

New Waterford system to alert residents during emergencies

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Waterford Township officials soon will be able to alert residents of emergencies via phone - and not tie up dozens of staffers to do it.

Called Reverse 911, the system allows recorded messages to be launched on a computer network to residents' telephones or cellular phones. Bulletins also can be sent as e-mail or text messages. Messages can be sent to the entire township or to a few residents living on one block.

"It could be to alert people of a chemical spill, missing children, a water main break or escaped prisoners, for example," said Bill Smith, assistant director of fiscal and human resources. "It really has many uses."

The \$43,350 system was approved in December. Costs will be borne equally among the police, fire, water and sewer and general funds. The system should be in place and tested by the first week of May.

The system will be housed in the township hall on Crescent Lake Road. Each department will have its own clearance and decide how and when to use it, Smith said. Via the Internet, messages can even be recorded when the sender is not near the system.

While studying various systems, Smith learned that one community found a pipe burst at a polling place the night before an election.

"Rather than have people show up, the community simply called and told them the new polling location," Smith said.

The township will be able to contact groups of employees if their services are needed on off-hours, such as special operations units, volunteer firefighters and various public works units.

"This is cutting edge," said Dennis Storrs, Waterford's fire chief. "Our different departments talked together about this system and new (uses) keep popping up every day. Even the school district has showed interest in using it."

The system not only sends messages but also allows responses from residents, Smith said. If a homebound resident receives a call and needs assistance, he or she can respond through the phone and the township will receive a message.

"It's a very useful tool for the health, safety and welfare of people in Waterford," said Carl Solden, the township's supervisor.

"It's not a very expensive thing when you think about its capabilities. I'm excited about it."

Township officials will draft a policy defining which departments will have access to the system, Smith said.

"We have to make sure we're careful not to overuse it," he said.

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People who would want to be notified on their cell phones or by e-mail will be asked to register the numbers and addresses with the township.

Storrs said that, in his experience, there have been a "number of times we had to evacuate areas."

"It's not a question of if we're going to use it, it's a question of when," he said.