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TESTIMONY

**Before the Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Committee
Subcommittee on Disaster Recovery and Intergovernmental Affairs**

**Understanding the Power of Social Media as a Communications Tool in the
Aftermath of Disasters**

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Introduction

Thank you Chairman Pryor and distinguished members of the Subcommittee for the opportunity to testify today regarding the use of social media as an effective communication tool in disasters. This is a critical topic and the recent storms throughout the South have brought the use of social media during weather events to the forefront.

The Arkansas Department of Emergency Management (ADEM) has been using social media since 2008. Like others, our agency is tasked with disaster preparedness, response, and recovery of the State of Arkansas. Social media has worked as an effective communication tool for ADEM as it has enabled ADEM to capture important messages for citizens of Arkansas on sites they already use.

ADEM began with Facebook, primarily as a preparedness tool, using it to educate Arkansans on disaster preparedness. ADEM then expanded its audience by utilizing YouTube. In the fall of 2008, a personal Twitter account was created by an ADEM's Public Relations employee. The Twitter account was created to determine whether Twitter could be a social site for ADEM to consider. During the ice storm of 2009, it was noted that the public used Twitter, among other social platforms, to obtain disaster related information. Information on the site gave the public road openings/closings, shelter location/availability, and energy outages. At that time, it was determined ADEM should have a presence on the site and similar sites.

It was determined Arkansans were utilizing social sites and would benefit from information that ADEM was sharing with media outlets. ADEM expanded to Twitter in 2009 with the Mena tornadoes and utilized the social media tools for communication. With the use of the social sites it became easier to get essential information to citizens. Rumor control became easier now that we had established a presence on the sites and the public would refer rumors to ADEM for validation. ADEM used social sites to communicate directly with disaster impacted citizens, families of impacted citizens, reporters, and volunteer organizations. Media outlets began retweeting ADEM's messages which allowed for an even larger audience to be reached. ADEM noticed the social media's full potential as a crisis communications tool.

Those in the emergency management field often say that a nation, state, and community are only as prepared as its citizens; and it is true. Social media has enabled the state and local emergency management agencies to prepare their communities by bringing preparedness information to them.

ADEM encourages local Offices of Emergency Management (OEMs) to engage in tools their communities are using. When time and resources are limited, emergency managers need make use of primarily tools that their audiences employ. Of the citizens that utilize social sites, the majority are found on Facebook and some on Twitter. Social sites have given local emergency managers a site to post disaster related information and interact with their communities without website development knowledge required.

Preparedness

Arkansas uses social media as a tool to make preparedness information available to citizens. Examples of ADEM messages include, tips on preparing for disaster, scheduled preparedness events, and training opportunities. Creation and communication of preparedness messages before a disaster is significant. Creation during a disaster only assists in the preparedness for the next one.

ADEM also uses the Facebook page as an opportunity to illustrate to Arkansans that state agencies collaborate by sharing information sister agencies, local emergency management offices, as well as other states' emergency management agencies.

In a disaster, the question is always asked, "What did you do in advance to prepare Arkansans for this?" Using social sites is one way ADEM educates individuals on the importance of self preparation.

During National Preparedness Month 2010, ADEM and the Arkansas Chapter of the American Red Cross teamed up on Facebook and Twitter to issue daily messages on preparedness. This partnership enabled delivery of messages to Arkansans in a medium that allows citizens to respond with questions and/or comments, as well as share disaster related information with others.

Local OEMs make use of social platforms in the same fashion as state agencies. Social media sites, such as Facebook, assist local OEMS in locating citizens who offer their assistance in disasters.

Social media sites help communities stay involved with local emergency management. A Facebook page allows communities to understand the extent local OEMs go to in order to keep their communities prepared. Rural areas may not have much as far as media is concerned and some local governments have limited resources for a website. If one exists, it may just list basic contact information. Having a virtual location where the county emergency management office can post what is going on in their community; the steps it takes for them to be prepared; the actions that they take during a disaster; and places the community can go to get trained...it all is involvement. When the time comes that a citizen needs help they are going to know where to get it. And if they specifically are not on these sites to see this information, chances are someone they know is.

Lastly, we use it for preparedness because social media gives us an opportunity to directly communicate with our audience. While we still use traditional media outlets; it is no longer our only option. If questions or rumors come up, we can not only go to media outlets to help answer and correct, we can also answer them directly.

Response

Social media has become a huge asset during the response phase of disasters. It provides the capability of putting information out as we get it. Often in response, by the time public affairs has gathered information, written a release, and received approval to distribute, the message released is not the newest information available. Incorporating social media into our communications plan allows us to keep the public up-to-date as information is available.

Like in preparedness, this does not mean we stop traditional media and press releases; it just means we now have an ability to stay on top of the audiences' expectations. ADEM tries to develop and issue an initial statement within 15 minutes of being made aware of a situation. Social platforms allow us to not only reach the media within that time frame, but reach Arkansans directly. Having a constant flow of information in short bursts lets citizens know the State is working. Responding within 15 minutes of an incident saying, "ADEM is monitoring the XXXX and is ready to assist counties with whatever resources are needed" is enough in the beginning for Arkansans to see the State is doing something. Would we write a press release with one sentence? No, but it is acceptable to write a one sentence message on social sites. As the situation continues, it allows the public to receive information as it happens.

ADEM uses its social sites during the disaster response phase: keeping Arkansans up-to-date on weather watches and warnings (at least the information on where to find the alerts); reporting areas with damage; assisting locals in evacuation notices, rumor control; monitoring what is going on across the state; answering individual questions from citizens.

Online it is important for everything to be linked together to create order. Having data available is great, but until we know what to do with the data and until our audience is able to put data together, it does not become a usable message. Making our data searchable is a great way to ensure that when our audience is looking for information, they will find it.

One way ADEM has created order in monitoring Twitter is by setting pre-established hashtags. In January of 2010 we polled our followers on Twitter and asked what hashtag they would like to see for the upcoming winter weather – we wanted to establish something in advance to have some order to the data we monitored. As suggestions came, we realized we could create one hashtag for all weather related events. In doing so we could narrow our monitoring responsibilities down considerably. Instead of attempting to track everything anyone in the state of Arkansas was posting as individual events, tornadoes, ice storms, floods, severe weather, drought, we could follow it all by using one designated hashtag. After all, we did not want all the data that was out there, only what was relevant to Arkansas weather. #ARwx was created for the simplicity of working for all weather events in the state of Arkansas. It also happened to be only a few characters long so most messages aren't affected by its presence.

We involved our followers in the creation of our hashtag for one reason. Social media is all about community involvement. In order for our hashtag to be a success it had to be used. A large part of the #ARwx success is due to the fact that ADEM did not push a hashtag on anyone, but instead went in the direction the Arkansans wanted. Once #ARwx was created we publicized it. Messages were sent out before potential weather events reminding people to use it.

Meteorologists also joined, as well as storm trackers from all over the state. Currently it stands as a valued resource for Arkansas weather information. Not only has it gained the attention and use of current Arkansas twitter users, but also national media outlets looking for our state's severe weather information through twitter. We are also aware of citizens who have created twitter accounts for the sole purpose of following #ARwx in severe weather. In seeing how well the public responded, we also established a hashtag for earthquake information, #AReq.

Currently a gap exists in Arkansas with the ability to push information to multiple sites without having someone physically push a button, or multiple buttons. Social media is currently housed in public affairs and while one of us is on-call at all times, the sites are not monitored 24/7. If alerts come out in the middle of the night, they do not get posted. To make up for this we have made it known that while we post some weather alerts, our social sites should not be anyone's single source of information for severe weather alerts. We direct people to the National Weather Service since they are the ones who issue the watches and warnings.

We are aware of the forthcoming Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) which is supposed to make it easier to issue warnings to citizens. Arkansas has elected to be a part of the pilot to test its abilities.

Recovery

Social media tools are useful in assisting in the recovery phase because they are able to bring the community together. Again, these sites enable us to talk with each other instead of to each other. Information about aid is able to be disbursed and then shared by anyone that wants to pass along the information. As individuals have questions they are able to direct them to us in a familiar format. We also post pictures of damaged areas to reinforce preparedness.

At this time the only privacy concerns I can see would be if someone was to discuss their assistance applications on a social site, asking ADEM for input. Assistance applications are not discussed through social sites. If a citizen was to initiate the conversation concerning their application the State's response would be to ensure the individual that they would be personally contacted regarding the status. Details are not to be discussed socially.

Barriers

The largest barrier was broken when our federal family began engaging in social sites. Before then, it was difficult for states and locals to say they were going to do something, or that it was acceptable to do something that the federal government had not yet adopted.

I believe that the federal government can work with social media companies to create a uniform analytics application for emergency managers to use. This would help emergency personnel see what messages were being received and which messages should need to be approached differently.

Conclusion

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony today and I look forward to any questions the Subcommittee members may have.