City of Torrance

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>
> Soraya Sutherlin
> **City of Torrance**

OVERVIEW

The City of Torrance is the sixth largest city in Los Angeles County, California. The city covers roughly 20.5 square miles and includes one and a half miles of coast line, a reservoir, a non-commercial airport, rail road tracks, the Newport-Inglewood active fault line, the high-traffic interstate 405 and the ExxonMobil Oil Refinery.

PROBLEM

The City of Torrance is vulnerable to natural, technological and human-made disasters due to its proximity to natural hazards as well as home to many high profile attractions. To ensure efficient, at-a-moment's notice information dissemination, the city required a functional critical communication solution to reach key stakeholders and residents. This was particularly true during recent ExxonMobil Oil Refinery explosions that occured in February and October of 2015.

SOLUTION

With Everbridge, the City of Torrance is able to communicate to various city departments, surrounding cities, media personnel, non-profit and nongovernmental organizations and residents. Communication is instantaneous, across multiple contact paths and based on geo-coded locations,as well as pre-configured groups. The city has also had success using Everbridge to create an engaged community – establishing two-way dialog between residents and local government – especially in the wake of the ExxonMobil Oil Refinery explosions.

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TELL US ABOUT THE CITY OF TORRANCE AND THE CRITICAL COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES THAT YOU FACE?

There are approximately 147,000 full-time city residents – with daily fluctuations of up to a population of 250,000. We are full service city with our own police and fire departments. We also have our own unified school district, separate from LA USC, with 43 schools. Back in the early 90's, the City of Torrance and the ExxonMobil Corporation (Mobil Corporation at the time) entered into an agreement that set guidelines and responsibilities in handling emergencies. As a city, we have a responsibility to communicate effectively, and instill trust and confidence in our residents in terms of refinery operations and our emergency response strategy.

HOW AND WHY DID YOU CHOOSE EVERBRIDGE AS YOUR UNIFIED CRITICAL COMMUNICATION SOLUTION PROVIDER?

What made us decide on Everbridge? First, it was a good investment – Everbridge puts a lot of effort into product improvement. We also took our neighboring cities, hospitals and partners into consideration when choosing Everbridge. Their use of the system is crucial and we knew that Everbridge's system was interactive and interoperable. Everbridge also encourages two-way dialogue, targeting individuals and their roles and preferences, not just a static device. Arguably the most important reason why we chose Everbridge is that it is one comprehensive system that we can integrate into our daily operations and use for both internal and external critical communications.

WHAT TYPES OF SITUATIONS REQUIRE THE NEED FOR COMMUNICATIONS TO INTERNAL EMPLOYEES AND RESPONDERS?

Previously, the city relied heavily on manual call trees, emails and faxes to communicate internally. Now, with Everbridge's pre-populated incident communication templates, we can quickly send a message to a responder or incident commander for awareness purposes, and to prompt resource staffing. We also need the ability to gather all of our internal stakeholders – our incident commanders, our city manager, our chief, the PIO, etc. – on a conference call at a moment's notice. The Everbridge conference call functionality is particularly useful on the Fourth of July when we are inundated with people at the beach. We actually held conference calls with our internal stakeholders every four hours and provided email updates every two hours.

AND HOW DO YOU USE EVERBRIDGE FOR EXTERNAL COMMUNICATIONS TO RESIDENTS? HOW DOES EVERBRIDGE HELP IMPROVE COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT?

What we've gathered from our community is that residents are curious about what is happening within the city and we encourage them to opt-in to receive alerts. The system, which we have named TorranceAlerts, is very customizable to the individual so we are not overwhelming them with an abundance of non-emergency messages. We encourage all residents to register and "opt-in" at TorranceCA. Gov/TorranceAlerts. Community members can choose from different subscription types including Public Works, Community Services and even Community Development alerts. Depending on their preferences, residents can receive Everbridge notifications on anything from street sweeping and water conservation, to library services and building code issues. Residents can also stay engaged with the community through our TorranceAlerts Twitter and Facebook handles as well.

We ask the community to provide additional contact information so we can notify them urgently, and also in the case of a life threatening emergency. Using multiple contact paths, such as phone, email and text messages, will improve our ability to more effectively alert them of future incidents and bypass any bottlenecks presented by older landline infrastructure or damaged infrastructure. We also encourage residents to download the ContactBridge mobile app.

Individuals can enter as many contact paths as they like, set their preferred order for devices to be contacted and select other non-emergency notifications as offered by the City. Overall, this program saw an immediate spike of registrations right after the explosion at the plant growing from roughly 3,000 to over 8,000 registrants in 3 days. The system was particularly useful in communicating to external stakeholders when the city recently experienced severe lighting and thunderstorms. Our watch commander and battalion chief determined it was a public safety threat due to the proximity, time and location of the storm. We issued an alert to all 140,000 residents in the designated geo-coded area. We also provided updates to our resident opt-ins during our annual Armed Forces Day parade, which is actually the largest Armed Forces Day Parade west of the Mississippi.

Our true intent is not to use Everbride simply for public safety, but to integrate the system into our daily operations and use it as a fully functioning city resource. We want to connect with our community on different levels so residents are fully engaged in our city processes.

LET'S TALK ABOUT THE EXONNMOBIL OIL SPILL FROM FEBRUARY 2015. HOW WERE YOU ABLE TO USE EVERBRIDGE TO COMMUNICATE TO STAKEHOLDERS THROUGHOUT THE INCIDENT?

On February 18th, the ExxonMobil Oil Refinery located in our city experienced an explosion that measured 1.7 on a local Richter scale. As part of the standard protocol for public safety dispatch, a first alarm was requested and responded to the incident. It was later upgraded to a second alarm due to the nature of the incident. Units began to arrive on scene and communication with the ExxonMobil fire brigade was established. Injuries were treated, damage was assessed and street barriers were put in place where necessary. We thought we had a good handle on things, but then we started to receive reports on something resembling ash, falling from the sky. This was a consequence of the explosion, it wasn't hazardous, but now we had to deal with the offsite incident as well.

In terms of notifications throughout the process, we sent out an initial alert notifying the community as well as notifications to internal employees including our incident commanders, various folks in the emergency management department and our key stakeholders throughout the school district. We monitored our TorranceAlerts social media handles throughout the incident to gain intelligence from the community, and we continued to send out updates throughout the day. We urged residents to take shelter and updated outside communities on the situation. Although there were many emergency communication lessons learned, with the help of Everbridge, internal and external stakeholders were informed and the situation was resolved. More importantly, no one was severely hurt.

CAN YOU ALSO TELL US ABOUT THE EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND USE OF EVERBRIDGE DURING THE SECOND EXXON MOBIL REFINERY EXPLOSION ON SATURDAY, OCTOBER 23RD?

During this incident, we were up to 186,000 contacts in our database, and again the decision was made to launch a notification.

One of the realizations that was made during the incident, however, was that modern notification technology can now work faster than the local telephone company's infrastructure can handle. Everbridge's call throttling capability can slow down the outbound calls to a level the phone company's infrastructure can handle - but even that was set a bit too high for the local system, which may only be able to handle 200 calls at a time in some areas.

The most important lesson learned from this situation is that in some parts of the city there are phone company infrastructure limitations which only allow for very limited simultaneous calls. That said, we were able to log 186,000 contact attempts through Everbridge in just one hour—with 180,000 of those being phone calls.

Q&A with Soraya Sutherlin, Emergency Services Manager and David Dumais, Deputy Fire Chief

YOU MENTIONED LESSONS LEARNED. WHAT OTHER EMERGENCY RESPONSE AND CRITICAL COMMUNICATION LESSONS CAN YOU SHARE THAT MIGHT HELP OTHERS IN YOUR FIELD OF WORK?

Looking back on the oil refinery explosion, there were definite areas of improvement and key takeaways for us. First, when sending notifications, messages should be put in standard, pre-configured templates to ensure that critical information is not missed. Also, all public messaging should be immediate – even if you don't have all the details, go ahead and put out a statement informing the community that you are aware of the situation and will update them accordingly. At the same time, ensure effective community engagement and provide residents with a number or website where they can gather more information. If you are updating community members via social media, make sure that city social media pages are controlled by one central person for consistency.

To help with this engagement, we are moving forward with Everbridge's Community Engagement application to facilitate social media publishing, as well as to help us generate even more opt-ins via the use of keyword and event-based Opt-Ins (e.g. residents can text something like **EXXONSPILL** to **888-777** to opt-in for regular alerts.

We also found that sending two messages – one to the impacted area with details and instructions, and one to the rest of the city indicating what the problem is, and where they can find information, helps reach the right people and provide the right level of detail. Lastly, establishing media expectations up front is also a good idea. Identify a media staging unit as soon as possible and tell the media when you plan to update them, regardless of whether or not you have new information to share.

About Everbridge

Everbridge is a leading unified critical communications platform trusted by corporations and communities of all sizes that need to reach the right people for immediate action, collaboration, and decision-making. Connecting millions of people and internet-connected devices, the company provides reassurance that secure, compliant messages are delivered, locally and globally, received and responded to, no matter the recipient's location. Everbridge is based in Boston, Los Angeles, San Francisco, Beijing and London.

For a full product description, along with best practices and product details please see the Everbridge User Guide and Everbridge University.

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