

**STATEMENT OF
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BEFORE THE

**HOMELAND SECURITY COMMITTEE - SUBCOMMITTEE ON EMERGENCY
COMMUNICATIONS, PREPAREDNESS AND RESPONSE
U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES**

**“ADVANCING PUBLIC ALERT AND WARNING SYSTEMS TO BUILD A
MORE RESILIENT NATION”**

MAY 14, 2008 – WASHINGTON, DC

Good morning Mr. Chairman, Congressman Dent and thank you for the opportunity to appear before you today to discuss the critical importance of having a modern and robust public alert and warning capability for our nation.

My name is John Gibb and I am Director of the New York State Emergency Management Office. Emergency alert and warning has long been a core responsibility of our government and the emergency management community. Since the ride of Paul Revere, Americans have shown that if they are provided with information about a potential threat or risk, they will take actions to protect themselves and their property. Stephen Flynn, a Senior Fellow for National Security Studies at the Council of Foreign Relations, recently cited the example of the brave American passengers on United Flight 93. Having received information of the unfolding events that morning of September 11, 2001, those selfless citizens took action and made the ultimate sacrifice to protect their fellow Americans. Given timely information, our citizens will seek to help themselves in the face of great adversity. Recent advances in technology have challenged us to re-examine how we can best disseminate critical public information to our residents. I am especially pleased to be able to discuss with you NY-ALERT which is the state-of-the-art, web-based alert and notification system that we have developed in New York.

Alert systems are not a new issue for our nation. The Emergency Alert System (EAS) and its predecessor, the Emergency Broadcast System (EBS), have provided a platform for the dissemination of emergency information to the public and met the federal requirement for the President to have the ability to provide information to the nation on short notice for decades. Local systems, which at one time included civil defense siren systems in many parts of the country, now consist of a patchwork of systems that include local access to the Emergency Alert System, NOAA weather radios, reverse dialing systems, outdoor siren systems and more recently blast email and commercial text messaging services. Each of these systems is capable of notifying segments of the population, but no single outlet provides a maximum penetration of the emergency information to the public that needs to receive it. Complicating and delaying dissemination of information today is the requirement to create a message tailored to each dissemination gateway.

Presidential Executive Order 13407 in June of 2006 declared the, “policy of the United States to have an effective, reliable, integrated, flexible, and comprehensive system to alert and warn the American people in situations of war, terrorist attack, natural disaster, or other hazards to public safety and well-being (public alert and warning system), taking appropriate account of the functions, capabilities, and needs of the private sector and of all levels of government in our Federal system, and to ensure that under all conditions the President can communicate with the American people.” While the executive order may be a daunting charge, it is fairly unambiguous. Twenty-three months later, however, we do not have a comprehensive new national alerting capability and as late as last month, federal agencies were in disagreement over roles and responsibilities in administering the Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS) which is expected to be a national text messaging alert and warning capability.

In New York State we have NY-ALERT which is a web-based, all-hazards alert and notification system developed by the New York State Emergency Management Office. This system, designed and built by a small but visionary Information Technology staff at SEMO, is compliant with the Common Alert Protocol (CAP) and allows public officials to simultaneously broadcast emergency information through series of gateways. From a secure website, local and state public safety and elected officials can provide emergency information via the Emergency Alert System (EAS); email; blast faxes; text messages to cell phones; posting to the NY-ALERT website (www.nyalert.gov); RSS (real simple syndicate) feeds from the nyalert.gov website; and voice messages to landline and cell phones. The unique quality of NY-ALERT is that you only create the message once. When the person making the notification sends the message, all of the “gateways” chosen by the notifier are activated simultaneously and the emergency information is delivered to users as close to instantly as the individual technologies allow.

NY-ALERT allows subscribers to sign-up via the internet and dictate how they want to be notified and what types of events they want to be notified of. Subscribers can designate multiple email addresses, cell phones, and landline phones to receive emergency information. They can choose the geographic areas they are concerned with down to the town, village or city level. Subscribers can also choose the type of emergencies they want to be notified of and the severity or urgency of the event. We will be announcing a number of enhancements of the system in the next several months which will even further improve the service to our citizens.

We have been utilizing NY-ALERT statewide for the past eleven months. Last year as NY-ALERT readied completion, the tragic shooting at Virginia Tech occurred. Much of our initial efforts shifted to adapt NY-ALERT to campus alerting needs. Our NY-ALERT team headed by SEMO’s Assistant Director for Technology Kevin Ross worked closely with university campus safety and information technology officials to tailor NY-ALERT to the task. As a result, NY-ALERT is now the alert and warning system for fifty-five of our State University campuses and twenty-five of the City University of New York campuses. NY-ALERT has been activated numerous times to disseminate campus related safety information including campus closures for weather events and security related issues.

Twenty-four New York counties are currently using NY-ALERT with additional with additional jurisdictions coming on board each week. We have more than 1.4 million subscriber records already accessible through NY-ALERT. We are also able to import E911 data from participating counties and support “notification” groups which allows targeted, private notification of specific groups of individuals using the NY-ALERT infrastructure. In the past 10 months NY-ALERT activations have issued more than six million emails, millions of text messages, and made hundreds of thousands of phone calls with emergency information. With NY-ALERT’s flexibility, our State Department of Transportation, effective this coming Monday, May 19, will be sending email and text message “TransAlerts” providing subscribers with critical information regarding highway closures, accidents and significant delays. We are working with the State Division of State Police to integrate NY-ALERT for their use including the ability to quickly activate

AMBER Alerts via the system as well. Our State Office of Homeland Security is preparing to use the system to share information with their public and private sector partners by creating secure notification groups. Through this system, the Office of Homeland Security will be able to alert critical infrastructure sector partners of new information available, provide threat intelligence, and send supporting documentation via attachment quickly to their partners.

I am proud to tell you that NY-ALERT has been designed and built using state resources. Governor Paterson has made a significant commitment of \$5.4 million in this year's state budget to further enhance and support the system. One of our frustrations last year was that we were not allowed to use available Hazard Mitigation Grant Program dollars to enhance our NY-ALERT phone dialer capacity. Federal guidance on the use of mitigation funding should be revisited to ensure that investments in emergency alerting capabilities be allowed.

Later this year we will be announcing additional enhancements to NY-ALERT including state-of-the-art capabilities such things as additional dialer capacity, a geographic interface allowing the public safety official making the emergency notification to designate on a map the area that they want notified and the ability for people who receive emergency information to respond back to the notifier.

This is not a test. NY-ALERT is not a pilot program. It is being used on a daily basis to provide New Yorkers with emergency information. Moving forward we know that we will have to work closely with FEMA as the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) evolves. It has not been made clear to us when the IPAWS implementation timeline will impact New York, but it would seem to make sense that any federal efforts would leverage existing state capabilities like NY-ALERT. NY-ALERT works now. It can as easily support federal notification needs as it does local needs.

Cell bursting or cell casting – the ability to send text messages to all cell phones that “see” a given cell tower – is an important capability and we are working with cell providers to add that function to NY-ALERT. As I understand it, the Commercial Mobile Alert System (CMAS) recently announced by the FCC, which uses this the cell bursting capability, will require messages to get to the federal officials (agency yet undetermined) who will then activate the CMAS. We need to find a way to integrate CMAS with existing systems like NY-ALERT that would allow local emergency officials to access this capability. Every emergency is local and the prospect of sending an important emergency message from a local jurisdiction to the federal government, who will then send it to the carriers, to ultimately get back down to local cell towers, is worrisome.

In closing, I feel very confident in saying that NY-ALERT is our State's solution to our alert and warning needs and a best practice that other states and the federal government can draw upon in designing an integrated state, regional or national alert, notification and warning system.