

NASCIO 2015 State IT Recognition Awards

MISSISSIPPI

Mississippi State Department of Health
MS Ready Mobile Application

Category:
Information Communications Technology (ICT) Innovations

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I. Executive Summary

MS Ready is the State of Mississippi's premier mobile alerts and emergency preparedness application designed to give citizens one central location to access state-wide alerts and to prepare them in the event of an emergency. The Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) partnered with Mississippi Interactive (MSI) and utilized emergency preparedness grant funds to release MS Ready, the department's first mobile application for iPhone and Android devices. MS Ready contains a wealth of information for citizens during emergencies and weather-related events across the State of Mississippi.

Features of the application, available in the Apple App Store and Google Play for free download, include:

- Real-time push, text or email notification of statewide emergency alerts to keep users aware of potential emergencies and hazards.
- Detailed information about emergencies, natural disasters and what users can do to safely prepare.
- Important MS Department of Health phone numbers and an emergency hotline, available both online and offline, in case of a loss of cellular data or Internet connection.
- Complete emergency checklist of items to have on hand should an emergency arise.
- Instant connection to MSDH twitter, Facebook and YouTube pages within the app.

To date, users have downloaded the emergency preparedness and alerts application over 2,440 times.

II. Description of the Business Problem and Solution

Problem

After surveying the existing emergency preparedness and alerts mobile offerings in the State, The Mississippi State Department of Health (MSDH) recognized the need for a forward thinking mobile application focused on delivering real-time alerts to citizens in the event of an emergency, natural disaster or weather-related event. With the continued increase of mobile device use across Mississippi, the MS Ready team had to determine a solution to provide users with as much information as possible but to present this information in a way that is easy to read and access on a small mobile device screen. The MS Ready app leverages mobile devices to deliver a streamlined and efficient experience without sacrificing content. The MS Ready team spent a great amount of time focusing on what information users would expect from a mobile application.

Solution

The MS Ready Mobile App was a brand-new application for the State Department of Health, and the first official mobile solution offered by the Department. The Department's website contains information for emergency preparedness and MS Ready was able to use portions of this information for content in the MS Ready App. Users who download the application have proven to be more inclined to access the MSDH website thus increasing traffic to the multiple online services offered by the Department. Transactions for Health Clinic payments and health professional licenses renewals have increased 90% since the MS Ready launch. Furthermore, the nationwide positive reception MS Ready has seen continues to propel MS Ready to the forefront of emergency preparedness in Mississippi.

- <http://blog.amcpros.com/2014/04/02/2014-hermes-creative-awards-entry-spotlight-mississippi-interactive/>
- <http://www.govtech.com/public-safety/App-Takes-on-Emergency-Alert-Duties-in-Mississippi.html>

MSI was able to leverage PhoneGap, software used to deploy mobile applications across various platforms without the need to develop separate native applications. The cost savings gained from utilizing PhoneGap for the development of MS Ready was over \$5,000.00 in hard costs and almost two weeks of resource time. The reduced development time enabled MSI to have the application live for MSDH during hurricane season, a critical time for emergency preparedness in Mississippi.

The Mississippi Department of Health, realizing the high usage of mobile technology in Mississippi, utilized emergency preparedness grant money to fund MS Ready. The total cost for the application was \$10,010.00 and included the development of the app for two platforms, use of MSI's creative team for logo design and CSS, a dedicated Project Manager, Q/A testing and marketing of the application across all available ms.gov social media channels and a highlight on the award-winning ms.gov portal.

III. Significance of the Project

MS Ready was the first government application in the State to offer dedicated push notifications of alerts. Accompanying the mobile application is a secure online system for MSDH users to enter ad hoc alerts and other emergency information. This mobile-responsive system provides approved users quick access to enter alerts on mobile devices or traditional web browsers. With a push of a button, unexpected weather, fire, or biological alerts are pushed out across the State. This mobile optimized system has become particularly useful for MSDH agents in the field. It provides them with a secure mechanism to communicate with the public in real-time when responding to an emergency event. Emergency information is too important to force users to get updates from a traditional web browser so MS Ready sends the details right to users.

After researching similar applications in other states, MSDH and MSI set a conservative goal of 1,000 downloads in year one of the application release. Through marketing and the positive nationwide press the app has garnered, the application was able to hit 1,000 downloads in just five months after launch, and achieved 2,400 total downloads in just 18 months. With the approach of hurricane season in the late summer and fall, there will be a collaborative marketing effort between MSDH and MSI to represent MS Ready as a central source for emergency preparedness in Mississippi.

The launch of MSDH's first mobile application required significant collaboration between three State entities and public-sector companies. Including:

- Mississippi State Department of Health
- Mississippi Interactive (MSI)
- Mississippi's eGovernment Oversight Committee (EOC)

As the governing body of the eGovernment program, the EOC provided the initial approval to begin the development of the mobile application. Throughout the development, implementation, testing and launch of the application the Mississippi State Department of Health and Mississippi Interactive worked closely in a collaborative process while providing monthly updates to the EOC. Thorough testing of the application occurred in groups with MSDH and MSI providing testing, feedback, and suggestions to enhance the application. Today MSDH and MSI still work together to update and enhance the application and will continue to jointly support the service in the future.

IV. Benefits of the Project

Any user with access to an Android or iPhone benefits from MS Ready and has the ability to access a wide-array of emergency related content and information. Currently, over 2,440 users take advantage of MS Ready Mobile Application features, including:

Push Notifications: Users may elect to configure push notifications to trigger a real-time message on their mobile device notifying them of a potential emergency or alert. Receipt configurations are available allowing specialization of the notification. One click on the notification will provide all of the applicable information for the alert without having to continually access the application.

Alert Subscription: In addition to push alerts, a subscription option provides users the ability to sign up via text or email to receive alerts issued by MSDH. Easily accessible in the settings pane, users can quickly subscribe and unsubscribe to MSDH alerts with just a few clicks.

Consistent User Experience: Great detail was paid to create a consistent user experience across iPhone and Android platforms despite the difference in screen sizes, operating systems, and differences in native features.

Offline Access: Features such as important contact information for the Department of Health, emergency phone numbers and help for disaster survivors is hard-coded into the app, where it is available for use even without a data connection.

Detailed Emergency Preparedness Tools: Emergency checklists, kits, guidelines on how to prepare yourself and your family before, during and after emergency, and easily accessible information are available to help users stay informed on a variety of emergency categories: biochemical, earthquakes, hurricanes, tornadoes, nuclear incidents and floods.