same public the better...As the number of times that people hear the same warning message increases, the more likely they are to become convinced that they are at risk and then take a protective action” (Bean et al. 2015).

Alertable offers over 18 different notification options, including mobile apps, texts, emails, phone calls, and social media, ensuring widespread dissemination of alerts. Additionally, communities can integrate with physical notification systems like roadway signs and PA systems for broader coverage and enhanced safety measures.

Conclusion

Clear and effective notifications are vital for keeping your community safe and informed, empowering individuals to take action even in situations where they might feel helpless. To ensure your notifications are effective, they should include:

- **Identifiable Source:** Clearly identify a trusted source to enhance credibility and trustworthiness.
- **Captivating Headline:** Capture people's attention by clearly identifying the type of threat.
- **Accurate Description:** Provide an accurate description of the threat and its location for better understanding.
- **Actionable Instructions:** Clearly state what actions people should take to protect themselves and when updates can be expected.

Sending notifications through various channels helps disseminate information quickly to those who need it most, ensuring a higher percentage of your community receives timely updates.

Emergency alerts play a crucial role in communication during emergencies. Well-crafted messages can instill confidence, enhance public safety, and promote cooperation. Tools like Alertable can assist you in this responsibility, simplifying the process of keeping your community safe and informed.

Sources:

Bean, H., Sutton, J., Liu, B., Madden, S., Wood, M. & Mileti, S. (2015). [The Study of Mobile Public Warning Messages: A Research Review and Agenda](#)

Mileti, D. (2012). [Public Response To Disaster Warnings](#)

Australian Government; Department of Home Affairs. (2018). [Public Information and Warnings](#)

(FEMA, 2014). [Communicating in an Emergency](#)

[Environment Canada](#)

Mileti, M. & Sorensen, J. (2015). [A Guide to Public Alerts and Warnings for Dam and Levee Emergencies.](#)