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National Preparedness Month – September 2007:

Today Emergency Information Online is proud to present a 'special guest article' by Carl Pramuk. This article is taken from a 2005 presentation Mr. Pramuk made at the Accessible Emergency Communication and Notification Conference, hosted by Gallaudet University, the world leader in liberal education and career development for deaf and hard-of-hearing undergraduate students. Special thanks to Dr. Judy Harkins for making that conference, and this special feature, possible.

TIPS FROM GALLAUDET UNIVERSITY: Campus-Level Accessible Notification

By Carl Pramuk, Guest Contributor

I have been asked to talk specifically about campuses and how they deal with different issues that they confront in dealing with emergencies. I am happy to provide our perspective here at Gallaudet University. I am the Dean of Students; I am responsible for the campus in terms of the dorms and the residence halls, and I'm also a member of the university's Crisis Management Team. With those two roles there are a variety of issues that present themselves. I'm happy to see that there's a variety of products available on the market that can help provide solutions to those issues. But we still face some of the same types of issues that you have.

Gallaudet is a four-year liberal arts college. It was established in 1864 by an act of Congress. Our programs and services are specifically designed to accommodate deaf or hard-of-hearing students. There are 1,800-plus students, primarily deaf or hard-of-hearing, and 60-plus students and employees also have vision impairments. Our campus is different than other campuses, so that presents the first point: You can't adapt a plan to fit a place without observing the environment first, who the population is. Some Federal agencies have a lot of employees. Their solutions might be different than a workplace that has one employee; it depends on what the particular environment is. So what you will see in this presentation is how we have dealt with issues on our campus. I want to preface this by saying that our solutions might not be applicable to all campus environments.

In the '70s and '80s the most serious emergency that we had was perhaps a trashcan fire, and you had to crawl to get out. It was very minor, even though back then it would have been classified as major. More recently we've had murders on our campus; the D.C. - area sniper; September 11 that hit New York and the Pentagon. We've had a variety of things that impacted our campus and the surrounding area. So we had to review our emergency plan and realize that we had to do a lot more work.

Prior to that, our notification system included strobe light notification, which works great when you are awake, but when you're asleep that is another issue. We do have door bell alarms so that if someone is at the door, you know that by a flashing door light. Also we have an alert notification that was through pager, cell

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phone, or e-mail. You have to subscribe or sign up for the service and one department sends out the messages, so if there is a snow-closing or other emergency, that notification would be done through e-mail, cell phone, or pager.

Now, I am going to talk about issues that we were confronted with 9/11 and post-9/11. We had realized we had new issues had emerged, for example, 9/11 network congestion. The network traffic was very high, and communication between Crisis Management Team members was not functional. There was so much traffic that the messages arrived hours later. When an emergency meeting was called, we weren't aware of it.

The second point is the issue of signal strength with pagers. In my office, the signal strength was not very good. In my office, my desk is in one corner and on the opposite side of my office there is a conference table. With the layout of my office, there are only two positions where the pager will work. I have to either put it on the printer, which is near my desk in the corner; or I have to sit on one of the chairs on the opposite side of the room. If I am wearing it in a different location within the room, it won't work. So that's a serious issue. It's very limiting to have just two very specific locations where I can use my pager.

We've researched notification systems. In other universities, voice based systems such as a public address system is often used for the notification system. Here, that is not helpful. If there was an emergency in the campus there would be a visual alarm, usually for fire. If you have a biological or chemical threat, that will not work: The reason is that we as deaf people have learned from the elementary school all the way to the college level, that when you see the strobe alarm go off, it means fire and you exit the building, that is the procedure that everyone follows. If students leave their building during a chemical or biological threat, it makes matters worse. It is important to have a different solution when you need to communicate to shelter in place.

Students who are in wheelchairs present another issue. We've addressed that by means of having a sub-committee that has proposed different solutions. One is that wheelchair users will go to a safe area, and the police or fire department will carry them downstairs. But many of these students did not like this solution, this type of intervention. We're revising the policy on having people who need help with steps having to wait for security to arrive.

Our Crisis Management Team met and we laid out many different types of solutions and recommendations. We developed a manual that talks about different procedures. But really, the key issue we talked about was communication: specific methods of how we provide information that should be good and reliable instead of relying on one solution. You need to have different means of notification. If the first one doesn't work, then there is a secondary backup. As I explained about my pager that doesn't work in certain areas, we need to have a back-up system.

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We're looking for different technological solutions. Some things that we have either applied or are considering applying:

Cable TV interrupt: We have campus cable TV and cable lines throughout the campus, and we have control centralized in one place. We are able to interrupt the programming to let them know something is happening. That's really a great solution. That was one of the first things that we did. So for example, if students are in the cafeteria watching ESPN, we can let them know something is happening. That is one back-up solution.

Improved signal strength for mobile devices: We also have new network towers set up by such carriers as NexTel, Cingular, and T-Mobile, on campus. This has greatly improved our reception. So instead of having to worry about my pager working only in two positions in my office, I can walk around and use my pager in many areas of my office. It's much better.

Computer interrupt: We work a lot with our computers, as many of you do, and while on the computer there can be a pop-up with emergency information. Let's say that I am working on the presentation for this conference, and there is some kind of warning. I wouldn't know that. So there is an interrupt, and even though I am not working online, with this notification system from TCS Associates and NXi, it will automatically pop up with the emergency information.

Sometimes there is a red flag about such systems – we must also worry about Internet security where hackers outside can come in do serious damage. So it's really important for our Information Technology Department to be able to learn from these companies that have been involved with agencies such as the Department of Defense. If the Department of Defense can trust this company to implement something, we feel that we can trust the company also.

Another product I've learned about in my research for the Crisis Management Team is the Pb World Com Alert Emergency Notification System. This is connected with NOAA alerts, Amber Alert messages, and civil emergencies. It can also include your own internal organizational announcements. It can be sent to your computer, and also can be used on strategically placed LCD screens throughout campus.

Color coding visual signals: At the Texas School for the Deaf, they had a visual strobe, and there were three colors attached to the strobe for three different purposes. Blue was to let you know that class is over, it's time to change classes; yellow was emergency; white was all clear – that meant it's okay. They could see it via television, or via the computer, that is the interrupt system for both of those. People knew that color coding by heart. I mean, I'm not a student there now, but I can still remember from my day being in a school system and having these color codes

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Special transmitters and individual receivers: This is a solution that we're looking at now in terms of mobility disabilities and being able to allow people to get to safety. How can a deaf person in a deaf environment, who is a wheelchair user, communicate if there is no one there to help them down the steps? If everyone has left, or if a person is working alone in a lab and an emergency happens, and the lab is on the fourth floor, and that person starts going down the steps and encounters a wheelchair user. We need to have a plan and place those emergency chairs so they can be readily used in case of a situation like that. We need to have a sensor or a button that can be pushed when they need help, so that someone can come and assist. Perhaps you remember what college is like in terms of alcohol used, or people want to go out and have a fun time, they want to go play with the button. You can't lock up the equipment; it needs to be accessible. If the sensor is set off, and there is no emergency, then security will know that someone has tampered with it or is playing with the wheelchair.

This is, in brief, our experience. We appreciate working with you, talking with you, analyzing these different things for consideration, looking for possible solutions, and we look to see what can come ahead.

Resource 8 - Schools:

The Accessible Emergency Notification and Communication Website
<http://tap.gallaudet.edu/emergency/nov05conference/EmergencyCommConf.asp>

In 2005 the RERC on Telecommunications Access sponsored a state of the science conference on the accessibility of emergency communications to people with disabilities. This timely seminar brought together experts in accessibility, mass media, emergency communications, telecommunications, Internet, and government policy to analyze barriers and technological solutions for effective emergency communications with and for people with disabilities. This website features informative talks, resources, and videos from that conference.

TOMORROW: Emergency Preparedness for Businesses

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