

# Public Alert and Warning / External Affairs Annex

## INTRODUCTION

### Purpose

This Annex outlines how Westchester County government coordinates public information during large scale emergencies and disasters, and supports communications, including public alerts and warnings to residents and visitors in the county. This annex also applies to those situations that may necessitate County departments to provide support and assistance for Joint Information System (JIS) coordination, and development and distribution of situational awareness notifications to internal and external stakeholders.

### Scope

This Annex supports the Westchester County Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan (CEMP) and applies to County departments and agencies with a role in emergency communications and public information. In this annex, the terms alert and warning refers to a message sent to the public that provides protective action instructions (e.g., evacuate, stay indoors, or boil water). The annex also incorporates communicating situational awareness information internally, to county government stakeholders, externally, to local municipal and agency officials, and the general public.

### Situation and Planning Assumptions

Some incidents can occur with little or no notice and do not provide enough time to warn the public to take protective actions.

The magnitude of an incident is not always clear at the outset, and some incidents that do not initially appear serious will escalate.

Effective situational awareness relies on information from and coordination with local responding first-response agencies, 911-Emergency Communications Centers, Westchester County Emergency Management (WCEM) other county departments, and partner emergency agencies including New York State Office of Emergency Management (NYS OEM), the National Weather Service (NWS), as well as emergency communications

organizations in neighboring jurisdictions to determine an emergency incident is possible or imminent.

All local jurisdictions have in place some capability to communicate with the public, including public information staff and technology. Some jurisdictions also maintain a public alert and warning capability, and initial communications may be made via email, phone or text depending on the urgency of the situation.

In order to warn the maximum number of people at risk during an emergency, the use of multiple warning methods may be required to:

- Capture the public's attention, regardless of location or time of day.
- Ensure that protective actions are communicated to all in the affected area, including those with disabilities, Access and Functional Needs (AFN).
- Reach people who rely on different communication tools (i.e. social media, traditional media, telephone, email, and text).

As the hazard and danger to the public become known, alerts and warnings will be developed with appropriate and necessary:

- Content.
- Format.
- Communications tools.
- Time(s) for releasing each message.

Effective warnings require communicating the nature, extent and expected impact of a hazard as well as clear, concise, and decisive information concerning safety actions.

Timely alerts and warnings to the public may result in the reduction or prevention of injuries.

If an incident occurs suddenly and the situation evolves rapidly, information may be incomplete or unconfirmed. Every effort will be made to provide full and complete information in the initial message with life safety instructions being the priority.

The successful delivery of messages is dependent on external networks and providers beyond the County's control. Overwhelmed communications systems could impair the ability to contact the public.

Various factors can influence the public's response to alert and warning message including:

- Interpretation – different people listening to the same message may come to different conclusions.
- Previous experience – often people rely on previous experiences to determine what actions to take.
- Misinformation – the spread of misinformation can happen quickly. It is important to provide multiple ways for the public to easily verify information in the warning.
- Perception of risk – people make rapid assessment of their safety. If their perception of personal risk is high, people will act quickly.
- Milling – people may attempt to confirm the hazard and warning by contacting neighbors or family before taking recommended action.
- Understanding of surroundings – visitors and new residents may lack knowledge of local hazards, geography, and community features.
- Populations with disabilities, access and functional needs require special consideration to ensure warning messages are received.

## CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS

This Concept of Operations is intended to provide a strategic overview of the process established for Westchester County departments having a role in emergency communications and/or alert and warning, to support local officials during emergency incidents or disasters.

Multiple Westchester County offices and departments have a public information role related to emergency preparedness programs and services. All significant communications of this kind are coordinated through the Communications Office within the Office of the County Executive. All County departments and offices involved in the development of public messages utilize inclusive communications guidance to assist in the development of inclusive and accessible messaging.

Requests for emergency notification may be received and facilitated by the County's Department of Information Technology (DoIT) or the Emergency Management Division on behalf of the local official making the request. Examples of when the County may support public alert and warning for a local municipality include notification of local evacuation or shelter-in-place orders.

- Message content shall be developed in conjunction with but approved by the local Chief Elected Official and/or the Incident Commander.

- Location(s) for message delivery shall be developed in conjunction with but approved by the Chief Elected Official and/or the Incident Commander.
- Notification of such issuances shall be made to the Office of the County Executive and the Communications Office.

Requests for assistance with emergency notifications, must be made by the requesting jurisdiction in a timely and accurate manner to ensure that county officials are aware of the situation as soon as possible so efforts can be coordinated quickly and effectively.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) provides the following guidance for developing warning messages:

- **Specific Hazard:** What is/are the hazard(s) that are threatening? What are the potential risks for the community?
- **Location:** Where will the impacts occur? Is the location described so those without local knowledge can understand their risk?
- **Timeframes:** When will it arrive at various locations? How long will the impacts last?
- **Source of Warning:** Who is issuing the warning? Is it an official source with public credibility?
- **Magnitude:** A description of the expected impact. How bad is it likely to get?
- **Likelihood:** The probability of occurrence of the impact.
- **Protective Behavior:** What protective actions should people take and when? If evacuation is called for, where should people go and what should they take with them?

## ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

The following table outlines the various emergency notification functions of Westchester County departments, agencies, and offices.

LEAD DEPARTMENT / INDIVIDUAL	RESPONSIBILITIES
Communications Office – Office of the County Executive	– Establishes County government’s public information and warning processes.

LEAD DEPARTMENT / INDIVIDUAL	RESPONSIBILITIES
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Develops and coordinates media notifications, press releases, press conferences, appearances and interviews, and works with subject matter experts on the issuance of accessible documents.</li> <li>- Oversees content for the County’s social media accounts and official website in cooperation with the DOIT, including engaging with subject matter experts on accessibility of web content.</li> <li>- Supports, where appropriate and requested, public information and warning activities by local cities, towns and villages within Westchester County.</li> </ul>
<b>Department of Information Technology</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coordinates County government’s procurement and maintenance of information technology and communications systems, including but not limited to the County website and emergency notification systems.</li> <li>- Provides technical assistance to all departments related to coordination of public alert and warning.</li> <li>- Initiates emergency public alert and warnings via the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) and County’s Emergency Notification System (ENS).</li> <li>- Identifies and maintains accessibility expertise, accessible technology software and methods to evaluate and remediate all electronic information, to meet Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) compliance.</li> </ul>
<b>Department of Emergency Services / Emergency Management</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Monitor for and advise County senior leadership and departments of emergency related information.</li> <li>- Provides technical assistance to all departments related to emergency and disaster response, including the coordination of public alert and warning, as well as supporting emergency public information upon request by a local official.</li> <li>- Coordinates Emergency Public Information and Public Alert and Warning activities of County government via the Emergency Operations Center (EOC).</li> <li>- Supports emergency public warnings via the County’s ENS.</li> </ul>
<b>911 – Emergency Communications Center</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Receives emergency / threat related information as designated County Warning Point and as part of the National Warning System (NAWAS).</li> <li>- Monitors communications for situational awareness information from local responding and mutual aid agencies.</li> <li>- Notifies senior leadership of critical emergency incidents and provides updates.</li> <li>- Coordinates field interoperable emergency communications.</li> <li>- Initiates emergency alert messaging and communications to emergency responders and officials, as required.</li> </ul>
<b>Public Safety/County Police</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Coordinates and supports Public Safet Sector incident public information and advisories.</li> <li>- Monitors public safety communications for situational awareness information and provides updates and advisories including critical county road closures.</li> <li>- Supports emergency public warnings via the County’s ENS.</li> <li>- Supports loudspeaker and in-person warning notifications.</li> </ul>

LEAD DEPARTMENT / INDIVIDUAL	RESPONSIBILITIES
Health Department	– Supports Public Health system public information and health advisories.
Office for People with Disabilities	– Provides technical assistance to all departments related to the Americans with Disabilities Act, accessibility generally and inclusive messaging.
Public Works	– Supports distribution and coordination of message signs for public warning information.
Local Response Agencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>– Utilizes local / municipal alert systems to notify the public.</li> <li>– Communicates emergency incident information requiring alert and warning, to County Emergency Management.</li> <li>– Assists with loudspeaker and/or in-person notifications as necessary.</li> </ul>

## WARNING TOOLS

Westchester County has access to a number of alert and warning systems that can be utilized to alert county departments and employees, and to issue emergency information and warnings to citizens. These tools include:

- Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS).
  - Emergency Alert System (EAS).
  - Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA).
  - National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Weather Radios (planned).
- Mass notification by text, email, and/or phone.
- Media Releases.
- Media Briefings.
- Social Media.
- Message signs.
- Loudspeakers.
- In-person notification.

Westchester County has the capability to issue warning and emergency messages via FEMA’ IPAWS, including EAS messages, WEA, and outbound phone calls to landline phones. WCEM also maintains liaison with the NYSOEM, as well as the NWS who maintains similar capabilities for public alert and warning. With the exception of access to

the EAS and WEA, local municipalities may also maintain their own notification system to notify either landline phones in a specific geographic area, or by mobile phone call, text message and/or e-mail to a subscriber device.

## Integrated Public Alert and Warning System

IPAWS is an internet-based capability (run by FEMA) that federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial authorities can use to issue critical public alerts and warnings. The three core components of IPAWS are EAS, WEA, and NOAA Weather Radio (NWR). IPAWS also includes capabilities for unique alert systems, which include dissemination of alerts through third-party applications, and future system development. Westchester County is the local authorized alerting party for IPAWS.

## Emergency Alert System

The federal EAS is used by alerting authorities to send warnings via broadcast, cable, satellite, and wireline communications pathways. EAS can be used by local authorities in accordance with a pre-determined local EAS plan to alert their local jurisdictions of an imminent threat. Additionally, EAS enables the President to interrupt all broadcasts in one or more counties with an emergency announcement. Participation in local use of EAS is voluntary on the part of broadcasters except the Local Primary stations. EAS messages are delivered to all listeners or viewers of stations serving a targeted county.

Satellite and cable television (TV) carriers also participate in EAS, but their capability to geographically target dissemination is more limited. EAS can distribute warning messages over large areas very quickly but cannot reach people who are not watching or listening to broadcast media, particularly people who are asleep.

## Wireless Emergency Alert

WEA are emergency messages sent by authorized government alerting authorities through the major mobile carriers. WEA alerts are targeted to a defined geographical area and are presented differently than a typical text alert in order to differentiate it from regular notifications. They offer a unique alert tone and vibration accompanied by a brief push notification displayed uniquely on the end user's mobile device. WEA is an opt-out system. Mobile device users will receive the WEA notification unless they choose to deactivate the service on their mobile device.

WEA has the capability of notifying WEA-enabled cell phones within a selected geographic area, whether they have previously signed up or opted-in or not. This capability allows for both the residents of a given jurisdiction, and persons visiting the jurisdiction the ability to be notified.

## National Oceanographic and Atmospheric Administration Weather Radio

Using technology similar to portable radio pagers, desktop radio receivers can be activated when these receive particular tones or data signals. The alerting signal is typically followed by audio information. The nationwide National Weather Radio network operated by the NOAA is the best known and most widely deployed example of this technology. Tone-alert radios can provide both alerting and warning detail quickly over a wide area but require an investment in the receiving equipment that many members of the public decline to make.

## NWS and WEA

The NWS coordinates with its local partners prior to issuing WEA messages for continuity of operations and effective response. The NWS in conjunction with the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) has an established list of weather warnings that will trigger WEA for the affected area, generally defined as a polygon. WEA messages are disseminated via FEMA's IPAWS. The approved NWS warnings that will initiate WEA are:

- Tsunami.
- Flash Flood (including, due to dam inundation and debris flows).
- Tornado.
- Hurricane.
- Storm Surge.
- Dust Storm.
- Extreme Wind.

# Authorized IPAWS Alert Originators

**In Westchester County, the IPAWS can currently only be activated by trained and approved personnel with a role in alert and warning notifications.**

IPAWS can be activated statewide by the Governor and by the President for State and National emergency notifications.

## County Mass Notification System

Westchester County maintains a mass notification system able to deliver messages to landline phones, cellular phones, text message, in-app notifications, email, Telecommunication Device for the Deaf (TDD), and social media to advise residents of an immediate threat and appropriate protective actions.

The table on the following page depicts attributes of various public warning tools available to WCEM:

SYSTEM	WHEN USED	AUTHORIZED ORIGINATOR	METHODS	WHO IS REACHED	WHO IS NOT REACHED
<b>IPAWS / EAS</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Situation is imminent and life threatening to the public.</li> <li>- Public needs protective action instructions.</li> <li>- Other warning methods ineffective.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Westchester County DOIT</li> <li>- Emergency Management</li> <li>- Public Safety</li> <li>- New York State (NYS) Watch Center</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- TV</li> <li>- Radio</li> <li>- NOAA Weather Radio</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People watching TV or listening to radio in geographic area of warning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People not watching TV or listening to radio.</li> <li>- People who do not understand English well.</li> </ul>
<b>IPAWS / WEA</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Situation is imminent and potentially life threatening to the public</li> <li>- Public needs protective actions instructions</li> <li>- Other warning methods ineffective</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Presidential Alert</li> <li>- NWS</li> <li>- Westchester County DoIT</li> <li>- Emergency Management</li> <li>- Public Safety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Text message on WEA enabled mobile phones</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People with mobile phones who are located in the geographic coverage area of the warning.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People without phones.</li> <li>- People who do not understand English well.</li> </ul>
<b>County Mass Notification System</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Situation is imminent and potentially life threatening to the public.</li> <li>- Public needs protective actions instructions.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Westchester County DOIT</li> <li>- Emergency Management</li> <li>- Public Safety</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Phone call (9-1-1 database and registered cell phones)</li> <li>- Text message</li> <li>- Email</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Listed numbers with home or business addresses in the geographic coverage area of the warning</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People that don't have landlines or did not register with CodeRed.</li> <li>- People who do not understand English well.</li> <li>- Visitors in the targeted area.</li> </ul>
<b>NYAlert</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Situation is imminent and potentially life threatening to the public.</li> <li>- Public needs protective actions instructions.</li> <li>- In conjunction with other communication tools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- NYS Watch Center</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Text message</li> <li>- Email</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People who have signed up for NYAlert and chosen the type of emergency they want to be notified of.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People who not signed up for NYAlert, or have not chosen the particular hazard.</li> <li>- Visitors to the area who have</li> </ul>



SYSTEM	WHEN USED	AUTHORIZED ORIGINATOR	METHODS	WHO I REACHED	WHO IS NOT REACHED
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Specific message to Westchester County employees.</li> </ul>				not signed up for NYAlert.
<b>Media Releases</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is a public interest in the situation.</li> <li>- In conjunction with other communications tools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- County Communications Office</li> <li>- County department (Public Information Officer) PIOs</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- County website</li> <li>- Social media</li> <li>- NYAlert</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- News media</li> <li>- People following news</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People not following local news</li> </ul>
<b>Media Briefings</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is a public interest in the situation.</li> <li>- In conjunction with other communications tools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- County Executive Office</li> <li>- County Commissioners</li> <li>- Other county department leadership</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- In-person</li> <li>- Internet</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- News media</li> <li>- People watching</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People not watching / following local news.</li> </ul>
<b>Social Media</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- There is a public interest in the situation.</li> <li>- In conjunction with other communications tools.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- County Communications Office</li> <li>- Other county departments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Facebook</li> <li>- Twitter</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People following county social media sites.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People not on social media or not following county sites.</li> </ul>
<b>Message Signs</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Motorists are the targeted audience.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Westchester County DoIT</li> <li>- Emergency Management</li> <li>- Public Safety</li> <li>- Department of Public Works (DPW)</li> <li>- Other county departments</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Sign boards along roadways</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Motorists and passengers.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People who are not traveling.</li> </ul>
<b>Loudspeakers</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When the situation is imminent.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Public Safety</li> <li>- Emergency Services</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Loudspeakers on emergency vehicles.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Most people in affected area.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People with impaired hearing.</li> </ul>

SYSTEM	WHEN USED	AUTHORIZED ORGINATOR	MTHODS	WHO I REACHED	WHO IS NOT REACHED
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When the public needs protective actions instructions.</li> <li>- Small geographic area.</li> <li>- Other methods ineffective.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Other county departments</li> </ul>			<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People who do not understand English</li> </ul>
<b>In-Person</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- When the situation is imminent.</li> <li>- When the public needs protective actions instructions.</li> <li>- Small geographic area.</li> <li>- Other methods ineffective.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Law Enforcement</li> <li>- Fire and Emergency Medical Services (EMS) Agencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Knocking on doors</li> <li>- Speaking to people in public places</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Most people in affected area</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- People who will not answer door</li> </ul>

# Guidelines for Issuing Public Alert and Warnings

Depending upon the threat, time availability and anticipated severity, the Westchester County departments with a role in public alert and warning will initiate alerts and warnings utilizing any combination of the following methods:

- Mass Notification System.
- NYAlert and 333111 (by request to NYSDHSES Watch Center).
- Media broadcast alerts.
- Social Media.
- Integrated Public Alert & Warning System (IPAWS).
- In person (Public Safety personnel for evacuations).
- Message Boards.

As in any emergency, the effectiveness of any warning will be dependent upon many factors including:

- Time availability.
- Initial notice of threat.
- Time of day.
- Method of dissemination.
- Infrastructure dependent.
- Ability to receive and properly interpret the message.

There is no all-encompassing formula for decisions on when and how alert and warnings are issued to the public. The decision is based on information and intelligence regarding the specific incident at the time of the incident. There are, however, some evidence-based principles and best practices that can help guide the decision maker:

## **Identify:**

- The incident.
- Scope of the incident.

- Anticipated impact.
- Size and location of the impact area.
- Approximate time until impact.
- Severity of anticipated impact.

**Determine whether alert and warning program should be activated:**

- Incomplete or imperfect information is not a valid reason to delay or avoid issuing a warning.
- Time is of the essence, as recipients of warnings will need time to consider, plan, and act after they receive a warning message.
- Fear of triggering “panic” is not a valid reason to delay or avoid issuing a warning.

**Determine if the notification will be an alert or a warning:**

- Alert - attention/information.
- Warning – requires action.

**Determine warning tools to be used; err on the side of protecting the public:**

- When dealing with uncertain or conflicting information about a threat or population at risk, send the alert and err on the side of precaution.
- Some warning systems have provisions for communicating the general degree of certainty associated with threat information, but many only permit a yes-or-no decision as to warn the public. Reasonable details should be provided, but a warning message is not the place for an extended discussion of scientific data and probability.

**Limit the warning to people at risk:**

- Irrelevant warnings can fatigue the public rapidly and lead to recipients discounting further warning messages or opting out of receiving future alerts and warnings.
- Every effort should be made to target the message to the areas or specific populations at-risk.

**Alert coordination:**

- Notify response partners of the alert.
- Notify impacted partner jurisdictions and Operational Areas (OAs).

- If evacuation message directs people to move to another outside of Westchester County, coordinate the message with the receiving county.

### **Setup a schedule for follow up alert and warnings**

- Designate a position within response operations to monitor current alert and warning content, typically the PIO.
- Ensure the alerting authority, alerting originator, PIO, Joint Information Center (JIC), and designated social media staff are synchronized on current notifications.
- Establish a schedule for determining whether the alerting and warning activities are achieving the intended outcomes, i.e., public is responding as intended. This can be built into shift briefings.

### **Send all-clear or termination of event messages.**

## Alert and Warning Message Development

Warning messages that do not answer key questions may lead to those affected seeking additional information from uninformed friends or relatives, or other sources of misinformation, such as rumor, superstitions and urban myths.

To maximize warning effectiveness, the tone and language of a warning message should be:

- **Specific** – The message should make it clear which people are at risk and what protective action they should take. Inevitably, some people who are not at risk will receive the message; they should be able to determine that from the message text.
- **Consistent** – The public should receive consistent and mutually reinforcing messages through all media and from all sources.
- **Confident** – Even if the underlying information is uncertain, there should be no hedging or ambiguity about the protective action recommendations.
- **Clear** – Wording must be in simple language that can be easily understood. Technical jargon should be avoided.
- **Accurate** – If people learn or suspect they are not receiving correct and complete information, they may begin to ignore both the message and source.

The warning messages should address **five essential topics**:

**1. Source**

Identify who – agency / authority – the alert or warning is coming from. This should be a source that is familiar to and trusted by the community

**2. Hazard**

Describe the threat and its impacts.

**3. Location**

Articulate the impact boundaries in common language, i.e. use street names, landmarks, neighborhood name, etc.

**4. Public Action**

Say what protective action to take, the time to do it, how to accomplish it, and how doing it reduces the impact.

**5. Time**

Expected duration, if known, or “until further notice”.

**Identify the critical issue.**

- What is the critical health/safety problem?
- Example: “Public drinking water supplies in [insert location] may be contaminated with bacteria.”

**Identify the best source of information for the public.**

- Make sure that arrangements/resources are in place for responding to calls from the public before sending the message.

**Briefly describe the geographic area affected by the emergency.**

- Example: “Residents of the [insert location] who are customers of [insert location] Water.”

**Give a brief and immediate recommendation.**

- Example: “Until further notice, do not use tap water for drinking, cooking or mixing formula unless water has been boiled for a full minute. Bottled water is safe to use.”

**Give follow-up instructions.**

- Example: “For more information keep tuned to local TV or radio stations. Call [insert contact] at [insert number]. Do not call hospitals, Sheriff, police or fire with questions about drinking water.”

- Including additional incident information can help reduce milling (time it takes for people to take action). Some considerations for common protective actions include:
  - o Avoid calling 9-1-1 unless you are experiencing a life-threatening emergency.
  - o Evacuation locations, routes, road closures, shelter locations, etc.
  - o Reminders of things to bring with you when evacuating (medicines, pet safety, etc.).
  - o Instructions for sheltering in place or locking down.
  - o For more information:
    - Website Uniform Resource Locator (URL).
    - Call 2-1-1.
    - Social media platforms.

## Evacuation Messages

Evacuation messages are particularly demanding on their originators, as they must be coordinated with agencies responsible for transport, traffic control, and evacuee reception and sheltering.

Confusing and/or uncoordinated evacuation orders can have unintended adverse consequences.

### **Evacuation messages should provide the following:**

- Direction and destination of travel (include a map image if possible).
- Routes to be used and routes to be avoided.
- Means of travel (by auto, by bus, on foot, etc.).
- Accessible transportation and sheltering resources.
- Shelter locations.
- Things to take along (papers, medications, pets, etc.).
- Expected duration of relocation (a few hours, a day, etc.).
- Phone or social media links for additional information.

## ***Character Limits***

Many warning delivery systems have limitations on character length or composition that require a warning message to be brief. However, “keep it short” is not necessarily a good guideline for composing a warning message.

Because of character limitations and inability to include multimedia in most initial notifications, it is also recommended to include a URL or link to a website that hosts alert information, or to drive alert recipients to monitor media outlets for additional information. Be sure to confirm the capability of the resource to avoid the potential of overloading the site.

The order of message content has an impact on alert recipient response time. Since different delivery channels dictate the length of messages, below are the optimal message structures for both short (90-140 characters) and long messages (up to 1,380 characters).

**Short messages** works best if the content is presented in the following order:

- Source.
- Protective action.
- Hazard.
- Location.
- Duration/expiration time.

**Longer messages work** best if the message content is provided in the following order:

- Source.
- Hazard.
- Protective action.
- Location, duration/expiration time.

# JOINT INFORMATION CENTER OPERATIONS GUIDE

## Purpose

The purpose of the JIC Operations Guide is to detail the public information and external affairs actions that will be implemented by Westchester County, as part of the JIS, in the event of a major emergency or disaster.

Timely, consistent, and accurate communications can impact how the media, community partners, and the public react to an event. The intent of this JIC Operations Guide is to establish a process to explain and inform the public, in simplest terms, about potential risk for identified threats and hazards and to increase the likelihood that the public will take needed precautions. These efforts also aim to reduce anxiety and avoid unnecessary care seeking by those not at risk, as well as to facilitate effective response and recovery efforts.

## Overview

A JIC is a central, temporary facility where public information staff from multiple agencies co-locate to coordinate and disseminate consistent, accurate, and timely information during a crisis or incident. Its purpose is to streamline communication, minimize confusion and conflicting messages, and serve as the single point of contact for media and public inquiries. The JIC integrates various agencies' public information efforts into a cohesive system, often supported by a JIS, which provides communication links for sharing verified information.

## Responsibilities

Multiple Westchester County departments, agencies, and offices have a public information process related to the routine delivery services. These existing processes are expanded and integrated during major emergencies and disasters to support JIC operations. All significant communications of this kind are coordinated through the Communications Office within the Office of the County Executive, including but not limited to the following:

- Establishes County government's public information and warning process, incorporating "Inclusive Communications" guidance; functions as the primary public information officer for County government; coordinates related activities across County government.

- Develops and coordinates media notifications, press releases, press conferences, appearances and interviews; requests a Sign Language Interpreter for all emergency-related press conferences/media briefings and works with subject matter experts on the issuance of accessible documents.
- Oversees content for the County's social media accounts and official website in cooperation with the DOIT, including engaging with subject matter experts on accessibility of web content.
- Supports, where appropriate and requested, public information and warning activities by local cities, towns and villages within Westchester County.

During the initial phase of the emergency incident, an assigned PIO will be designated as the lead official for coordinating public information activities. An expanded organization will be established to support JIC operations, appropriate to the scope and magnitude of the disaster.

### ***Public Information Officer***

- Direct work related to the release of information to the media, public, and partners.
- Activate the JIC procedure based on careful assessment of the situation and the expected demands for information by media, partners, and the public.
- Coordinate with horizontal communication partners as outlined in the plan to ensure that messages are consistent.
- Provide updates to the Office of County Executive, Commissioner of Emergency Services, and Emergency Operations Center Manager.
- Ensure that risk communication principles are employed in all contact with the media, public, and partner information release efforts.
- Understand incident situation as well as related policy and potential complicating factors.
- Review and approve materials for release to media, public, and partners.
- Obtain required clearance of materials for release to the media on all information not previously cleared.
- Activate, staff and supervise the public inquiry information call center.

- Arrange regular partner briefings and updates.
- Respond to requests and inquiries from legislators and special interest groups.

## ***Assistant PIO (Media Relations, Information Gathering and Verification, Public/Stakeholder Messaging)***

- Assess media needs and organize mechanisms to fulfill those needs during the crisis.
- Triage the response to media requests and inquiries.
- Ensure that media inquiries are addressed as appropriate.
- Develop and maintain media contact lists and call logs.
- Produce and distribute media advisories and news releases.
- Produce and distribute materials, like fact sheets, audio releases, and video releases.
- Ensure that risk communication principles to build trust and credibility are incorporated into all public messages delivered through the media.
- Manage the mechanisms to respond to the public who request information directly from the organization by telephone, in writing, or by e-mail.
- Oversee media monitoring system and reports (analyzing news clips and video clips to determine needed messages, to discover which information needs to be corrected, and to identify concerns, interests, and needs arising from the crisis and the response).
- Manage the e-mail inquiries coming in over the website.
- Organize and manage, with the Webmaster, the emergency response web site and Web pages, including establishing links to other emergency response web sites.
- Develop and maintain lists and call logs of legislators and special interest groups.

## **Information Verification and Approval**

The assigned PIO, or designee, will officially clear any document with the County Communications Office before it is released to the public. Others, such as legal counsel, may provide input and suggestions if no significant delay occurs. Local emergency officials

involved with incident response will also be provided with a pre-release copy, as time allows.

Unless specified otherwise, information cleared for release is presumed to be cleared for website and social media release as well.

## JIC Coordination

The County has pre-identified JIC locations that can be activated and operated in the event of a large-scale emergency. This document establishes the procedure by which the JIC will be operated. It also includes guidance for the activation, and deactivation of the JIC.

The JIC serves as the central point for the coordination and dissemination of public information concerning a multi-jurisdictional major emergency or disaster.

## Key Aspects of a JIC

- **Coordinated Information:** Ensures that all public statements are consistent and accurate, preventing contradictory messages from different agencies.
- **Single Point of Contact:** Acts as the primary source of information for the media and the public, consolidating inquiries and responses.
- **Integration of Agencies:** Facilitates collaboration between PIOs from various responding agencies, including local, state, and federal organizations.
- **Support for Incident Management:** Provides essential public affairs support to the Incident Commander or Unified Command structure during an emergency.
- **Types of JICs:** Can be established physically at a central location, virtually via electronic means, or as satellite or area JICs for specific needs or large-scale incidents.

## Why JICs Are Important

- **Reduces Confusion:** By centralizing information and messages, JICs prevent misinformation and conflicting reports that can cause public confusion and distrust.
- **Efficient Resource Use:** Maximizes the use of public information resources by coordinating efforts and avoiding duplication of work.

- **Builds Public Trust:** Delivers a unified and trustworthy source of information, which helps to maintain public confidence during a crisis.
- **Facilitates Media Access:** Offers a central location and organized process for media to get verified information and conduct interviews, which is crucial for disseminating critical public safety instructions.

## Procedure

The activities at the JIC can be divided into three phases: activation, operations and deactivation.

### *Activation*

Upon the determination to activate the JIC:

- Coordinate with the County EOC and notify selected JIC facility and assigned staff.
- Initiate preliminary information about the event to media via established mechanisms.
- Designate and prepare JIC area with equipment, parking, security, etc.
- Notify media when the JIC has been activated.

### *Operations*

- Conduct initial internal briefing.
- Establish method to ensure coordinated information.
- Develop and distribute approved fact sheets, talking points and media releases.
- Schedule and hold periodic briefings for media.
- Schedule and hold periodic briefings for partners and other stakeholders.
- Forward new information to Public Inquiry Call Center staff, retrieve call trends, and address rumor control.
- Monitor physical and mental wellbeing of JIC staff.

### *Deactivation*

- Monitor situation and media/public interest.

- Determine when to deactivate the JIC based on need for public information and stabilization of the incident.
- Notify media of JIC deactivation with an advisory; indicate specific agencies to contact with residual questions.
- Conduct meeting for an after-action debriefing.
- Disassemble and store equipment.
- Prepare an after-action report.

## ***JIC Activation and Notification***

Activation of the JIC is authorized by the County Executive, when recommended by the Communications Office following consultation with a local Incident Commander, the Commissioner of Emergency Services or the EOC Manager.

### ***Media notification before JIC activation***

Since it may take a significant length of time to activate, staff and equip the JIC, information about the emergency will be provided through a message on the County website and through an initial pre-approved media advisory to local and regional news media.

### ***Media notification of JIC activation***

Once the JIC is open and has an appropriate number of staff present a pre-approved media advisory will be issued. This advisory will announce the JIC has been activated and will provide important information for news media representatives covering the emergency.

## ***JIC facility and equipment***

If the situation dictates that a JIC be established, the following essential items should be verified to be available. Although the number of telephones needed varies with each incident, adequate lines will be necessary to handle media inquiries, government officials' contacts, and community inquiries. A fax machine and a computer/modem connection is imperative. Several phone lines should be reserved for outgoing calls. Space should be reserved for:

- Media, government and community phone staff.
- News release writers.

- Supervisors.
- Workspace to collate news releases, fact sheets, etc.
- Status boards/maps.
- Copy and fax machines.

Additional space is also needed for media briefings and a media working area. The media briefing room needs to be large enough to accommodate a large number of newspaper, television and radio reporters and photographers.

The first person to arrive at the JIC will begin preparing rooms at the facility designated for use by JIC staff.

## JIC Operations

The overarching tasks of a JIC are to:

- Create news releases.
- Conduct media briefings.
- Ensure a consistent message is being expressed by all levels of government.

To do these functions, the JIC operations should include the following functions:

- Communications with the EOC staff.
- Preparation of information about the emergency.
- Coordination of information between PIOs.
- Presentation of information to the media and public.
- Feedback and rumor control.
- Administrative and operational support.

### ***Becoming Operational***

The JIC may be declared operational when a minimum of one public inquiry phone line and one media phone line are active and staffed, the assigned PIO is present, and authorization has been issued by the County Executive, and communicated to the Communications Office, Commissioner of Emergency Services, EOC Manager, and local Incident Commander(s).

## *Initial internal briefing*

A situation briefing should take place as soon as possible. It should, at a minimum, include the following:

- Summary of the essential elements of information about the incident and status.
- Report on media notification and interactions.
- Report on partner notifications and participation in JIC.
- A list of organizations or persons from whom information has been requested but calls have not been returned.
- Description of any rumors or misinformation.

## *Development and approval of media releases*

The assigned PIO(s) decides if there is sufficient information to issue a news release. The PIO, in coordination with the Communications Office and other JIC partners, coordinates drafts of news releases in the approved format on County letterhead. Once information is reviewed and approved, the news release is ready for distribution. Administrative support personnel will be responsible for duplicating, filing, and distributing the media advisory to the JIC staff. The advisory will be provided as a handout to the media present at the beginning of the next media briefing. For media not present at the JIC, the administrative staff will fax and/or e-mail the advisories.

# Crisis Information Dissemination Mechanisms

The County PIO and JIC staff will use any necessary public information mechanisms to provide information to the public and media. These include:

- |  |   |   |
|--|---|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Phone.</li> <li>- Inquiry Lines.</li> <li>- Fax.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Pre-programmed broadcast fax to media.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Email.</li> <li>- U.S. Mail.</li> <li>- In-Person.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Town Hall Meetings.</li> <li>o Media Briefings.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Media.             <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>o Radio.</li> <li>o Print.</li> <li>o Web.</li> <li>o Television.</li> </ul> </li> </ul> |
|--|---|---|

- |   |   |  |
|---|---|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Pre-programmed broadcast fax to partners.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ County Executive Press Conferences.</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Flyers.</li> </ul>              |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Social Media.</li> </ul>                             | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- County Web Site.</li> </ul>                    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- EAS.</li> <li>- NWR.</li> </ul> |

## Considerations for Inclusive and Accessible Communications

The following are identified public information functions and guidance for enhancing inclusive and accessible information sharing.

### *Notifications*

This includes automated calling to landline phones, text messages and e-mails to subscriber devices. When developing messages and determining systems to be utilized, County departments and agencies should refer to the following “Accessible Alert and Warning Messages for Persons with Access and Functional Needs” guidance as provided by FEMA. The guidance calls for:

- **Clear and simple language:** Use clear and simple language whenever possible, with minimal use of abbreviations. The most important information should be presented first.
- **Text-to-speech conversion:** Take care in composing text that is converted to audio by text-to-speech equipment.
- **Consistent audio:** Notification programs can accommodate pre-recorded audio files that may be used by Emergency Alert System participants (e.g. broadcasters) and assist the blind or low vision. The audio should be as consistent as possible with the text and ensure any abbreviations are spoken as full words.
- **Ample text and audio to explain images/maps:** Multimedia messages, ample text and audio should be provided to explain images or maps, so that message recipients can understand the meaning of what is being conveyed graphically.
- **Screen reading and text-to-speech devices:** Some mobile devices and software provide screen reading and text-to-speech conversion capabilities for alerts delivered via Internet technologies.

## Web-based Messaging

WCAG provides the standard for web content accessibility. This includes website, email, and social media platforms for messaging. For more information:

- **WCAG Overview:** <https://www.w3.org/WAI/standards-guidelines/wcag/>
- **WCAG 2.0 Checklist:** <https://webaim.org/standards/wcag/WCAG2Checklist.pdf>

The following principles should be used to guide content development:

- **Perceivable:** Information and user interface components must be presented to users in ways they can perceive (sight, hearing, and/or touch).
- **Operable:** User interface components (forms, controls) and navigation must be operable.
- **Understandable:** Information and the operation of the user interface must be understandable.
- **Robust:** Content must be robust enough that it can be interpreted by a wide variety of user agents, including assistive technologies.

## Media Coordination

Media coordination includes but is not limited to press advisory and press release development and press conference conduct. The following considerations should be considered:

- **Pre-scripted media request:** Message from Westchester to invited media entities should request that closed captioning be available during broadcasting and that video captured includes the American Sign Language (ASL) interpreter within the video frame.
- **ASL Interpreter:** An ASL interpreter is featured for press conferences whenever possible, via the County's Office for People with Disabilities.
- **Accessible Press Conferences:** Identify and respond to requests for accommodation from media personnel, participating agencies and observers or attendees attending the press conference.
- **Press Releases:** Disseminate and post in accessible format (e.g. via County Website).

## ***Media coordination at the JIC***

Media access at the JIC will be coordinated by the assigned PIO in coordination with the Communications Office and supported by County Police. Media will register at the entrance to the JIC. Once registered, the media will be provided with identification badges and an information packet, if available. They will then be directed to the media work area. Media members will not be permitted outside designated areas without the expressed permission of the PIO.

## ***Media Briefings***

The primary means of communicating to the media and the public will be through organized media briefings. For major incidents, a regular schedule of news briefings may be established by the PIO. There should be a minimum of two news media briefings each day for as long as the size of the media contingent covering the event warrants that number of briefings. Briefings should be scheduled to help reporters meet news deadlines, as appropriate.

## ***Schedule***

Although the specific times for news briefings will be determined by the PIO(s) in conjunction with the Communications Office and Incident Commander (IC), a typical daily news availability schedule may be as follows:

- Morning media availability — technical experts and/or PIO.
- Afternoon media availability — IC selected experts.
- Evening media availability — end-of-day briefing by experts and/or PIO.

Prior to each media briefing, the Assistant PIO will advise the media at the JIC of the briefing protocol and provide information as needed on JIC facilities and services available to reporters. Spokespersons from the agencies involved will provide statements, updated information and answer questions if deemed appropriate. Technical advisers will be available during each media briefing to respond to questions or provide additional details as needed. A summary of each media briefing will be prepared by a member of the PIO staff. This information will be provided to all JIC managers and all spokespersons. Response to a rumor or incorrect information may be disseminated through a media advisory, an announcement at subsequent media briefings or direct contact with members of the public or the media.

## ***Briefing Pre-meeting***

At least 30 minutes before each news briefing, the PIO and support staff should meet with the participants. A review of logistics, order of presenters, anticipated questions and use of graphics/props should be discussed. Between briefings, a list of anticipated questions should be developed by the PIO in conjunction with the JIC staff, especially the media inquiry phone line staff. Ground rules should be established during the pre-briefing meeting.

## ***Logistics for Dignitaries***

There will be times when the County Executive and other high-ranking officials will be conducting news briefings. It is very important that the PIO and support staff meet in advance to discuss logistics, messages and other coordination issues related to the inclusion of these individuals.

# **Designated Spokespersons**

The following are designated spokespersons for Westchester County in response to or in the event of an emergency:

- County Executive.
- Deputy County Executive.
- Director of Operations.
- PIO.
- Commissioner of Emergency Services, Public Safety, Health, or other department subject matter expertise.
- Emergency Management Director.

## ***After the Media Briefing***

During each news briefing, the Assistant PIO should take notes of responses to reporter questions and note any unanswered questions. It is suggested a video recording be made of each briefing (for playback to the JIC staff and others). As soon as possible, after the news briefing, the PIO or designee should provide a briefing to the JIC staff on any new information, decisions or policy statements that were presented. The lead PIO should ensure information is made available to address any unanswered questions. When

appropriate, the JIC staff should debrief with the EOC and IC regarding the effectiveness of the news briefing.

## Evaluating Effectiveness During an Emergency

The PIO will:

- Continue to gather and check the facts. What happened? What was done to keep this situation from happening? What can be done to keep it from getting worse? Determine what the County is doing to end this crisis. Is there an investigation? Who's involved in the investigation?
- Determine what other agencies/organizations are doing to solve this crisis.
- Determine who is being affected by this crisis. What are their perceptions? What do they want and need to know?
- Determine what the public should be doing.
- Activate media monitoring.
- Activate Internet monitoring.
- Determine what's being said about the event. Is the information accurate?

These feedback loops will be utilized to refine messaging.

### ***Public, Medical Professional and Media Telephone Operations***

The goals of the public inquiry teams are to answer individual questions, address concerns and to detect, track and nullify rumors or incorrect information during an emergency. The primary goal of the media inquiry line is to gather questions from the media and inform them about the next scheduled news briefing. The public inquiry team will respond to questions about the emergency through the use of approved fact sheets, prepared statements and media advisories. Team members will maintain a log of citizen, professional and media queries. The team will provide (at least daily) feedback to the JIC on the flow of emergency public information. The Call Center Coordinator attends all meetings and media briefings to gather information on the emergency and provide this to team members. Information provided through the call center will be consistent with

information provided to the media. When a call center team member is unable to immediately respond to a citizen or official's question, they should obtain the caller's name and telephone number and a brief description of the call. The team member will submit the inquiry form to the call center coordinator who will distribute these to the appropriate JIC staff for processing. Call center updates and reports will be made available to the EOC and IC of the jurisdiction having authority.

## ***Communications Feedback and Rumor Control***

During any emergency, there is always the possibility of rumors or incorrect information to be generated. Media monitoring will be performed to detect the broadcast of incorrect emergency information. This involves monitoring local television and radio news programs and viewing media Web sites. Media monitoring will be conducted at the JIC as a rumor control function but may also be conducted at the EOC or individual agencies. When incorrect information is detected through media monitoring or other means, this information is provided to the PIO, who notifies the appropriate JIC staff member to prepare a response. JIC personnel are responsible for advising their respective EOCs of rumors and incorrect information and the proposed response. To manage rumors, all JIC staff members are responsible for reporting rumors to the PIO. Generally, the public inquiry call center team members and media monitors will have the best opportunity to detect rumors and incorrect information from individual citizens and the media.

## ***JIC Security***

Security and traffic control for the JIC during operations will be provided by the County Public Safety Department with assistance from the NYS Police and local law enforcement agencies.

## ***JIC shift change***

Depending upon the level of the emergency and the extent of media interest, the PIO, in coordination with the Communications Office and other supporting agencies, may elect to suspend JIC operations during non-business hours, typically overnight. A voice mail system will be used during the overnight suspension to receive media or public calls. Follow-up will be handled when JIC operation resumes. However, for major disasters requiring full scale EOC activations, the JIC will synchronize operational shifts with the EOC.

### **JIC staff shift-change duties:**

- Arrive 30 minutes prior to shift change for the briefing.

- Sign in and receive badges.
- Participate in briefing prior to shift change.
- Brief incoming shift member (if going off-shift).
- Turn over logs, notes and other pertinent data.
- Sign out and turn in badges if going off-shift.

## ***JIC Deactivation***

Following the conclusion of the emergency incident and at the point where there is diminishing media or public interest, the JIC will enter a deactivation phase. The decision to deactivate is a joint decision by the PIO and JIC operations manager in consultation with the County Executive, Incident Commander, Commissioner of Emergency Services or EOC Manager.

Media will be notified that the JIC is being deactivated in the final JIC news briefing. A media advisory will be issued to the regional media. Media will be referred to the appropriate public affairs representatives for follow-up queries.

Once operations have ceased, the PIO will hold a brief after action meeting for the purpose of identifying areas for improvement identified during JIC operations. Following deactivation, each JIC manager will provide a report stating his individual perspective of the emergency to the PIO. The PIO will submit a final report to the participating agencies and partners.

# ACRONYM LIST

ACRONYM	DEFINITION
<b>AFN</b>	Access and Functional Needs
<b>ASL</b>	American Sign Language
<b>CEMP</b>	Comprehensive Emergency Management Plan
<b>DOIT</b>	Department of Information Technology
<b>DPW</b>	Westchester County Department of Public Works
<b>EAS</b>	Emergency Alert System
<b>EMS</b>	Emergency Medical Services
<b>ENS</b>	Emergency Notification System
<b>EOC</b>	Emergency Operations Center
<b>FCC</b>	Federal Communications Commission
<b>FEMA</b>	Federal Emergency Management Agency
<b>IC</b>	Incident Commander
<b>IPAWS</b>	Integrated Public Alert and Warning System
<b>JIC</b>	Joint Information Center
<b>JIS</b>	Joint Information System
<b>NIMS</b>	National Incident Management System
<b>NOAA</b>	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
<b>NWR</b>	NOAA Weather Radio
<b>NWS</b>	National Weather Service
<b>NYS</b>	New York State
<b>NYSDHSES</b>	New York State Division of Homeland Security and Emergency Services
<b>NYS OEM</b>	New York State Office of Emergency Management
<b>OA</b>	Operational Areas
<b>PIO</b>	Public Information Officer
<b>PC</b>	Primary Contact
<b>SAME</b>	Specific Area Message Encoding
<b>TDD</b>	Telecommunications Device for the Deaf
<b>TV</b>	Television
<b>WCAG</b>	Web Content Accessibility Guidelines
<b>WCEM</b>	Westchester County Emergency Management
<b>WCDES</b>	Westchester County Department of Emergency Services

ACRONYM	DEFINITION
WEA	Wireless Emergency Alerts
URL	Uniform Resource Locator