Connecting Key Players: Improving Public Sector Emergency Response

MARKET TRENDS REPORT

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Adobe Connect

Introduction

When Hurricane Maria brought its Category 5 winds to Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands and parts of North Carolina in 2017, damage was swift, with storm surges and widespread power outages. The president declared it a major disaster, but responders struggled to reach many areas and resource coordination faltered.

Since then, agencies at all levels of government have worked hard to improve the coordination of emergency response, especially in light of the worldwide pandemic. Many have shifted to virtual platforms, with good results. Yet there is still plenty of work left to do — collaboration is spotty and information isn't always communicated in real time, for example.

Improving the situation requires a mix of technology and processes. On the technology side, a communications platform tied into every stakeholder and providing a common operational picture ensures that everybody is on the same page and promotes real-time information exchange. On the process side, it's about having the right tools to effectively manage emergency planning, training, execution, post-event analysis and dissemination of timely information to the public.

To learn more about these solutions, GovLoop teamed on this report with Adobe, whose Adobe Connect platform powers many emergency response efforts. We'll discuss the challenges that agencies face, highlight the key components of a common operational picture and share best practices in coordinating a rapid response.

By The Numbers

5,400

the number of primary and secondary public safety answering points (PSAP) in the United States

$50 billion

the amount of money available through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021 to help state, local, tribal and territorial governments respond to and recover from major disasters or emergencies

58,950

the number of wildfires in the United States during 2020

20

the number of record-smashing weather or climate disasters in the United States resulting in at least $1 billion worth of damages in 2021

6

the number of Recovery Support Functions laid out by FEMA's National Disaster Recovery Framework (NDRF), each led by a federal coordinating agency with a core group of supporting organizations

"When the public calls 911, we must strive for seamless and efficient communication between federal and state/local public safety and emergency communications agencies."

- Joshua Black, Federal 911 Working Group Chair, CISA and John Holloway, Deputy Director of Public Safety Communications, DISA

Bringing Modern Tech to Emergency Preparedness

The Challenge: Disjointed Systems, Disjointed Efforts

Whether it's effective planning, training or execution, emergency personnel need access to the right information and the right experts whenever necessary. Some of the challenges today include:

Ensuring that everyone has the same up-to-date common operational picture: It's hard to make the right decisions and coordinate effectively with more than one version of the truth. That happens often, especially when information must be shared with geographically dispersed field respondents. Ensuring that everyone has the same set of facts, is working with the latest data and can exchange information in real time requires a central location and the ability to connect to that location via any device and any type of connectivity.

Managing large volumes of disparate sources like video and audio feeds: Live audio and video feeds are often crucial to analyzing a situation, prioritizing response and dispatching the right combination of respondents and resources. Yet low bandwidth, latency, low resolution and aging technology can slow down or even prevent access to these critical data points.

Keeping everyone informed: When an emergency arises, coordination with local organizations like places of worship, aid and assistance organizations and small municipalities is critical. This information is often disseminated in piecemeal fashion, sometimes hours after an event has occurred. Ensuring that key non-government organizations and the general public are fully informed requires a multi-channel approach that includes everything from event pages and microsites to orchestrated webinars and access to recordings of public information sessions.

The Solution: A Persistent Common Operating Environment

Effective incident response requires planning, coordination, rehearsals and communication, all based on a common operating picture and access to all relevant information and participants. This, in turn, requires a platform with persistence.

Persistence takes several forms:

- A custom location: An always-available, easy-to-access site
- Consistent and stored data: Includes everything from access rosters and security settings to preferences and capabilities. Full storage of historical operational plans and event logs provide access to successful blueprints from the past.
- Organization and structure: A consistent look and feel, configuration, branding and location of assets
- Content and branding: A body of assets like briefing charts, maps, files, forms and images that remain available to reference and use as needed

"Persistence is huge when it comes to incident response," said Mike Murtha, senior solutions consultant for e-learning and collaboration at Adobe. "The last thing you want when an incident arises is to have to search for current data and historical records, contact information and planning scenarios."

With a persistent collaboration space, emergency personnel have instant access to whatever they need at all stages of the process. In the planning stage, for example, collaborators can build out specific incident scenarios and generate game plans. Those plans are then ready and available for training, where first responders can walk through tabletop or sandbox exercises. In addition, the actual emergency response room is already customized for the mission and populated with the right assets.

"During rehearsals, first responders can actually wargame what they are going to do at each point, show supervisors what data they are going to generate and physically try to upload those files. They can get very hands-on," Murtha said.

This type of consistency is also critical when it comes to handling an actual incident. If it's a large office building fire, for example, everyone involved can track first responders and assets through both existing information and live information coming into the Adobe Connect solution.

"Maintaining a persistent platform also keeps institutional knowledge, standard operating procedures (SOP) and experience front and center even through routine employee rotation," Murtha said.

Best Practices in Rapid Response

Lay the Groundwork

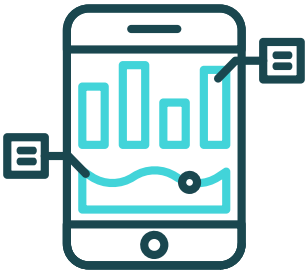
Prepare for virtual incident response and citizen outreach the same way you prepare for physical incident response and outreach. A virtual platform isn't an excuse to phone it in. Participants should expect to put forth the same amount of effort for virtual collaboration as they would with physical collaboration. "Whether you're running a webinar for thousands of people to update them on incident response or practicing incident response training scenarios, preparation usually requires planning and rehearsing, booking the space, arranging for good sound, dealing with seating arrangements and hiring a backstage manager. All of those and more have correlations in the virtual environment," Murtha said. "It won't work as well if you take shortcuts and all this hard work should not just be lost and re-done over and over."

Put the Platform to Use

Expand the use of your persistent, centralized platform to improve virtual collaboration, training and events across the board. With a persistent conferencing platform integrated into the environment, agencies can expand into many areas. Event managers can not only run virtual events, but use its capabilities to promote those events by customizing landing pages, creating registration forms, generating confirmations and reminders and measuring the effectiveness of each channel. With the capability for interactive and engaging live virtual sessions, agencies also can conduct training and e-learning. Choosing a solution with reusable or sharable templates also makes a difference; not only do templates speed up and organize current emergency response, but they serve as viable templates for future events.

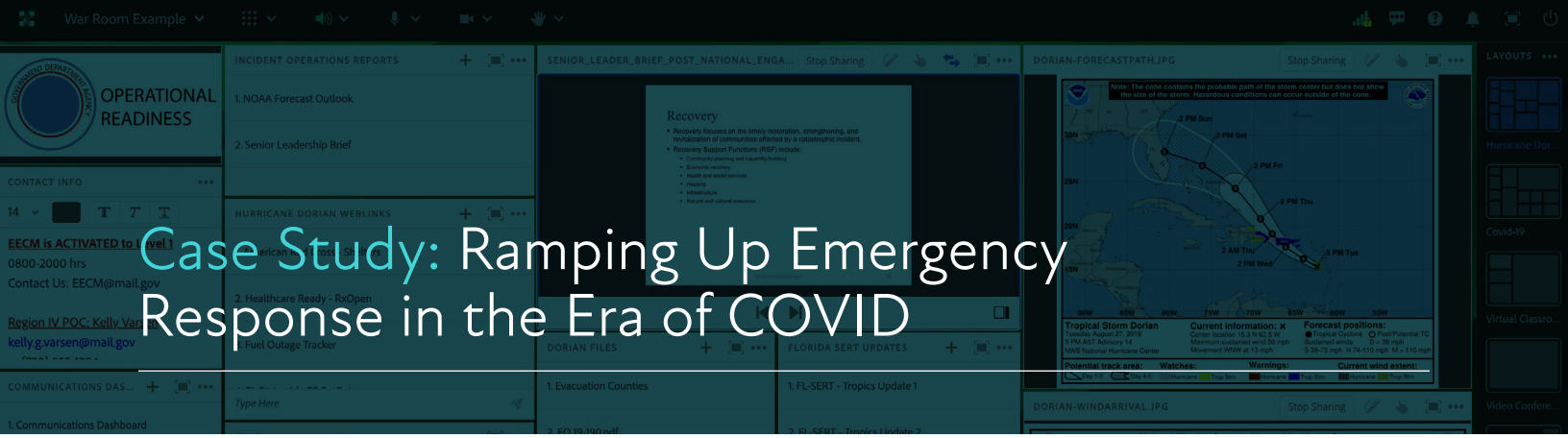
Tighten Up Security

Look for the highest level of security at all levels. Because states, municipalities and federal agencies often collaborate, security is paramount. Beyond fully AES-256 encrypted communications, room owners should be able to decide how to authenticate and verify users before they enter the room. Depending on their needs, they may choose to use role-based controls to determine access levels, require participants to preregister through an event page or choose to deploy the technology on premises behind a firewall. Ideally, the solution should integrate with other security measures like single sign-on. Agencies also should check to ensure that the platform meets their specific security requirements.



Create a Common Operational Picture

Fusion centers were developed after 9/11 to facilitate information-sharing among federal, state and local agencies, but the concept has taken off quite a bit since then. Today, there are 78 centers working together on a daily basis. With a platform like Adobe Connect, where rooms and layouts can be customized, participants at multiple fusion centers can create a common operational picture and collaborate on the fly. They can also use their Adobe Connect rooms to rehearse the mission on a recurring basis.



Case Study: Ramping Up Emergency Response in the Era of COVID

For more than a decade, the Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has relied on the Homeland Security Information Network (HSIN Connect) to share sensitive, unclassified information between public and private sector organizations. With a mission to coordinate planned event safety and security and respond to incidents, HSIN Connect has been instrumental in maintaining and improving security.

DHS's Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA) Region 7 Cyber Security Advisor (CSA) uses HSIN Connect to conduct remote cyber assessments with CISA stakeholders. The CSA utilizes HSIN Connect primarily due to its security features, which are not available via Microsoft Teams, WebEx and Zoom platforms. HSIN Connect also supports the premise that all CISA assessments are protected under the Protected Critical Infrastructure Information (PCII) program, thus the CSA can conduct virtual assessments without concern of stakeholders that the meetings might be hosted and possibly viewed by a commercial organization rather than solely by CISA through the HSIN platform.

But during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, even HSIN resources were stretched to capacity. It was essentially shouldering a completely new issue while working at full capacity on other issues, and had the added burden of maintaining social distancing practices. To address capacity and functionality issues, the network expanded its use of Adobe Connect to better coordinate with state fusion centers, many of which have integrated it into their emergency response SOPs.

During operations, chat and file-sharing tools have been some of the most popular capabilities of HSIN Connect. The chat function, for example, enables teams to communicate and contribute to an incident response remotely. That's especially important in this era of social distancing, since law enforcement officers, investigators and other participants can connect to HSIN Connect on a mobile device and share information with the full investigative team, offsite.

Adobe Connect helps improve situational awareness. Some fusion centers are using HSIN Connect to create state and local situational awareness rooms (SitRooms) to exchange information. They can quickly set up individual information rooms, layouts and pods to share specific types of information. And since Feb. 11, 2020, state fusion centers and federal partners have shared hundreds or even thousands of pieces of COVID-related information, reports and activities.

HOW ADOBE HELPS

Agencies at all levels of government use Adobe products, which include solutions for collaboration, creativity and design, digital document management and e-signatures, content and experience management, analytics and engagement, and digital enrollment and onboarding. Many of Adobe's solutions, including Adobe Connect Managed Services, are FedRAMP-approved. Adobe Connect also complies with SOC 2 Type 2 and is HIPAA-ready.

Adobe Connect provides a persistent, centralized virtual interface for planning, collaboration between remote and on-the-ground personnel and training. It ensures that all participants have the most updated information, alerts, warnings and other intelligence while managing incident response. Features include a virtual "backstage" for multiple hosts and presenters, a central content repository, shared templates, and the ability to develop storyboards and customize visual aesthetics, create and deploy interactive content, rapidly create custom landing pages and registration forms and more.

Learn more: adobe.com/products/adobeconnect

Conclusion

Effective emergency response requires thorough and coordinated planning, preparation and execution. Today, these functions can be done virtually without sacrificing speed, agility or collaboration. A platform that centralizes and retains information and enables secure real-time communication is the solution. From planning for various scenarios to rehearsing and wargaming those scenarios to the actual execution of an emergency response scenario through to the post-mortem to document lessons learned, a comprehensive, persistent platform makes a difference.

With these capabilities, emergency personnel can collaborate with participating federal, state and local agencies, exchange information in real time among geographically dispersed field respondents and launch scalable online citizen awareness programs as part of emergency preparedness measures.

Adobe Connect

ABOUT ADOBE CONNECT

Adobe Connect is a modern virtual conferencing solution for creating secure, customizable and reusable virtual experiences as engaging as real-life interactions. Government agencies use Adobe Connect as persistent virtual environments for Emergency Preparedness and Response with secure real time information exchange for interagency collaboration. Enterprises and educational institutions use it to deliver engaging Training & Learning and customized, branded & engagement led Webinars and reliable, high quality & highly engaging Meetings.

Learn more: adobe.com/products/adobeconnect

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ABOUT GOVLOOP

GovLoop's mission is to "connect government to improve government." We aim to inspire public-sector professionals by serving as the knowledge network for government. GovLoop connects more than 300,000 members, fostering cross-government collaboration, solving common problems and advancing government careers. GovLoop is headquartered in Washington, D.C., with a team of dedicated professionals who share a commitment to connect and improve government.

For more information about this report, please reach out to info@govloop.com.

govloop.com | @govloop

1152 15th St. NW Suite 800
Washington, DC 20005

P: (202) 407-7421 | F: (202) 407-7501

www.govloop.com
@GovLoop