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Case Study

Communicating Through Disasters

By Brendan Read | July 2010

The pathway to effectively avoiding, and if that is not possible responding to and recovering from disasters – is accurate and timely communications with employees, clients, patients and customers. As the following examples illustrate, these terrifying events can be successfully planned for with the right solutions.

Helping Hospitals Help Others

Beryl is a healthcare-exclusive business process outsourcing firm headquartered in Bedford, Texas. It handles more than seven million interactions annually for its clients.

When a disaster threatens and/or strikes, Beryl holds an initial information gathering call with the affected client in which all of the details are discussed. A project plan is developed and reviewed by the support team. Training is conducted to ensure all Beryl agents are aware of the situation and are prepared to assist the client's callers in a caring and compassionate manner.

In October 2007, Beryl came to the aid of Palomar Pomerado Health when fires stretched across Poway and Rancho Bernardo, Calif., destroying hundreds of structures and forcing thousands of people from their homes. When the blazes threatened Palomar Pomerado's facility in Poway, patients

were evacuated to other healthcare centers with little advance notice. Palomar Pomerado contacted Beryl, which set up an emergency telephone support line. From mid-October to mid-November Beryl's advisors handled hundreds of calls, assisting patients' families in locating their loved ones.

In June 2008, Beryl assisted Columbus Regional Hospital, a 225-bed facility when it had to temporarily close its doors from 11 inches of rain that caused the area's Flatbush, Wabash and White Rivers to overflow. Beryl became the main point of contact for the communities the hospital serves. Calls were routed to Beryl's center while special lines were set up to handle patient information and transportation requests. Beryl worked closely with Columbus Regional Hospital to prepare communication to ensure all callers were informed and when necessary, directed to the right alternative facility. Beryl provided these services until October 2008, when the facility reopened.

On Guard for Bioterrorism Threats

Few dangers are more insidious and deadly than bioterrorism, whose agents can be in some cases planted virtually undetected and directed one-on-one, in small groups or mass. The California

Department of Public Health (CDPH) has a special team that stays on top of this risk. It focuses on enhancing state and local health surveillance and response for diseases due to biological agents such as anthrax, botulism and smallpox.

The CDPH bioterrorism team is specifically responsible for compliance with the Centers for Disease Control (CDC) Public Health Information Network program requirement to manage ongoing bioterrorism threats by alerting key agencies and staff.

To that end, since 2003, Varolii has been supplying automated alerting for the CDPH enabling it to quickly and accurately deliver vital messages to key organizations and individuals such as county and local health departments, key physicians and hospital administrators when there is a credible threat or actual incident. Varolii's solution uses multiple channels: phone (landline or mobile), fax, e-mail, text messaging and pagers to get the word out. Varolii guarantees delivery within a five-minute timeframe. It also provides real-time reporting to better respond to the situation, track recipient status, ensure that business continuity/disaster response plans and procedures are followed and create audit trails for regulatory compliance.

Varolii assisted CDPH with implementing the CDC-required alerting function. This included setting up the alerting script templates, recipient lists and contact information, routing instructions based on agreed-upon message subject descriptors and corresponding recipient descriptors. It also included putting together secure information archiving for subsequent viewing and the facilitation of secure discussion of public health issues. CDPH imports a recipient list; with a simple-to-use and flexible application; message recipients are able to manage their own notification profiles to ensure up-to-date information is available to the state agency on an ongoing basis.

Fortunately at press time the CDPH has not had to use the Varolii solution for a bioterrorism incident. The system has been regularly used, though, for food safety alerts and is tested on a regular basis.

“Varolii has become an integral part of California’s bioterrorism response initiative,” says Robin Rees, director of customer programs. **CIS**