

Emergency Notification at The Texas School for the Deaf

By Diana Poepelmeyer



There's an old saying in Texas: "If you don't like the weather, wait five minutes." In five minutes, the skies in Texas can turn from tame to a tempest. Currently it's tornado and flash flood season, and the Texas School for the Deaf (TSD) must be able to notify staff and students, both hearing and deaf, of what to do in case of weather-related emergencies or any other calamity that might head our way. After reviewing a number of options for emergency notification, TSD has settled on an arrangement of components that are multifunctional (and therefore cost-effective) and accessible to both deaf and hearing individuals.

While fire alarm strobe lights with an accompanying audible alarm are used to signal fire emergencies, Texas School for the Deaf uses a separate array of strobe lights, along with televisions and computers to inform staff and students of all other types of emergency situations. The blue, yellow, and clear strobe lights are located throughout the entire campus, indoors and out, and can be used to signal both routine and emergency situations. Flashing blue lights are used on a daily basis to indicate class change time, while yellow and clear strobes are used only for emergencies.



When the yellow strobe flashes, staff and students know to check either their computers or their televisions. Using Apple Remote Desktop Software, our designated emergency notification personnel can freeze and take control of all computer screens on campus and insert text that describes the nature of the emergency and appropriate actions to be taken. For example, staff and students may be directed to more secure parts of buildings when tornadoes threaten, or they may be notified that all homebound buses will be delayed until further notice when there is flash flooding. Using Videonics Personal Title Maker, these same text messages can appear as captions on the campus's closed circuit broadcasts over Time Warner lines. When the yellow strobe flashes, staff and students with access to a television turn to Channel 6, which is assigned the sole function of emergency broadcasts.

Like the strobe lights and Apple Remote Desktop, Videonics Personal Title Maker has both routine and emergency applications. It is most commonly used for making daily announcements and for captioning videos shown on TSD campus channels, but when paired with the flashing yellow strobes, it becomes a vital component of our emergency notification system.



The final piece of this system is the clear strobe light that signals the end of the emergency and indicates that all is clear to resume normal operations.

To date, the TSD emergency notification system has not been tested under real circumstances and we would be happy to keep it that way. However, should we be faced with a situation in which everyone needs information immediately, we feel that we have pieced together a system that is affordable, multifunctional, and, most importantly, will get the job of emergency notification done. The accomplishment of getting this system in place was no easy task as accessibility for all and cost were two factors that repeatedly nullified one system or another. Only with a group of dedicated individuals thinking outside the box of typical emergency notification systems were we able to come up with our current arrangement.



If you, your school, or your community find yourself in the similar predicament of trying to establish an emergency warning system for deaf and hard-of-hearing individuals or if you need informational videos on an array of emergency preparation topics, the Captioned Media Program is available to help. Their collection of captioned videos has titles related to first aid, fire safety, medical and health topics, and personal safety, all accessible to both deaf and hearing individuals. For more information on this free program, visit <http://www.cfv.org> or call 1-800-237-6213 (VOICE) or 1-800-237-6819 (TTY).

(Thanks to Jim Johnston, Facilities Manager at TSD, who provided information for this article.)

About the Author

Diana Poeppelmeyer, Ph.D. is currently Coordinator of the Educational Resource Center on Deafness at Texas School for the Deaf. She has worked in the field of education of the deaf since 1976 and has taught at the college, high school, middle school, preschool, and parent-infant level.

