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## **A Plea to Residents of L.A. County: Exercise Greater Public Safety Awareness and Action**

Joe Wilson, President, Industrial System Group, Federal Signal pleads with fellow citizens to get safer.

By Joe Wilson | July 12, 2011

Though not in the tornado belt that has recently been ravaged by this season's severe weather emergencies, Los Angeles is no stranger to public safety scares. From earthquake threats to raging wild fires, the county is well aware of the damage that Mother Nature can do.

As we approach 10 years after 9/11, we are reminded that natural disasters are not the only time we should consider our public safety. Now is the time to take a close look at what progress we have really made, and start to think discuss how we should respond and communicate in the event of all disaster scenarios.

Unfortunately, only half of us in the L.A. area and across the U.S. are actively taking precautionary steps. Recent public safety survey findings from Federal Signal and Safe America Foundation show that nearly half of American households do not have an emergency plan. In addition, half of the respondents are unaware whether their city or town is even able to alert them in the event of an emergency. Los Angeles county residents simply have to become knowledgeable about how to keep themselves safe in the event of an emergency.

Advanced technology and messaging formats are enabling more effective emergency warning and mass notification systems. However, while it's true that reaching out to someone may indeed be easier, achieving dependable communications with everyone on a moment's notice at a time of crisis is at least as challenging as ever.

We all must consider new technologies together with a host of human factors—including age, physical disabilities and cultural differences—related to the diverse needs of citizens in a heavily populated city like Los Angeles. Fortunately, emergency planners are making progress in addressing language issues with the help of computer-aided language translation technologies. Siren tones also address many citizens' unique needs; however, one alerting platform, such as a siren, will not suffice and education or training is still required.

These aren't the only challenges we face. The previously cited 2010 American Public Safety survey revealed that 60% of households now rely on cell phones to the exclusion of landlines. Interestingly, however, many cell phone users do not use their phones the same way they use their landlines. Many people—particularly those in older age groups—opt to keep them turned off until they need to make a call. Additionally, a large-scale disaster would almost certainly overload current cell networks and quite possibly internet-based communications. Would you have a back-up plan?

For these and other reasons, it has become increasingly apparent that no single alerting method is sufficient. Emergency communications and mass notification systems need the capability to issue alerts through a variety of mediums, including telephones, text and e-mail while also confirming

receipt of those messages in real time. This reality also underscores why traditional warning devices such as radio broadcasts, and even police car PAs, continue to represent valid elements of a successful emergency communications strategy.

Take action now. Enroll yourself and any others for whom you are responsible in Alert LA County, the city's tool for registering your cell phone number, Voice over IP phone number, and e-mail address with the Alert LA County Emergency Mass Notification System. You can add multiple telephone numbers and an email address to each personal account, and select the types of notifications you would like to receive. This is a small step that will help remind you that public safety is everyone's responsibility.

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