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PRACTICE NOTE

Emergency Public Information: The Harris County, Texas, Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management's Implementation of a Social Media Protocol

PRACTICE

The Harris County, Texas, Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management (HCOHSEM) implemented a social media protocol and utilized Facebook and Twitter during wildfires in 2011. These social media efforts enabled HCOHSEM to disseminate information rapidly, to answer questions, and to dispel rumors posted on social media Web sites.

DESCRIPTION

In the summer of 2010, HCOHSEM recognized that it needed the ability to disseminate emergency public information to its residents through social media. The office began by observing how other emergency management agencies utilized social media, including how they disseminated information and what information they posted to social media sites. HCOHSEM then developed standard operating procedures (SOPs) for managing social media information received from partner agencies. The office also developed a social media template for drafting, reviewing, and approving alert messages, Web site posts, and other related information. In January 2011, HCOHSEM launched a [Facebook page](#) and a [Twitter account](#). HCOHSEM uses these to post information and to provide links to its joint information center (JIC) Web site, www.readyharris.org, and to link to its partner response agencies.

Harris County, Texas, had more than 4.1 million residents in 2010. The county is approximately 1,778 square miles and includes the metropolitan areas of Houston, Sugar Land, and Baytown.



2011 West Texas Wildfires

2011 Summer Drought and Wildfires

Texas experienced more than 20,000 wildfires in 2010 and 2011, which burned approximately 5,781 square miles and destroyed 7,439 structures. In addition, the State suffered from a drought during the summer of 2011, which exacerbated the wildfire threat. President Barack Obama declared a disaster (FEMA-4029-DR) on September 9, 2011, for areas affected by the wildfires since August 30, 2011. As of September 30, 2011, the Federal Emergency Management Agency had designated 22 counties for individual assistance and had provided \$8.6 million of assistance.

Social Media Strategy

On September 13, 2011, the George Bush Park wildfire threatened Harris County. HCOHSEM activated its emergency operations center (EOC), including its social media staff. HCOHSEM developed a social media strategy that required social media staff to use its SOPs and template to disseminate fire- and drought-related information to the county's residents via Facebook and Twitter. Further, the office's social media messages would include information about traffic, road closures, immediate hazards caused by the fires, and links to situation reports posted on the JIC Web site and to partner updates. HCOHSEM social media staff members were also prepared to address questions and comments posted on its social media sites.

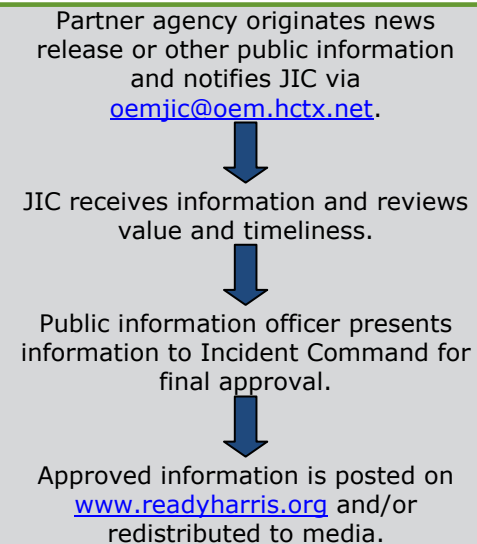
At the onset of the response, HCOHSEM social media staff analyzed how individuals used Twitter to identify common "hashtags" related to the fire. The staff anticipated that adding popular hashtags to the end of messages would increase the agency's visibility on Twitter. This helped HCOHSEM reach Twitter users who were searching for fire-related information but were not subscribed to the office's account. HCOHSEM utilized a Web-based Twitter application to search for common Twitter phrases, what people were tweeting in a given area, and popular hashtags. The staff determined that adding commonly used Harris County fire-related hashtags, including "#hounews" and "#txfires," at the end of their Twitter messages would increase the office's visibility on Twitter. This helped to ensure that Harris County residents could access validated information from HCOHSEM when they searched the "#hounews" or "#txfires" hashtags on Twitter.

Twitter users can create hashtags to mark keywords or topics in a tweet. Hashtag tweets on a public account can be searched by any user. Hashtags require a "#" and a key phrase without a space.

Social Media SOPs and Template

During response operations, HCOHSEM employed its social media SOPs and template to share critical information quickly, efficiently, and effectively with the county's residents via Facebook and Twitter. The SOPs outline the approval process for posting social media releases from HCOHSEM's partner agencies. These SOPs describe the process from receiving information from a partner agency to publishing the information on the HCOHSEM communication platforms.

Further, the template provided EOC staff members with a concise document to develop and approve social media messages. The template included information about the type of message, the event name, the message length, and whether it was for Facebook or Twitter. In addition, it included an approval section with checkboxes that indicate who should receive the information. Employing the SOPs and template during response operations helped ensure message consistency across all HCOHSEM communication platforms, regardless of the type of platform. It also streamlined the approval process for social media messages. Finally, it enabled HCOHSEM to maintain a record of all social media messages distributed during the incident.



Information Flow Chart Included in SOPs

Social Media Messaging Outcome

HCOHSEM posted Facebook and Twitter messages several times a day to ensure that residents could access fire-related information from a variety of sources. Further, the social media staff used its social media tools to answer relevant questions about wildfires, to disseminate emergency public information from HCOHSEM's partner agencies, and to address rumors posted on social media sites.

Harris County residents responded immediately to HCOHSEM's social media campaign by commenting on Facebook posts and tweeting questions about the fire. Further, Harris County residents retweeted HCOHSEM tweets, which indicates that individuals were sharing validated emergency public information with each other. Within 6 hours of the EOC activation, HCOHSEM added more than 100 Facebook and 75 Twitter users. As of September 19, 2011, a total of 762 Facebook users and 551 Twitter followers receive emergency information from HCOHSEM.

For more information on how Harris County, Texas, disseminates emergency public information, please see the *Lessons Learned Information Sharing* Practice Note, [Mass Evacuation: The Harris County, Texas, Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Management's Interactive Hurricane Evacuation Map](#).

CITATIONS

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