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Smart Practices Spotlight

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A Stand-alone E-mail System for Emergency Communications California's Santa Clara Valley Water District, Office of Emergency Services

Summary: *In an effort to provide a supplementary system for the countywide exchange of emergency information and data, Santa Clara County's flood protection agency and water supplier developed a stand-alone, cost-efficient e-mail system that connects critical agencies and individuals, and for some things, works better than Internet-based e-mail.*

More than a year before 9/11, the Santa Clara Valley Water District's Office of Emergency Services created a relatively low-cost, reliable way to exchange large volumes of information among emergency responders, Emergency Operations Centers (EOCs) and other response and recovery partners. The solution? -- An independent alternate e-mail system that uses commercial off-the-shelf software to connect five counties, 16 local government Emergency Operations Centers, two major universities and a leading national defense contractor.

At the heart of the system is a score of still-useful last-generation desktop computers the district had routinely cycled out of service. The District re-employed the PCs and surplus servers to build a wide-area network dedicated exclusively to managing emergency response and recovery intelligence traffic. The independent duplicate e-mail system interconnects twenty-four county, city, and special district and allied emergency management agencies together in a disaster intelligence-sharing network. The connected EOCs provide secure access to the dedicated telephone lines needed to operate the system exclusive of the Internet.

The system is designed to handle exactly the type of information essential to emergency management – large data files such as inundation maps and digital photographs. Extremely large files, which often cause Internet-based systems to crash, or are blocked by firewalls, can be sent and received over the network much faster than they can be carried by messenger, the only other direct delivery alternative.

"The success of projects like this clearly depends upon timing and opportunity," District Emergency Services Manager Bob Fields, CEM said. "Emergency managers need to have a vision about when to preserve resources ... having a resource available when the timing is right is a testimonial to all the emergency managers."

Thinking Locally:

Are your emergency plans too dependent on an Internet-based system?
Do you have any viable alternative to your current system that would function efficiently in an emergency?

To submit a 'Smart Practice' for consideration or to subscribe to Smart Practices Spotlight, send an e-mail to SmartPractices@fema.gov

Smart Practices Spotlight highlights practices and ideas that members of the emergency management and responder community have found useful and effective; they are not necessarily advocated or endorsed by FEMA. For more information about the Santa Clara Valley initiative, please contact Richard Staley, emergency planning coordinator, Santa Clara Valley Water District Office, at (408) 265-2607 ext. 2336 or rstaley@valleywater.org.