

Cellphone alert system announced in NYC

May 10 2011, By SAMANTHA GROSS , Associated Press

(AP) -- An emergency alert system that will send messages to cellphones during disasters could have been used to warn New Yorkers of the tornadoes that hit the city last year, city officials said Tuesday.

Federal officials joined New York City Mayor Michael Bloomberg to announce the Commercial Mobile Alert System, which will direct emergency messages to cellphones in case of a terrorist attack, natural disaster or other emergencies.

There will be three levels of messages, ranging from a critical national alert from the president to warnings about impending or occurring national disasters to alerts about missing or abducted children. People will be able to opt out of receiving all but the presidential alerts, Federal Communications Commission Chairman Julius Genachowski said.

The alert system will be up and running in New York and Washington, D.C. by the end of the year. Genachowski said the goal is to ultimately install the system throughout the United States.

New York City Emergency Management Commissioner Joseph Bruno said the alert system could have warned residents of two destructive tornadoes that hit Brooklyn and Queens last year. The tornadoes killed one woman and caused extensive property damage.

A special chip is required to allow the phone to receive the messages. Some smartphones already have the chip, and software updates will be available when the network goes online later this year.

The chips will not allow government agencies to collect information about the phones' users, said Craig Fugate, administrator of the Federal Emergency Management Agency.

Fugate said cell phones turned on in the direct vicinity of a disaster - an evacuation zone, for instance - would receive a message warning them of the impending danger. The alert would show up on the phone's front screen, instead of the traditional text message inbox, and arrive with a distinct ring and likely a vibration.

Gilberto Palma, a 62-year-old maintenance supervisor in the World Financial Center, a complex that was severely damaged in the 9/11 attacks, said he thought the alert system was a great idea.

"Everybody's going to be happy, especially in this area," he said. "In this building, everybody's still on alert."

Debbie Hayes, a 49-year-old nanny who passed through the complex on the way to a play date with her 11-month-old charge, said she was also thrilled with the idea of getting important information instantly during a crisis, even if she isn't at home in front of the TV.

"I'm, like, on the go. I'm not in one place," she said, adding that she was curious about whether the system would work on the subway, where she has suffered from anxiety since the 9/11 attacks.

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Citation: Cellphone alert system announced in NYC (2011, May 10) retrieved 18 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2011-05-cell-nyc.html>

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