

## How Do You “Direct-Connect” To Those You Protect?

By William Baker, President and CEO, Information Station Specialists, Zeeland, Michigan

If you can communicate, chances are you can protect. Your preparation, mitigation, response and recovery efforts all are undergirded by a comprehensive, communications network. But does your network extend as far as it should? Can you talk directly to your citizens, when seconds count – to save time, property and lives?

Traditionally, the tools at hand for “direct-connect” to citizens have been few and inefficient. Requesting that local AM and FM radio stations broadcast emergency messages is not a bad thing in itself, but it takes time and relies on the stations’ willingness and accuracy. Outdoor warning systems, such as sirens, while alerting residents with loud blasts, do not inform about the nature of emergencies or what actions to take. Even modern, “talking” outdoor warning systems do not reliably reach people indoors or in cars – together, a high percentage of your population. Reverse-911 systems can call people within telephone reach but are expensive and can take hours to deliver critical messages. And local-access cable TV channels – for the communities that have them – only warn those who happen to be watching that channel at just the right time.

No one system available today can instantly connect with everyone you are charged to protect. But there are new tools available that go a long way toward helping you reach the “still-unreached” in your community.

The FCC has made available designated AM emergency advisory radio frequencies public safety professionals can use to inform citizens before, during and after disasters. These channels, which have traditionally been used by departments of transportation, airports and national parks to convey traveler information, may also be licensed by local govern-

ments for a variety of applications, including critical safety broadcasts during emergencies. Strategically located flashing signs and/or sirens alert those in the area to tune in on any AM radio receiver.

More than 200 emergency advisory radio stations operate across the country today. According to FCC data, since Sept. 11, 2001, an average of once each week a new station is licensed somewhere in the United States. In 1989, Newark, California’s, “emergency advisory radio” station was called to duty during the Loma Prieta Earthquake. Residents, stranded across the San Francisco Bay area, were able to tune in the station while driving to learn it was safe to return home. In 1993, Napierville, Illinois, a suburb of Chicago, pioneered a system of three such stations, synchronized using newly developed global positioning system techniques. That trio of emergency advisory radio stations was the only information link citizens had during massive flooding that stranded whole neighborhoods along the DuPage River in 1995. Recently, in the mega power outage of 2003, dozens of cities along the East Coast and Great Lakes took to the airwaves on their emergency advisory radio stations to speak directly to citizens, instructing them where to seek assistance until the lights came back on.

Emergency advisory radio stations can be particularly efficient for reaching people on wheels – a segment of the population especially vulnerable and difficult to penetrate with traditional notification methods. The percentage of residents on wheels can be quite high during certain hours – especially in heavily concentrated suburban commuter areas. Some cities, such as Union Beach, New Jersey, realized this early on and designed a system of flashing-beacon street signs to

alert residents to tune immediately to their public-safety station, when urgent messages are broadcast. More recent sign systems allow beacons to be activated throughout cities immediately via VHF/UHF radio. Many communities with existing siren systems mount public relations campaigns to condition residents to tune to special frequencies to get specifics, whenever sirens sound.

Emergency advisory radio stations may broadcast on any AM frequency between 530 and 1700 kHz that meets FCC separation parameters. They commonly have a three to five mile radius area of coverage, expandable, as described above, using synchronization. Larger areas such as Gallatin County, Montana, employ portable stations that can be deployed exactly where needed on a moment’s notice. More advanced emergency advisory systems automatically broadcast National Weather Service and Emergency Alert System (EAS) messages when relevant to an area and can operate up to five days after AC power loss. Other capabilities include special tie-ins with siren systems so that when sirens wail, emergency radio messages automatically switch to appropriate content.

The cost of an emergency advisory radio station is usually less than a single outdoor warning siren. Local governments can obtain frequencies on a first-come-first-served basis. Because of the popularity of these types of stations in recent years, it is recommended that those evaluating such systems obtain licenses right away. Equipment suppliers will often handle license applications and perform installation work. To research this issue further and find a qualified provider, key into your favorite Internet search engine the term “emergency advisory radio.”