



Public Media's Role in Emergency Services



Public television and radio stations play an integral role in our nation's emergency alert system. Public media's infrastructure provides the broadest nationwide communications platform in the country, and its national-local organization allows public media entities to distribute national, state, and regional emergency alerts and provide encrypted, geo-targeted alerts to local communities in times of need.

In 2006, Congress passed the WARN Act, establishing a voluntary system allowing cell phone companies to notify their subscribers of imminent threats to life or property. Since 2013, public television has been an essential partner in the Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) system. PBS WARN enables all public television stations to send WEAs out over their transmitters to provide a "hardened, redundant" alternate path for the cellular companies' connection. Between January 1 and December 31, 2024, more than 11,000 WEAs issued by federal, state, and local authorities were transmitted over the PBS WARN system, a 30% increase over 2023. Public television stations save lives in their communities, even those who might never turn on a television.

During the January 2025 wildfires, Southern California public media stations provided timely news and information, on air and online, to more than 18 million people. From January 7-13, local alerting authorities issued 111 geotargeted WEAs, including fire weather warnings and fire outbreak alerts, evacuation warnings and orders, and curfew notices. The stations also offered real-time guides and resources for those threatened by the fires, partnering to send out daily newsletters with the latest updates from all their organizations.

The Public Radio Satellite System (PRSS), managed by NPR, receives a national Emergency Alert System feed directly from the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) to send Presidential emergency alerts to local public radio stations. NPR/PRSS is also named as a resource in at least 20 states' emergency plans, with many public radio stations serving as Primary Entry Point (PEP) stations. The PRSS network includes almost 400 stations, serving more than 1,200 local public radio stations, supporting secure, reliable communications without relying on the Internet.

In fall 2024, Blue Ridge Public Radio (BPR) in Asheville, N.C., provided a lifeline for people hardest hit by Hurricane Helene, which killed more than 100 people, damaged more than 125,000 homes, downed power lines and obliterated public infrastructure, leaving much of the region without power, water, cell or internet service. The BPR newsroom was a front-line news resource for residents and national audiences via NPR and PBS NewsHour. BPR partnered with Newspark to launch a text-only service for those with limited cell service and worked with the nonprofit Enlace Latino to translate reports and state briefings into Spanish, ensuring essential information reached everyone in the affected community.

In 2022, FEMA selected CPB to administer the Net Generation Warning System (NGWS) grant program, providing public media stations funding to upgrade infrastructure to expand alert, warning, and interoperable communications, creating a more resilient and secure public alerting system.

Public media stations provide public safety and emergency services in a variety of ways. Here are a few examples:

- The [Florida Public Radio Emergency Network \(FPREN\)](#), a collaboration of 13 public radio stations headquartered at the University of Florida's WUFT-FM/TV in Gainesville, provides statewide multimedia updates during hurricanes or other emergencies to stations across the state, their websites, social media channels and on mobile devices via the Florida Storms app. The free app provides geotargeted information with live hurricane forecasts, evacuation routes and shelter details, and it live streams the closest Florida public radio station.
- South Carolina Educational Television (SCETV)/South Carolina Public Radio partnered with FPREN to launch the [SC Emergency Information Network \(SCEIN\)](#) to provide weather emergency content statewide. SCETV serves as the liaison with the South Carolina Emergency Management Division, producing and coordinating the Governor's live briefings on all its channels. SCETV is the media of record for the state's Emergency Management Division.
- To reach diverse communities with health and safety information, [Twin Cities PBS](#) launched [TPT NOW](#), the nation's first 24/7 TV channel broadcasting real-time, emergency alerts in English, Spanish, Hmong and Somali. During the coronavirus pandemic, TPT NOW aired messages from the governor, the Minnesota Department of Health and the World Health Organization translated into multiple languages and made the translations available to other media.
- [Alabama Public Television's \(APT\)](#) microwave system serves as the backbone of Alabama's Emergency Alert System, distributing national, state, and local emergency broadcast signals to all radio and television broadcasters throughout the state. APT is also the hub for Alabama's AMBER Alert system to track missing children.
- [Vegas PBS](#) provides a full range of Emergency Alert Services, including severe weather and civil alerts. It broadcasts geo-targeted alerts on behalf of the Department of Homeland Security's Personal Localized Alerting Network (PLAN) system, which provides instant message-style warnings to wireless providers and their subscribers. PLAN sends emergency alerts to mobile devices in the affected areas.
- [Maine Public](#) broadcasting network makes its statewide spectrum available to federal and state authorities to communicate with first responders and the media in the event of an emergency. The one-way closed communication system works even when internet connections are down and power is out.
- [WHUT-TV](#) partners with the U.S. Park Police to distribute helicopter and other video services when large crowds gather in Washington, D.C. This work has been critical during Presidential inaugurations, the Fourth of July, protests, and other large-scale events on the National Mall.
- [Houston Public Media \(KUHT\)](#) can deliver secure, encrypted IP data to targeted, multiple users while continuing its television broadcast service. This encrypted data delivery system can deliver a helicopter aerial feed to police, dashboard camera footage to firefighters, building blueprints to specific users, and television programs to public viewers all at the same time. These resources have been used during presidential debates, the Super Bowl and other major sporting events, and natural disasters such as Hurricane Harvey-related flooding.

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