

Calif. County Tries Multilingual Warning System

Phone Devices Will Deliver Emergency Calls to Large Laotian Population in Native Tongues

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RICHMOND, Calif.—On March 25, 1999, a valve on a processing line at the Chevron plant here failed, releasing vapors that exploded and sent a massive black plume of smoke hundreds of feet into the afternoon sky.

Emergency workers sounded the 22 warning sirens installed in this industrial city just north of San Francisco. Contra Costa County's telephone emergency notification system was set in motion, calling households downwind of the spreading fumes with prerecorded messages to go inside and "shelter in place."

Sprawling out from the eastern shore of the San Francisco Bay, Contra Costa County is home to 2,250 factories and industrial plants that handle hazardous materials—the most in any California county outside Los Angeles. It is also home to a diverse immigrant population that

speaks more than 40 languages. More than one in four residents speak a language other than English at home.

For those non-English speakers, the emergency calls did no good. The minute-long emergency message, which advised them to shut windows and doors and bring pets inside, was in English. Members of Richmond's Laotian community watched the smoke plume on television, but thought it was happening somewhere else. Many stepped outside to see what the commotion was.

As the U.S. population continues to diversify with an influx of immigrants who speak a range of languages, emergency officials are looking for novel ways to communicate with them in times of crisis. The 1999 fire accelerated those efforts here. Contra Costa County tried a limited system of phoning some immigrants in their native languages. Now, it is going further with a test of a new system that will announce native language warnings through speakers attached to their phones. If successful, the county's emergency warning system could offer one of the most comprehensive multilingual emergency notification systems in the country.

"We're talking to counties across the country who just ring sirens, and if [people] don't know what to do, it's their problem," says Lewis Pascall Jr., director of the county's Hazardous Materials Programs, a department of Contra Costa

Health Services.

After the fire, "people were terrified," said Tom Nonpraseurt, who works with the Laotian Organizing Project (LOP). In the days after the incident, people called project leaders asking what had happened, or complaining of headaches and difficulty breathing.

"They said, 'We've got to do something about this,'" Nonpraseurt said.

The translator is a little bigger than a Palm Pilot, as loud as a smoke detector and as easy to use as Caller ID. In fact, the off-white box plugs into home phones, using Caller ID technology to receive emergency messages.

The upcoming test in Contra Costa will be the first time ClassCo Inc., the device's manufacturer, will target multiple non-English speaking communities in the United States. The boxes, currently programmed in English and French, are used in warning systems in bilingual parts of Canada and in New Hampshire, where ClassCo is based.

ClassCo's boxes will make their California debut in 100 Richmond homes. Fifteen will be programmed in English and in Lao, the official language of Laos. The other 50 will be programmed in English and Mien. Mien, like three of the four languages spoken in Contra Costa's Laotian community, has no written form.

When the county sends out an emergency message, the box receives the signal over the phone line. It sounds an

alarm and without anyone having to pick up the phone, the box translates the warning into the language it has been programmed for and announces it from a speaker. In a native voice, the box would actually say "chemical release," "shelter in place," or whatever the county tells it to. A phone number shows up on the box's small message screen that the resident can call to hear further information in their own language.

This winter's pilot program is an outgrowth of the county's ongoing efforts to render the 12-year-old telephone emergency notification system multilingual as part of its larger community warning system.

After the fire in 1999, leaders in the Laotian community started lobbying for an alert system that they and other non-English speakers could understand.

Because only one of the four Laotian languages spoken in Contra Costa is written—each as different from the other, Nonpraseurt says, "as English and Russian"—LOP looked for a solution through television, radio, or another audio messaging system. LOP approached the county about recording messages in languages other than English to use in the existing telephone system.

It took a year for county workers to compile a database of 400 community phone numbers and their corresponding languages that Health Services could program into its existing telephone emer-

gency notification system.

Pascall recalls that county employees were met with hesitation in their home visits to gather this information. Nonpraseurt says members of his community are afraid to get involved in government affairs because of the unstable political climate they left in Laos. When you complain to officials in Laos, he said, "either your head will be chopped off or you'll be in jail for the rest of your life."

Once Health Services had the database of 400 homes, they saw that keeping it updated would be a daunting task, and that keeping an entire database tracking the language populations throughout the county would be even more daunting. As residents move from apartment to apartment or change their phone numbers, the database could quickly become obsolete.

The new boxes, however, can move with residents if they change homes.

Some telephone systems throughout the country have the capability to send messages in more than one language, using prerecorded messages or the "Press 1 for English" approach. Washington State issues Spanish and English prerecorded telephone messages around a nuclear plant and a military chemical storage facility.

The box's disadvantages include its cost (\$30 to \$35 each), finding people who move to the area and don't know about getting a device, and making sure residents hook up the new equipment correctly.

"Since 9/11, alert and warning is becoming a big thing," says Dilzabeth Klute, who manages the county's warning systems. "There are a lot of places who are watching Contra Costa to see what happens."