Ventura County
Emergency Notification System

VC ALERT
EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION SYSTEM

TABLE OF CONTENTS

I. Purpose

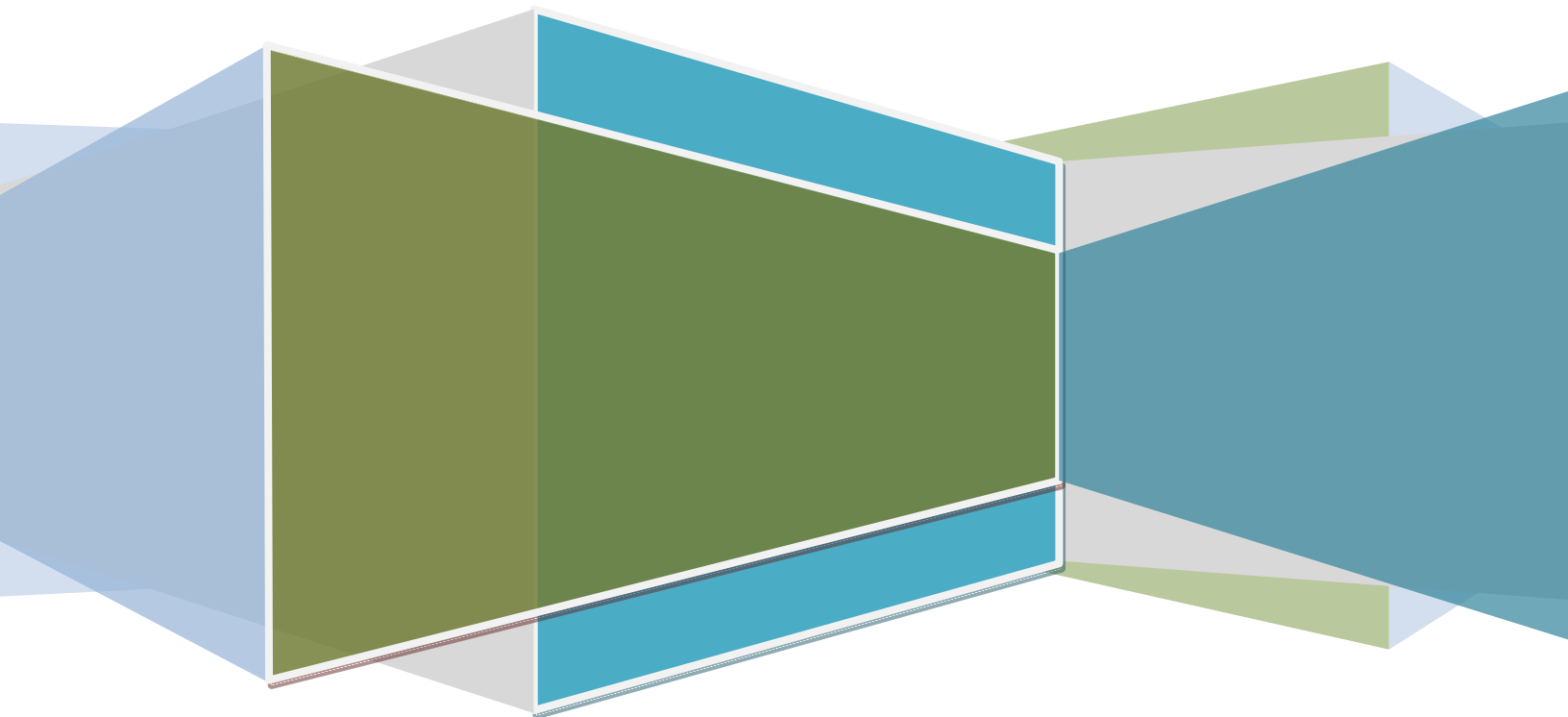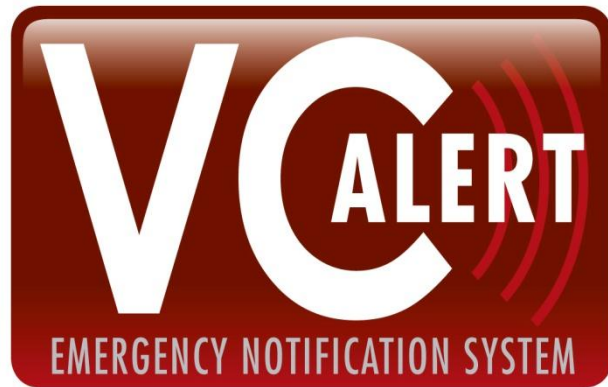The purpose of this document is to provide guidelines on the use and administration of Ventura County's Emergency Notification System, VC-ALERT. This document is intended to serve as an overview of policies and agency roles and responsibilities. It *will not* provide step-by-step instructions on how to utilize the system and is not exhaustive in its description of system capabilities.   The Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services (OES) will be responsible for administration and activation of the Emergency Notification System (ENS) unless otherwise defined through a signed memorandum of understanding (MOU) with the end user.

II. System Description

VC-ALERT is a telephonic community notification system that utilizes a combination of database and GIS technologies to deliver outbound messages. In the event of an emergency, the system is accessible from any location that can access the Internet. Notifications can be generated in a recorded vocal format or in a text-to-speech format for quicker message delivery. GIS technology integrates the ENS with geo-coded contact data (that can be uploaded from customer databases and/or local telephone companies) and intelligent street centerline data. This allows for precise message delivery to a specific geographic region. This feature is vital in the many events such as mandatory evacuations, severe weather warnings, and shelter-in-place instructions during hazardous materials spills. Upon sending out this message, the ENS system provides an active confirmation of message receipt following successful delivery. In addition to notifying communities, the ENS can be used to mobilize first responders by using preset notification lists.

Administration of the system is the responsibility of the Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services (OES). OES is the sole approving authority for any public notification message not outlined in this policy. This approval may be exercised on a case by case basis.

The VC-ALERT ENS system is only one component of Ventura County's public warning system and is intended to be used in conjunction with existing notification systems (Emergency Alert System [EAS], website, media) and should only be used for situations deemed appropriate for citizen notification as defined in the Policies and Guidelines.

A. General System Features
i. Ability to generate notification sessions to telephone numbers within a user-defined geographic area or a predefined list.
ii. Ability to pre-record messages and outgoing calling sessions for subsequent use at a later time.

iii. System is accessible by authorized users through Internet connection.

iv. Multiple ways to upload message and attach to a notification, including text-to-speech, online recorder and microphone, selection of a pre-recorded text and/or voice message, or attaching a .WAV file.

v. Ability to notify the Hearing Impaired if they have self-registered online for Text-Message alerts or TTY notification.

vi. Ability to detect voice mail or answering machines and play messages.

vii. Ability for citizens to replay messages via a touch-tone response (this option needs to be indicated when recording the outbound message).

viii. Ability to exclude any number(s) from a calling session. Exclusion process varies when using group versus geo-notification selection.

ix. Ability to send text or e-mail notifications to citizens through multiple contact pathways until system receives read confirmation from the intended recipient.

x. Ability to stop notifications in mid-session if conditions change.

xi. Ability to call telephone numbers based on the results of a previous session (e.g. successful notifications, answering machine, call timed out, operator Intercept, hung up, fax tone detected).

xii. Ability to obtain real-time data on status of an outgoing calling session. Data remains on the system for up to 18 months. Archive reports may be downloaded if needed for longer storage.

xiii. Ability to include polling capabilities for surveying and data collection. Survey information includes multiple choice questions with up to 9 responses.

xiv. Ability for citizens to 'opt in' or subscribe to community alerts in addition to emergency alerts by visiting our website located at http://www.readyventura.org.

xv. Ability to send notifications to one or more individuals, groups, or dynamic groups (or any combination thereof) in a single step.

xvi. Customizable automatic (real time) reporting (to specified e-mail address) feature for System Use and Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI).

B. Telephone Database

    i. Telephone service data is provided to Everbridge by a commercial data vendor and in uploaded into our system by Everbridge.

    ii. Updates to the data are provided by the vendor on a quarterly basis. Implementation of updates is the responsibility of Everbridge and VCSO.

    iii. Cell phone, landline, and hearing impaired users can "opt in" for additional notification methods or non-emergency community alerts by completing a registration form on the County of Ventura Website (www.readyventura.org) and clicking on **'disaster information'** or by calling 805-648-9283.

    iv. Citizens may opt in or opt out additional contact devices to receive emergency or non-emergency alerts by completing a registration form on the County of Ventura Website.

    v. Citizens have the ability to create a secure user profile, set alert preferences, update contact information including physical addresses, email addresses & more.

    vi. Data is updated in real-time, and is reflected immediately on the map, provided a valid address is submitted.

C. Mapping and Geographic Notification

    i. Mapping data is provided in ESRI shape file compatible format. The base map layer is supplied by NavTec and is updated quarterly.

    ii. Ability to isolate a specific geographic area for notification to the citizens within the selected area.

    iii. Ability to edit and save a geographic area for future notification sessions.

    iv. Ability to define a geographic area by designating a ZIP code, street address, neighborhood, or radius from a specific point.

    v. Ability to create custom layers identifying specific locations such as hospitals, police and fire stations, to target communications more precisely and effectively.

    vi. Ability for citizens to enter critical information to database such as special needs, interests in volunteering, or special skills.

D. Notification to Lists

    vii. Ability to create, maintain, save and delete an unlimited number of lists with an unlimited number of records per list for outgoing calling sessions.

viii. Allows users to build lists for notification of vulnerable populations or special response teams (i.e. In-home care residents or public health response teams).

ix. Ability to record a message and launch calling sessions remotely using a pre-designated user ID.

D. Mobilization of Responders

i. Ability to import a list of responders for mobilization in the event of an emergency. (The user is not able to restrict access by group to the responder information when importing a list.)

ii. Ability to contact pre-determined responders.

iii. Ability to track the responses of individual team members (i.e. SWAT) to see whether or not they will be reporting to the scene.

iv. Active confirmation of receipt provides a comprehensive audit trail, and improved quality of contact data.

v. Ability to record a message and launch mobilization sessions remotely using a user-defined ID for a specific team of responders.

E. Types of Notifications

i. **Telephonic (Recorded voice, text-to-speech, upload wav file)**
   1. Home phone, work phone, mobile phone

ii. **SMS Text Message – Limited to 120 characters. Messages over 120 characters will be split into multiple messages in increments of 120 characters.**
   1. Primary & Secondary SMS devices.

iii. **Email**
   1. Personal email, work email, other email

iv. **Instant Message**
   1. AOL AIM, Yahoo Messenger, or MSN Messenger

v. **Fax**

III.   Events Authorized for Activation of VC-ALERT Emergency Notification System

Appointed public officials or public safety command officers may request activation of the VC-ALERT system.   This includes public health officials, human services officials, emergency managers, city managers, police and fire officials, or other public safety officers involved in the management of an emergency incident.   Emergency activation of the system will require that the event meets one of the criteria as defined below.   For those who do not have remote access to the system, requests for activation will need to be funneled through the appropriate channels as defined in section IV. of this document.

A. **Evacuation Notices** - The system can be used to deliver voluntary or mandatory evacuation notices to citizens in areas affected by major fires (i.e. structure or wildland), flooding, or tsunamis.

B. **Hazardous Material Incident** - This system can be used to notify citizens whether it is appropriate to evacuate or shelter-in-place when a hazardous material release has occurred.

C. **Community Policing** - The Ventura County Sheriff's Department and local police departments may use the system for a variety of community emergency policing activities.   Community policing activities may include:
    i. AMBER Alerts
    ii. Endangered missing adults
    iii. Investigative canvassing
    iv. Prisoner escapes
    v. Search for Outstanding Suspects

D. **Public Health Alerts –** The Ventura County Public Health Department and Human Services Agency may use the system to disseminate emergency public health information such as:
    i. Boil-water alerts
    ii. Biting animal alerts
    iii. Infectious disease outbreak
    iv. Heat and cold advisories to vulnerable populations

E. **Severe Weather Event –** Severe weather usually affects a significant portion of the County and is **not usually** an appropriate occasion for activating the VC-ALERT system.   The EAS should be used in this capacity.   However, the system does have the ability to import shape files generated by the National Weather Service (NWS) when issuing a warning statement.   It may be appropriate to send out a Flash Flood Warning for a dam failure generated by NWS to citizens within a dam inundation zone or to advise residents of severe weather predicted by spot weather forecasts.

F. **Any other threat to public health or safety –** It is impossible to list every situation for which use of VC-ALERT is appropriate. A warning should be issued if the situation threatens human health and safety or serious damage to property. However, the warning must be issued in a timely manner that gives the public enough time to react and follow instructions. The capacity of the system needs to be taken into account when determining whether it is appropriate to launch a calling session. Please see "system limitations" for more information on the capacity to make calls.

G. **Non-Emergency Situations** requiring mass notification.
    i. Broken water mains
    ii. Power system failure

H. **Time of Broadcast**

Special consideration shall be taken when activating the VC-ALERT system between the hours of 10pm-7am. Outbound sessions conducted during these hours should be a matter of public safety. Courtesy notifications of non-life threatening situations shall be made during normal daytime hours.

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IV. Authorized Users of VC-ALERT

The Ventura County Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services (OES) is responsible for administration and maintenance of the ENS. The ENS is available for use by Cities, Special Districts and other authorized entities located within Ventura County. The Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services personnel are the primary persons that have access to the system and are authorized to initiate calling sessions. Other users may access the system to send notifications to citizens with proper training and a signed memorandum of understanding with OES (i.e. Cities & authorized agencies).

Authorized users must notify OES (**805-654-2551**) during normal business hours or the OES Duty Officer (**805-947-8210**) on evenings and weekends, when launching an *emergency* calling session that may impact an additional jurisdiction other than their own. In addition, calling sessions that may create an influx of calls to any neighboring PSAP (public safety answering point) shall require notification of the OES Duty Officer. **Non-emergency** calling sessions do not require OES Duty Officer notification. These sessions may be conducted assuming the session is permitted by the guidelines listed in section III of this document.

Each user of the VC-ALERT ENS must possess an individualized user account to access the system. The sharing of user account information is not permitted. To obtain a user account, please contact OES at **805-654-3843**.

V. How to Access the VC-Alert System
   A. Internet Access: https://www.everbridge.net
   B. Mobile Internet Access: http://mobile.everbridge.net/
   C. IVR Automated System: 1-888-440-4911
   D. Operator Assisted: 1-877-220-4911

VI. Use of ENS during Ventura County Operational Area EOC Activation

In the event the Ventura County Area Operational Area Emergency Operations Center (EOC) and City EOC(s) are activated for the same incident, the ENS messages shall be coordinated through the Joint Information Center (JIC) and disseminated only after all stakeholders have collaborated and agreed upon information and objectives relative to the incident. Upon successful collaboration, the agreed upon ENS session may be launched from the County EOC or an alternate location.

Requests to activate the ENS may be submitted within WebEOC®. It is recommended that the requesting agency call the OES Duty Officer (805-947-8210) to confirm receipt of the request. Those authorized users that do not have access to WebEOC® may request a login by e-mailing webeoc@ventura.org.

Non-emergency routine activations of the ENS system used to notify citizens of routine events or mobilize personnel may be conducted without the notification and approval from the Duty Officer. Non-emergency calling sessions interfere with emergency calling sessions, they may be temporarily suspended by the OES system administrator.

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Prior to Requesting Notification by OES

Prior to activating the VC-ALERT system, please ensure the following criteria are met:

- ☐ **Step 1. Review Notification Criteria in Section III.**
- ☐ **Step 2. Fill in the Emergency Notification request form PRIOR to making request.** This will serve as your guide when speaking to OES. *Be Clear and Concise in your message.*
- ☐ **Step 3.** Call the Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services (OES) at **805-654-2551** during normal business hours or the OES Duty Officer at **805-947-8210** on evenings and weekends. **Clearly identify yourself and state that you wish to activate the ENS system.** Be prepared to positively prove your identity to prevent any unauthorized use of the system. This will require providing your supervisor's name and contact information, your city/special district/agency name and your position within that city, special district, or agency **and a call back number**. This is for identity verification purposes.
- ☐ **Step 4.** After verification of identity is complete, e-mail the Emergency Notification Request Form to 805-648-9258 or oes.oes@ventura.org. It is important to **clearly identify the geographic area or predefined list** that needs to receive notification on the request form.
- ☐ **Step 5.** OES personnel will then record the message or provide instructions on how to record the alert message.
- ☐ **Step 6.** Stay in contact with OES personnel to receive the results of the calling session. If necessary, request termination of the calling session if changes occur that no longer warrant the alert.

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SYSTEM ACTIVATION REQUEST

Agency:	
Contact Name:	
Contact Phone:	
Contact E-mail:	
ID/Badge #:	
Position:	
Supervisor Name/Contact #:	

Priority:	Emergency □ Standard □	**Interval Between Attempts (min):**	
Residence and Business (Y/N):	YES □ NO □	**Leave a Message (Y/N):**	YES □ NO □
Number of Attempts Per #:		**Pre-defined List Name:**	

Message Text (Keep Message Clear and Concise, see section V.B.) :

_____

_____

_____

Geographic Area to Receive Message:

Please be as specific as possible. Include city, zip code, and street names if available. When available, provide the street names of intersections in the event a perimeter has been established.

_____

_____

_____

Please e-mail or fax the completed form to oes.oes@ventura.org *(preferred method) or 648-9258.*

Message Content

The alert/notification message is one of the most important elements of the public warning effort. The content and style of the hazard notification message has a direct impact on the public's response to a warning and the willingness to comply with the recommended protective actions. An effective message is clear, concise and simplifies complex concepts. Most effective ENS messages are written at a 6th grade reading level and are free of agency jargon. The best chance of getting an audience's attention occurs within the first 9-seconds of an audio broadcast. The length of the message will have a direct effect on the capacity of the system to complete the calling session in a timely manner. Therefore, messages should be limited to 30-60 seconds in length but should include the following information:

    i. **Source of the message –** The authorized agency responsible for issuing the alert should be clearly identified.

    ii. **Description of the hazard or risk –** The message must include a description of the event that has occurred (or may occur) and the danger that it poses.

    iii. **Location of the hazard** – The message must include a description of the geographic areas that are at risk.

    iv. **Guidance for protective actions** – The message must include instructions on what citizens should do to protect themselves. Terminology should be defined so that citizens can take the proper action to ensure their safety.

    v. **Time available to act** – The warning message must include information on the time available for those in the affected area to take the appropriate protective action.

    vi. **Future Information Source** – The message should direct the citizen where he/she look to for more information in the future. E.g. Future VC-Alert Notifications, TV stations, press release, etc.

Example Alert Message: "The Ventura County Sheriff's Department is notifying you of a mandatory evacuation in the Upper Ojai area due to the fast approaching Day Fire. Mandatory evacuation means that the fire poses an imminent danger to life and property. The fire is being driven by high wind and is anticipated to reach Ojai within four hours. A shelter has been setup in the City of Santa Paula at Isabel School. Please do not delay in leaving the area."

B. Follow-up Communication

Following the successful delivery of an outbound calling session, ENS users should determine whether or not a follow-up "all clear" telephonic message will be required. If the purpose of the session was to inform citizens of a future situation or activity, the call may not require a follow-up notification. In the case of an ENS notification warning citizens of a barricaded suspect in a particular neighborhood, it would be appropriate to inform citizens once the situation has resolved or circumstances have changed.

Outbound sessions that are stand-alone informational sessions should include directions to a source where more detailed information may be obtained.

C. Session Priorities

VC-ALERT will process outbound alert sessions based upon your initial selection of "Emergency Message" or "Standard Message." Emergency messages will always take precedence on the system.

VII. System Limitations

A. The telephony server utilized by Everbridge carries a capacity to place 100,000 calls per hour, at minimum. In addition, 100,000 text messages can be generated per hour. More often than not, system limitations arise from "bottle-necking" of calls at the local telephone company central offices as opposed to delays generated at the data center.

B. Multiple Language Alerts – Agencies may need to consider recording multiple messages for various demographic groups. Messages can be recorded in multiple languages. The system has the ability to send alerts in any language as long as there is someone available to record the message in a particular language. These policies and guidelines do not suggest that it is mandatory to send alerts to the public in multiple languages. That decision will be left to the Incident or EOC Commander as to whether it is appropriate for a given geographic area. Those jurisdictions that have a high percentage of non-English speaking families may want to pre-designate geographic areas that should receive multiple language alerts. There are three ways to accomplish sending out messages in another language in addition to English.

   i. **Record Both Messages within a Single Recording –** The user has the ability to record both messages within the same recording. For example, the English message could be recorded first followed by the Spanish

message. This will make the outgoing message longer and may affect the session results; citizens may hang up after the English message is complete causing a high number of hang ups that would normally be counted as successful calls.

ii. **Record a Separate Message for Each Language -** The user may record a separate message for each language. The user has the ability to launch two sessions concurrently, one session in English and one session in Spanish (or any other language) to the same geographic area. This method will result in citizens receiving two separate calls, but will result in more realistic session results for the session launched in the primary language for that geographic area.

iii. **Utilize the Survey Tool** – There is a survey tool on the system that allows the user to record a series of questions/messages that require a keyed response of 1-9 from the resident receiving the call.

C. **Cell phone numbers and Voice Over IP (VoIP) –** The system has a limited ability to capture VoIP and cell phone lines made available through commercial phone lists however not ALL cell phone and VoIP listings will not be automatically captured. Citizens who do not have a landline telephone will need to manually submit their cell phone, VoIP phone number or other notification device information on the County of Ventura Website to insure their information has been entered into the VC-Alert system.

D. **Factors that Affect the Ability to Receive the Alert -** Citizens will **not** receive notifications if the phone lines are down and some may **not** receive calls when the power is out. VoIP lines and phone lines provided by cable companies, and cordless phones, require the power to be on in order to complete a call. During an emergency, the circuits may become overloaded which will prevent the Central Office from completing calls originating from the VC-ALERT servers. These calls will return as an error and a subsequent calling session will need to be launched using a list of erroneous calls. Also, those citizens who have their call-blocking activated will **not** receive the emergency notification. These calls will show up as "operator-intercept."

E. **Internal Private Branch Exchange (PBX) -** Businesses with internal Private Branch Exchange (PBX) phone systems present the potential to cause idiosyncrasies if they are included in an ENS calling session. The system will attempt to call all published numbers located within a geographic area if the calling session is

based on a geo-zone. Most problems can be minimized by careful screening of the database, but authorized users should be aware of the potential for:

i. Some organizations may have more than one building location, but have a centralized telephone system. The address location of published phone numbers may be associated with the central office building when the actual telephone is located at a remote site.

ii. The calling session may complete multiple calls to numerous offices within the same organization at the same location. System administrators from each City will be tasked with the responsibility of identifying large corporations within their jurisdiction in order to exclude them during calling sessions.

VIII. Routine Testing

The Sheriff's Office of Emergency Services will be responsible for routine testing of the system. OES personnel will use staff member lists in order to test the functionality of each module. Testing will be performed using the frequency defined in the table below. Authorized users of the system will be subject to a routine testing schedule as defined in their memoranda of understanding.

System Component	Testing Frequency
Ability to Make Outbound Calls	Weekly
Outbound Email Session Using OES Staff	Monthly
Mobilization Session Using EOC Activation Lists	Bi-Monthly
Geo-zone Creation	Weekly