**Is There a Gap in Your Mass Notification System Plan?**

**Check with your cell providers to make sure they aren't blocking your SMS/text alerts.**

[**1**](http://www.campussafetymagazine.com/Blog/Campus-Command-Post/Story/2011/04/Is-There-a-Gap-in-Your-Mass-Notification-System-Plan.aspx)

**By David Burns** | April 18, 2011 | [Comments (10)](http://www.campussafetymagazine.com/Blog/Campus-Command-Post/Story/2011/04/Is-There-a-Gap-in-Your-Mass-Notification-System-Plan.aspx#WriteComment) | [Post a comment](http://www.campussafetymagazine.com/Blog/Campus-Command-Post/Story/2011/04/Is-There-a-Gap-in-Your-Mass-Notification-System-Plan.aspx#WriteComment)

For the past week, I have been getting reports across the country of the nation's cellular providers taking steps that may be impeding higher education [mass notification system messages](http://www.campussafetymagazine.com/Channel/Mass-Notification/Articles/2010/09/Your-Mass-Notification-Cheat-Sheet-Revised.aspx). What is happening?

It appears that major, regional and independent carriers (like Sprint, Verizon, regional carriers and pre-paid providers), appear to be flagging mass notification messages as potential spam, or "alert" (short code) messages, and either disabling (blocking), delaying or denying [SMS/text transmissions](http://www.campussafetymagazine.com/Channel/Mass-Notification/Articles/2008/11/Text-Message-Troubleshooting-4-Challenges-Your-Campus-Should-Address.aspx) to some or all of their cellular subscribers. These are the folks who are subscribing to your mass warning alert messaging system.

Emergency management colleagues in Indiana, Washington State and Florida are reporting blockages of their mass warning system messages. An emergency management colleague from Washington State reported that its major cellular carrier subscribers did not receive recent campus mass warning system test messages because the provider blocked them. A colleague in Indiana reported that its major carrier had established an "Enterprise Management Gateway (EMG)" that mass warning system providers have to register to allow their mass warning messages to bypass spam and protective measures, allowing emergency messages to pass through.

This establishes a very fine line between protecting customers (being vigilant) and denying services because cellular network providers may flag, delay, or impede a message and block it when the providers' internal system senses a large number of messages coming from a specific entity (mass warning system provider).

The impact on college and university campuses is unknown. SMS/text messaging systems are a major part of campus mass warning systems, and this issue reinforces the fact that they may not work in a crisis. It may also mean that campuses face a new obstacle and difficulty in complying with the Higher Education Act of 2008, which mandates all college and university campuses issue mass warning messages to their communities under a myriad of emergency conditions.

There may also be some political and profit motives at play here. Cellular providers want more money, and denying SMS/text messages provides an opportunity to try and collect fees from mass warning providers to allow the emergency SMS/text alerts to pass through unabated; all that is needed to pass is to pay an additional fee. That option in a very bad economy is not a viable option.

This presents a gap in our crisis management strategies. When legislators mandated that all higher education institutions use mass notification systems to alert their communities, they assumed our nation's cellular carriers would play ball and allow their resources to be used for crisis management. It appears we may need some legislative action to make it illegal to charge extra fees or block emergency messages from public safety entities. Given the power of the cellular industry lobby, don't count on it.

So what does this mean for you? It just reinforces the fact that reliance on any single messaging and warning system means a potential single point of failure. If you are just using SMS/texting or phone services as your sole source of alerting your community, you may find a serious problem in a crisis.

Best practices and standardized practices require most public safety agencies to have multiple (multi-modal) and redundant layers of alerting their communities in a crisis - putting all your eggs in one basket is just asking for trouble. Add a historic recession and economic challenges, and you invite the cellular industry to potentially impede crisis management efforts by trying to game the system and generate more money.

In any case, no matter the intent or motive, it would be prudent for a higher education institution to investigate and test its systems regularly to determine if there are any gaps in your university's mass warning system resources.  Perhaps making a phone call to your system provider and asking them to look into this issue as a preventive measure is a good pro-active step. It's easier to tell the public that you are aware of the problem and took steps to remedy a problem that may be beyond your immediate control, than admit you were caught flat-footed in a crisis and didn't take steps to mitigate any potential damage or delay to your system.