

Neighborhood Emergency Team Communications Working Group

Findings & Recommendations

Executive Summary

The Neighborhood Emergency Team (NET) program remains an important part of the City of Portland's overall strategy for preparing citizens for disaster and supporting emergency response to such events. Effective communication between the Office of Emergency Management (OEM) and Neighborhood Emergency Team (NET) volunteers ensures the health and stability of this program by normalizing expectations and empowering decisions and actions when time is of the essence. Improving communication between OEM and NET volunteers and teams on one hand and among the teams and their volunteer leaders on the other requires attention to the quality of communication and the quantity, timing and timeliness of the information exchanged. These findings and recommendations outline general points of agreement that should guide efforts by all parties to improve flow of information about the NET program among interested and affected stakeholders. The implementation of these guidelines, if adopted, will become the responsibility of one of four standing committees recommended by the NET Organization and Responsibilities Working Group.

Background

The NET Communications Working Group was formed following an April 19, 2010 meeting of team leaders. The group was charged with reviewing arrangements for communicating with and among teams. Its task included identifying stakeholders and information requirements, reviewing and discussing best practices and recommending principles that should guide effective communication irrespective of the mode or medium used. Members of the working group represented teams in each quadrant of the city and members of varying tenures and experience levels within the program. The group met four times between May 25 and August 17, 2010. This document summarizes the findings and recommendations arising from their discussions.

Findings

1. Audience: Effective communication requires the sender to take account of the intended audience, audience members' preferences and the desired outcome.
2. Expectations: Members of the same audience may have different expectations of the party with whom they are engaged in communication.
3. Content: Audience members may vary with respect to the ways they process information, which may influence their preferred method of receiving and processing information.
4. Purpose: Every communication has an intended purpose, whether it is to inform, influence, explain or empower.

5. Consistency and frequency: The frequency and consistency of communication affects the ability of those receiving information to appreciate its significance and respond in an appropriate and timely fashion.
6. Timeliness: Most information has a finite shelf-life, which depends upon the intended purpose of the communication.
7. Tone: How anyone receiving a message interprets that information depends not only on content, but also on the tone, style, vocabulary and delivery method by through which it is conveyed.
8. Personalization: All parties to communication have responsibility to themselves and the other participants to clarify their needs clear and express their understanding or lack of understanding in a respectful fashion.

Recommendations

1. Audience: The Portland Office of Emergency Management and NET volunteer leaders should recognize the following audiences are stakeholders in communication about the NET program and its activities:
 - NET team leaders and assistants
 - NET volunteers
 - Prospective NET volunteers and recruits
 - Amateur radio operators (including those not affiliated with NETs)
 - Portland OEM staff
 - Police officers and firefighters
 - Neighborhood associations, business district associations and neighborhood coalition offices
 - Office of Neighborhood Involvement, especially crime prevention staff
 - Community-based organizations (including faith communities)
 - Voluntary organizations active in disasters (VOAD members)
 - Media, especially community newspapers, radio stations and bloggers
 - Schools (including colleges and universities)
 - Elected officials
 - Citizens at-large
2. Expectations: When selecting the mode of communication and considering how to tailor messages to the intended primary audience, Portland OEM and NET leaders should consider the following:
 - Familiarity with the subject
 - Complexity of issues addressed
 - Urgency of action
 - Severity of consequences if the message is misunderstood
 - Competing interpretations
 - Time required to read and respond, if required

3. Content: Efforts by Portland OEM and team leaders to communicate with others should focus on issues of interest and importance to a broad cross-section of the intended audience or multiple audiences; subjects for such communication include the following:
 - Training
 - Exercises, drills and tests
 - Planned events
 - Meetings
 - Planning workshops
 - Program priorities
 - Budgets
 - Incidents
 - Case studies and lessons learned
 - Procedures and best practices
 - Changes in any of the above
4. Purpose: The Office of Emergency Management should establish and maintain periodic communication with NET volunteers at regular intervals to keep them informed about the activities of the office. This communication should encourage NET volunteers' efforts to maintain their own readiness, promote community preparedness and solicit feedback on City initiatives that affect readiness, response and recovery. NET team leaders and OEM staff should meet at least quarterly to facilitate decision-making and governance consistent with the recommendations of the Organization and Responsibilities Working Group. Whenever possible, OEM should encourage the participation of NET volunteers in presentations to City Council concerning community preparedness.
5. Consistency and frequency: The Office of Emergency Management could significantly improve the frequency and consistency of communication with and among NET volunteers and teams by developing standardized resources. These should include both electronic and print resources to suit the diverse audience within the NET community. At a minimum, OEM should develop a webpage, newsletter and brochures describing the NET program and training. Twitter, email and SMS/text messaging could be used to augment these resources by directing users to more detailed information on topics of interest to them. As regular communication becomes routine, NET volunteers should be encouraged to establish and maintain communication among themselves and their teams using online discussion groups.
6. Timeliness: With the exception of time-critical communication (such as mobilizations or deployment instructions), most messages do not require urgent delivery and immediate response or confirmation of receipt. The Office of Emergency Management should avoid the use of email as a primary means of communicating with NET volunteers and should not expect immediate or timely responses to messages when this medium is used. Most of the information NET

volunteers require can be posted on a website, which can be monitored for traffic and equipped to facilitate comments and feedback. Email, Twitter and SMS/text messages can be used to direct NET volunteers to the website when updates become available. These messages could include a summary of the changes, but need not repeat content available elsewhere. When NET volunteers provide feedback or initiate contact, Portland OEM staff should acknowledge receipt of the message or inquiry promptly and respond to the request as soon as practical, preferably within three business days.

7. Tone: Frequent, brief communication is preferable to lengthy and intermittent or rare communication. At the same time, both Office of Emergency Management staff and NET volunteers should avoid terse phrasing and maintain a respectful and business-like tone in all their communication. This need not preclude familiar or even humorous exchanges, provided each party maintains a degree of decorum appropriate to communication subject to disclosure as a matter of public record.
8. Personalization: Direct communication with all volunteers is rarely essential, but relaying messages through team leaders can produce undesirable “telephone effects” as portions of the message get modified or dropped. Direct communication is desirable, but must be managed to prevent overload or learned irrelevance.” The Office of Emergency Management should avoid relying too heavily on any one distribution channel or medium for communicating with NET volunteers and the community in general. Making messages available in a variety of forms and formats so they can be readily accessed at the recipient’s convenience is desirable. Structuring messages so the recipients can easily screen content for relevance will help people decide when and how to receive and respond to the message and should encourage more appropriate engagement.