

Title of Nomination: Rhode Island Emergency Bulletin System

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CATEGORY: Digital Government G to C

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2003 NASCIO Recognition Awards Digital Government G to C Rhode Island Emergency Bulletin System

Executive Overview:

"A cornerstone of the DHS philosophy revolves around a commitment to partner closely with other federal agencies, state and local governments, first responders, and law enforcement entities to ensure the security of the United States."

- US Department of Homeland Security, 2003.

Communication between State Government and citizens is paramount in times of emergency. To facilitate that need the State of Rhode Island developed the Emergency Bulletin System.

Rhode Islanders, like the rest of the nation, are becoming more and more reliant on the Internet as a source of news and information. That dependency does not change when it comes to statewide emergencies. The goal of the Emergency Bulletin System (EBS) was to create a coordinated system to deliver web-based content directly to the people of Rhode Island from official state emergency departments.

While the technical solution to this problem is simple, it's integration into state adopted procedure has been carefully planned, developed and tested to ensure correct implementation and functionality in the event of an emergency. The result has been a testament of how traditional government can utilize the power of eGovernment for the benefit and, most of importantly of all, the safety of citizens.

The determination to declare a state-of-emergency rests with the Office of the Governor. Once a state-of-emergency has been declared, the Chief Information Office of Rhode Island is notified and the emergency web staff is assembled at the Emergency Operation Center. Using a secure administrative interface, the state implements the Emergency Bulletin System that places an alert page, controlled by the Emergency Web Team, on the homepage of the state portal at <http://www.ri.gov>. An attention-grabbing header along with time-stamped information specific to the emergency dynamically replaces the portal homepage content.

The Emergency Web Team is then fed information from the Governor, via the Adjutant General, which is expediently posted to the homepage via an encrypted SSL connection.

The switchover from the standard RI.gov homepage to information being distributed by the emergency team is completely automated and requires no technical oversight or intervention.

On 6/12/02 the system was extensively tested as part of Operation H.O.P.E (Homeland Operation Planning Exercise). The Emergency Bulletin System was activated and used in conjunction with this overall test of Rhode Island's emergency preparation plan. The After-Action Report noted that the system had performed as planned. At this time the state is drafting a new Emergency Operation Plan in which the Emergency Bulletin System will play a key roll.

Project Overview

a) Description of project, including length of time in operation

The EBS system was developed in May of 2002 as part of Rhode Island's overall strategy to better the State's emergency systems as part of the national Homeland Security initiatives.

Bringing this service to fruition took the combined efforts of the following groups.

- ❑ **OLIS** (The Office of Library Information Services) <http://www.olis.state.ri.us/>
- ❑ **RIEMA** (RI Emergency Management Agency) <http://www.state.ri.us/riema/>
- ❑ **RI.gov** (The Official Portal of RI Government) <http://www.RI.gov>
- ❑ **NEI** (New England Interactive) The self-funding private partner and host of Rhode Island's Official State Portal, RI.gov. <http://www.neinetwork.com/>

It was the desire of both OLIS and RIEMA to design, create and implement a web based system that would mimic the FCC's Emergency Broadcasting System. The plan was to harness the power of the Official State Portal to post official bulletins during times of state or federal emergency.

In the first quarter of 2002 the agencies met with the State's portal partner, RI.gov, to draft a plan and determine a course of action for implementation. It was determined that the EBS needed to meet the following criteria:

- ❑ RIEMA needed to be in complete control of content that could be updated constantly and securely from the RIEMA Emergency Operation Center.
- ❑ The switch from traditional portal content to the EBS content needed to be achieved without the intervention or technical assistance of IT teams from Rhode Island or NEI.
- ❑ The switch from traditional portal content to the EBS content had to be achieved directly from the RIEMA Emergency Operation Center immediately following a request for activation from the CIO or Governor.
- ❑ The replacement EBS page had to clearly note that a state of emergency had been declared and that the website was the official source of online emergency information
- ❑ The EBS replacement page also would need to display the time of last update and current time to best communicate the newness of bulletins.

After a requirement doc was drafted, a tool was developed. In order to accomplish publishing and switch from RI.gov to EBS OLIS takes the following steps:

- ❑ The team first uploads a page via ftp to a secure directory on the RI.gov server.
- ❑ The team access a form on a non-broadcasted page on the RI.gov portal site. This form can only be loaded through an Apache htaccess, password-protected directory.
- ❑ On that form are two simple submit buttons – "Switch" and "Switch Back"
- ❑ Clicking on the "Switch" submit button redirects the homepage of RI.gov to the previously uploaded page emergency alert page.
- ❑ After switchover the team is free to update the live page via ftp at anytime during the duration of the emergency.
- ❑ Once the state of emergency is over, the team uses the "Switch Back" submit button to direct the RI.gov start page back to the standard index.

While the tool was made ready for testing OLIS worked with RIEMA to outline the following procedures.

- ❑ The Governor of RI declares a state of emergency

- ❑ The Chief Information Officer of Rhode Island is notified
- ❑ At the order of the CIO The Emergency Web Team assembles at the Emergency Operation Center
- ❑ The EBS system is activated.
- ❑ Information from the Governor through the Adjutant General is scripted in HTML and posted on the portal via FTP.

Recently, the EBS system was extensively tested as part of Operation H.O.P.E (Homeland Operation Planning Exercise). The Emergency Bulletin System was activated and used in conjunction with this overall test of Rhode Island's emergency preparation plan. The After-Action Report noted that the system had performed as planned. At this time the state is drafting a new Emergency Operation Plan in which the Emergency Bulletin System will play a key roll.

Sample of EBS Test Page:



b) Significance to the improvement of the operation of government

The protection of people in the event of an emergency has been a priority of not only the Federal Government through the DHS but a burden shared by each one of the 50 states. A keystone of protection and prevention is communication. An even greater challenge is to control the costs of these programs in a less than ideal economic environment. Rhode Island, through the EBS tool has indeed pioneered a unique and creative solution to broadening paths of critical information while controlling associated costs.

The program was developed though a self-funding, zero-dollar contract public/private partnership between the State of Rhode Island and New England Interactive. Because of this agreement, the technology behind the Emergency Bulletin System could be developed at no cost to the state. The software development, hosting and banking fees could all be handled using zero tax dollars.

While traditional news media some times filters official information as it is distributed to their audiences the Emergency Bulletin System acts as a direct conduit between State Government and the people of Rhode Island. The creation of this new source of communications insures that all recipients are getting information directly from the state without interpretation.

c) Benefits realized by service recipients, taxpayers, agency or state

As the Emergency Bulletin System is fully integrated into Rhode Island's overall Emergency Operation Plan, all methods of communication refer to the RI.gov portal as the official online source for information. This helps ensure that citizens always know that they can depend on the RI.gov site as their primary source of official information in both normal times when information is important and times of emergency where information is often critical.

While it is everyone's sincere wish that this system is seldom if every activated, the continued promotion that this avenue of communication exists should help ease the concerns of citizens. The very fact that these systems have been established helps send a clear message to the people of Rhode Island that our government has prepared, planned and tested a system designed exclusively to keep order and information flowing regardless of what the future may bring.

d) Return on investment, short-term/long-term payback

There are few who would be so bold as to put a price on the security and safety of the general population. That being the case – both the method of ensuring protection and the financial repercussions of instances when protection is not successful do come at a real cost.

From an operational perspective, the EBS system offers Rhode Island the opportunity to increase the reach and scope of information conduits without adding an additional financial investment. This simple fact creates an environment where the State is free to invest available DHS dollars into other programs, every increasing the capabilities to prevent and prepare against emergencies.

By harnessing the combined resources of several agencies and through the creative use of existing systems and technology, Rhode Island has been able to achieved a marked improvement in the efficiency of it's overall emergency plan. The long-term payback of these steps can truly be measured only in hindsight. Short-term the implantation and testing of the EBS system has offered a rich dividend – the basic understanding that our public servants have the wisdom and foresight to creatively explore unique avenues of communication to ensure the safety and security of our citizens in an ever changing world.