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deepdive

2023 Emergency Notification Deep Dive

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Campus Demand for and Use of Emergency Notification Greater Than Ever

CS' latest survey finds that campuses are using and buying way more emergency notification systems than ever before.

By Robin Hattersley

Let's start with a bit of a history lesson on emergency notification. The year was 2007, and the college campus security community was reeling from the **Virginia Tech** mass shooting. It was and still is the deadliest school shooting in U.S. history, with 32 killed and 17 injured.

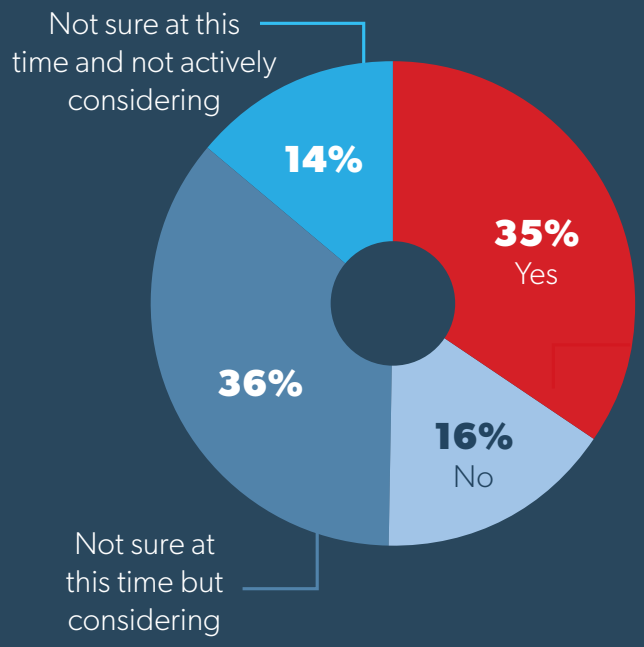
Rightly or wrongly, the massacre immediately provoked widespread criticism of Virginia Tech's lack of communication to the campus community in the time between when the gunman shot and killed two students in an on-campus residence hall and when he shot and killed 30 additional people in an academic building more than two hours later.

The attacks prompted all U.S. institutions of higher education to take a long, hard look at how they warn students, faculty, staff, and visitors when a life-threatening situation occurs. The trend gained even more traction in 2008 when the Higher Education Opportunity Act expanded the Clery Act's scope to include emergency response and notification provisions.

Ever since then, colleges, universities, trade schools, K-12 schools, school districts, and healthcare facilities have spent countless hours and millions of dollars acquiring **emergency notification systems** and refining their emergency alert programs, policies, and procedures. Over the past six years, that trend appears to have accelerated even more, according to this year's Emergency Notification Survey of more than 350 education and healthcare protection professionals.

More than seven out of 10 respondents (71%) say they either plan on deploying new or upgraded mass notification solutions in the next two years (35%) or are not sure but are considering doing so (36%). ***(See Figure 1 on this page)*** That 71% is a 20-point increase compared to 2017.

Figure 1. Do you plan on deploying new/ upgraded emergency notification solutions in the next two years?



Text messaging alerts and **intercom** usage overall have increased as well. For example, in the **2019 Campus Safety Emergency Notification Survey**, 71% of respondents said they use text message alerts, compared to today where 87% use this technology to disseminate emergency notifications. ***(See Figure 2 on page 4)*** Intercoms are also much more popular now than four years ago, with 63% of all respondents saying they currently use this type of system for mass notification. In 2019, that percentage was 53.

Interestingly, most of the other technologies used for mass notification by schools, school districts, hospitals, colleges, universities, and trade schools have remained remarkably constant over the past four years. For example, 38% of 2023 respondents say they use external **loudspeakers**, which is only a three-point increase compared to four years ago. **Call boxes** are used by 23% of respondents today compared to 24% in 2019.

Read on for more insights from this year's survey.

Text Messaging, Emails Most Commonly Used for Emergency Notification

Like in 2019, text message (SMS) alerts sent to mobile phones and emails continue to be widely deployed by K-12, college, and healthcare respondents. It's interesting to note that four years ago, emails came out on top at 76% and SMS at 71%. Now texting leads the way at 87% with emails being a close second at 86%.

The rate of adoption of many of the other solutions varies, depending on the type of campus. For example, nine in ten K-12 and hospital respondents use intercoms/overhead paging, compared to only 27% of respondents from higher education.

Panic buttons are a clear favorite with healthcare respondents: 87% say they currently use this type of solution. That's no doubt because of the high rate of **workplace violence** incidents experienced at hospitals. Just over half (51%) of higher ed respondents and 45% of K-12 participants say their campuses currently use panic alarms.

Figure 2. What types of emergency notification solutions are currently used on your campus? *(Check all that apply)*	**All**	**K12**	**Higher Ed**	**Healthcare**
Text message (SMS) alerts sent to mobile phones	**87%**	82%	95%	87%
Emails	**86%**	85%	96%	87%
Intercoms/overhead paging	**63%**	88%	27%	96%
Website announcements	**51%**	45%	70%	26%
Panic buttons	**50%**	45%	51%	87%
Mobile apps	**42%**	40%	50%	22%
External loudspeakers	**38%**	45%	34%	13%
Social networking sites	**37%**	28%	54%	30%
Fire system with voice evac	**32%**	36%	30%	30%
Phone trees/telephony	**26%**	32%	20%	39%
Sirens	**26%**	25%	33%	13%
Call boxes	**23%**	7%	42%	39%
Weather radios	**22%**	23%	20%	26%
Bull horns	**19%**	23%	16%	9%
Digital displays/signage or scrolling message boards	**19%**	11%	31%	9%
Pop-up alerts via computers/projectors	**17%**	9%	33%	17%
Radio announcements	**16%**	23%	9%	17%
Posters	**12%**	12%	13%	4%
TV announcements	**10%**	12%	11%	13%
Other - Write In (Required)	**8%**	11%	6%	4%

More than half (54%) of colleges, universities, and trade schools use social networking sites to send out emergency alerts compared to only about 30% of K-12 and hospital respondents. By contrast, K-12 and healthcare survey participants (32% and 39% respectively) are much more likely to use phone trees/telephony, compared to higher ed respondents (20%).

About one in three colleges, universities, and trade schools say they use **digital displays/signage or scrolling message boards** and **pop-up alerts via computer/projectors**. K-12 and healthcare respondents don't use those types of solutions as often.

Institutions of higher education and hospitals are much more likely to use call boxes (42% and 39% respectively) than K-12 schools and school districts (7%).

4 in 5 K-12 Schools Considering Purchases, Upgrades

As stated previously, demand for new or upgraded systems is greater than ever. More than seven out of 10 respondents are either planning on deploying new or upgraded emergency notification solutions in the next two years (35%) or are not sure but considering doing so (36%).

However, when broken down by sector, K-12 schools and school districts appear to be leading the pack with 42% saying they plan on upgrading their systems and another 42% saying they are thinking about it. Although we can't know for sure,

I suspect that last May's mass shooting at **Robb Elementary School** in Uvalde, Texas, may be a motivating factor.

Higher ed respondents are close behind K-12 schools at 37% and 30% respectively, compared to healthcare at 26% and 39% respectively.

At 30%, **mobile apps** are the most popular mass notification solution that campuses plan on upgrading or purchasing in the next two years. Panic buttons and text message alert systems are close behind, with 25% of all survey takers saying they plan on upgrading or purchasing these solutions in the next 24 months. It should be noted that K-12 school respondents are the most likely to be planning purchases or upgrades of panic buttons: 35% compared to 19% of colleges, universities, and trade schools, and 17% of hospitals. *(See Figure 3 below)*

At 27%, K-12 campuses are also taking the lead in planning to upgrade or purchase intercoms/overhead paging systems, compared to only 13% of institutions of higher education and 4% of healthcare facilities. However, healthcare respondents lead the pack in their plans to acquire or upgrade digital signage: 22%, compared to 17% for higher ed and 14% of K-12.

Figure 3. Which emergency notification solutions/systems do you currently plan on upgrading or purchasing as new in the next two years? *(Check all that apply)*

Mobile apps	30%
Panic buttons	25%
Text message (SMS) alerts sent to mobile phones	25%
I don't know	21%
Intercoms/overhead paging	18%
Digital displays/signage or scrolling message boards	14%
Emails	13%
Pop-up alerts via computers/projectors	12%
External loudspeakers	11%
Social networking sites	7%
Call boxes	7%
Phone trees/telephony	6%
Fire system with voice evac	6%
Other	6%

At 11% and 9% respectively, higher ed and healthcare respondents were much more likely than their K-12 brethren to say they plan on purchasing or upgrading their call boxes.

A significant portion of survey takers still appear to be trying to decide what they will get. More than one in five respondents (21%) don't know which emergency notification systems they will be upgrading.

Challenges Persist with Campus Mass Notification Programs

When asked about the challenges experienced with their emergency

notification systems, respondents said "database management and updates" is the biggest issue overall, but especially for hospitals (65%) and K-12 campuses (46%). ***(See Figure 4 below)*** Although "staff enrollment in text message systems" was the second most mentioned issue by all respondents, a whopping 61% of healthcare respondents say staff enrollment in text alert systems is a problem for them.

For the rest of the responses to the question about emergency notification system challenges, there weren't too many other outliers. There is an eight-percentage point difference between K-12 respondents (24%) and higher ed respondents (16%) who say they have challenges with message delivery verification. At 23%, schools and school districts have a lot more problems with the volume and intelligibility of their siren/loudspeaker systems than colleges, universities, and trade schools (10%).

Figure 4. Please indicate the challenges you have experienced with your emergency notification systems: *(Check all that apply)*

Database management and updates (cell number, name, etc.)	42%
Staff enrollment in text message alert systems	37%
Not enough staff to manage and operate systems	24%
Determining when it's appropriate to issue an alert	22%
Message delivery verification	21%
Equipment maintenance	20%
Integration of disparate systems	18%
Buy-in from management/administration	18%
Volume and intelligibility of siren/ loudspeaker system(s)	17%
Student enrollment in text message alert systems	16%
Parent enrollment in text message alert systems	14%
Testing our systems	14%
Crafting our written and verbal message	12%
Clarity regarding who has authority to issue alerts	11%
We have not experienced any problems with our emergency notification systems	10%
Through-put (speed and delivery) of text messages/IT system overload	9%
Local cell carrier issues	8%
Database security/cybercrime	7%
Other - Write In (Required)	7%
Buy-in from community (students/staff/surrounding community)	6%
Email and spam filters	4%

Some of the differences in responses are to be expected. For example, it's understandable that because the vast majority of colleges send their text alerts to students (because they are adults who are responsible for their own safety), institutions of higher education would have more challenges with student enrollment in their text message alert systems (28%) than K-12 campuses (only 11%). Likewise, because K-12 campuses generally send their text alerts to parents rather than students, it's understandable that schools and school districts would have more challenges with parent enrollment in text message systems (20%) than institutions of higher education.

Many of the participants who checked "Other" listed "budgets, cost, or funding" as obstacles for

them. Micromanagement by administrators and executive administrators wanting to craft every message was another concern that was mentioned.

"The biggest challenge by far is getting C-Suite administrators to understand that we don't have time to massage every message," one survey participant says. "In dire situations, we need to put out messages that will protect life and property. Some administrators want to see and approve every message before it goes out, thus slowing down the time we can push out a message."

That same respondent advises campuses to create and use templates for the hazards your school is likely to face.

"Get these approved in advance and let your administrators know that you will use the templates when you have to send an alert," the respondent suggests. "Also, follow the Incident Command System. When there is a circumstance that could cause loss of life, follow the instructions of the Incident Commander, and don't wait on approvals from an administrator."

New Hire, Student Orientations Encourage Text Alert Enrollment

Overall, respondents are most likely to use new hire orientation to encourage enrollment in campus text alert programs. ***(See Figure 5 on page 9)*** That's probably because 57% say this method is one of the most effective ways to entice users to sign up. ***(See Figure 6 on page 9)***

However, when broken down by sector, at 69% and 70% respectively, higher education and healthcare respondents are much more likely to use new hire orientation than K-12 schools (49%).

Nearly three in four (73%) colleges, universities, and trade schools use new student orientation to entice users to enroll, compared to only 38% of K-12 respondents. More than two in five respondents (43%) say new student orientation is one of the most effective ways to encourage enrollment in SMS alert programs.

At 40%, institutions of higher education are also much more likely than healthcare facilities (22%) or schools/school districts (19%) to use automatic enrollment with the option to opt-out.

Not surprisingly, K-12 survey takers are much more likely than higher ed participants

Figure 5. If your campus has a text message alert system, how do you entice campus constituents to enroll? *(Check all that apply)*

New hire orientation	59%
New student orientation	47%
Email announcements	41%
Web site announcements	30%
Automatic enrollment with opt-out option	26%
Parent/teacher meetings	16%
Newsletter/newspaper announcements	15%
Posters and flyers	11%
Automatic enrollment with no opt-out option	11%
Sign-up tables	8%
Parent association meetings	3%
Digital signage announcements	3%
Ads on campus radio, TV, newspapers	2%
Mailers	2%
Other - Write In (Required)	2%
Prize giveaways	1%

Figure 6. If your campus has a text message alert system, which four ways are the most effective at attracting users to sign-up for your program? (Check all that apply)

New hire orientation	57%
New student orientation	43%
Email announcements	39%
Automatic enrollment with opt-out option	28%
Web site announcements	23%
System tests and exercises	14%
Parent/teacher meetings	12%
Enrollment spikes when an incident occurs	9%
Automatic enrollment with no opt-out option	8%
Newsletter/newspaper announcements	8%
Posters and flyers	7%
Sign-up tables	7%
Digital signage announcements	3%
Parent association meetings	3%
Other - Write In (Required)	3%
Enrollment during parking permit application process	2%
Mailers	1%
Ads on campus radio, TV, newspapers	1%
Prize giveaways	1%

to use parent/teacher meetings to enroll users in their text alert systems (29% v. 5%). Parent/teacher meetings are the preferred way to attract sign-ups for 20% of K-12 respondents, compared to only 3% of higher ed respondents.

Incidents are much more likely to prompt sign ups in healthcare facilities (17%) and colleges, universities, and trade schools (14%) than K-12 schools or school districts (3%).

Message Sending Authority Varies Widely

Overall, security directors, emergency department managers, incident commanders, and emergency response/safety teams are the stakeholders most likely to have the authority to send out emergency notifications. ***(See Figure 7 below)*** However, there are some significant differences, depending on the campus type.

For example, 73% of K-12 respondents say principals can send out emergency notifications, but that percentage is zero for colleges, universities, trade schools, and healthcare facilities

Figure 7. Who has the authority to use emergency notifications at your organization? *(Check all that apply)*

	All	K12	Higher Ed	Healthcare
Security director	**63%**	55%	70%	78%
Emergency management department	**42%**	30%	44%	83%
Incident commander	**40%**	39%	33%	65%
Emergency response/safety team	**38%**	40%	30%	44%
Principal	**37%**	73%	N/A	N/A
Police chief	**32%**	22%	47%	13%
Safety team	**30%**	40%	19%	13%
Superintendent	**30%**	57%	2%	4%
Public relations/public information office	**26%**	18%	38%	13%
President	**20%**	5%	33%	30%
Dispatcher	**16%**	5%	25%	35%
Vice president(s)	**16%**	1%	29%	35%
Other - Write In (Required)	**15%**	19%	15%	4%
IT	**14%**	19%	8%	4%
Deputy chief	**13%**	5%	24%	4%
Deputy/assistant director	**11%**	6%	13%	13%
CEO	**9%**	5%	3%	44%
Human resources	**9%**	8%	6%	17%
Residence life director	**4%**	3%	4%	N/A
Chancellor	**2%**	1%	3%	N/A

since they don't have principals. Nearly six in ten (57%) schools and school districts allow their superintendents to use mass notification systems, compared to only 2% of institutions of higher education and 4% of healthcare facilities. The same goes for deputy chiefs: 24% of higher ed respondents say these individuals have authority compared to only 5% of K-12 and 4% of healthcare respondents.

At 38%, public relations and public information offices are much more likely to have mass notification authority at institutions of higher education than schools (18%) and hospitals (13%). Meanwhile, presidents, dispatchers, and vice presidents are much more likely to have this authority at healthcare facilities and colleges, universities, and trade schools.

Respondents who indicated "Other" say the following stakeholders have authority to use campus emergency notifications: all staff, all management, assistant principals, facility managers, nursing administration supervisors, office staff, police sergeants, and school resource officers.

General Budgets Most Often Pay for Upgrades

General campus budgets, IT, campus law enforcement/public safety, facilities, emergency management, and **grants** are by far the most common ways campuses are **paying** for their emergency notification systems. *(See Figure 8 on page 12)* Only between 1% and 3% of all respondents say they pay for their mass notification technologies with specific department

Figure 8. How are you paying for your emergency notification systems? *(Check all that apply)*	All	K12	Higher Ed	Healthcare
General campus budgets	**56%**	69%	46%	30%
IT budgets	**20%**	17%	23%	26%
Campus law enforcement/public safety budgets	**21%**	15%	34%	13%
Facilities department budgets	**13%**	16%	10%	26%
Emergency management budgets	**16%**	16%	17%	13%
Grants	**14%**	23%	4%	9%

budgets, environmental health and safety budgets, student fees, bonds, private donations, public relations/marketing budgets, or shared costs with the local city or county.

When broken down by sector, the percentages vary for campuses using general campus budgets: from 69% for K-12 to 46% for higher education and 30% of hospitals. At 23% and 26% respectively, institutions of higher education and hospitals are more likely to pay for their systems with IT dollars. Hospitals are more likely to pay with facilities department budgets: 26%, compared to 16% for K-12 and 10% for colleges, universities, and trade schools. Institutions of higher ed are much more likely to pay with campus law enforcement/public safety dollars: 34%, compared to 15% for K-12 and 13% for healthcare.

About a quarter of K-12 respondents (23%) use grants to pay for their mass notification systems, while only 4% of institutions of higher education and 9% of healthcare respondents tap into this funding source.

Campus Safety would like to thank the more than 350 campus protection professionals who participated in this survey. We truly appreciate your input. To read comments from participants on their emergency notification program successes and challenges, click here and here.

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