Automated Messages

# PURPOSE

*Automated messages take many forms. Developing the content for advisories requires careful planning. This information addresses automated messages specifically for drinking water advisories.*

# DIRECTIONS

*Review the information about automated messages. Be sure your communication plan addresses automated messages specific to the water system and community capabilities and tools. Consult your primacy agency for specific requirements.*

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Automated broadcast notification is used to send messages quickly to large numbers of people. Broadcast notification systems, use a wide variety of commercially available systems that include the following:

* **Voice:** Delivering messages by prerecorded or synthesized voice is suited for brief messages. Automated systems like Reverse 911 can be programmed to leave messages on answering machines if there is no answer.
* **Text (SMS):** Short Messaging Service (SMS) delivers messages of up to 160 characters to cell phones.
* **E-mail:** E-mail is suitable for more detailed messages and can be sent to large groups relatively quickly. E-mail is delivered over the Internet, which is typically a reliable network unless there is a power outage.

***Note: SMS and e-mail systems cannot guarantee delivery to a contact.***

## Effective broadcast systems require:

1. Accurate contact information.
2. Delivery to a relevant contact point (e.g., reaching a cell phone versus a home landline).
3. Simple, concise language.
4. Coordination with other communication tools to provide access to more detailed information (e.g., website, customer call center).
5. **Coordinate with other tools**

Automated messages are useful tools in combination with press releases, door hangers, call center information, website information, and other outreach tools. These brief messages are useful in building awareness but are inadequate to provide all the information customers need to receive.

Automated Messages, continued

Accurate Contact Information

A notification system is only as good as the contact data. Uploading contact data is not ideal; data can be inaccurate (entry errors), false (purposefully wrong data), or invalid (phone number has changed or been disconnected). This is more likely when data are uploaded from customer records or purchased phone lists, or gathered from available databases. Even converting data from enhanced 911 systems to Reverse 911 programs will not assure accurate contact information. Automatically entering contact data into a system also has problems. Notification system vendors are wary of violating anti-spam laws and blacklisting.

**Opt-in** data collection can provide and validate content for notification. Individuals can be invited to join a list on a website, or indicate their interest when opening an account. This option can make it easier for subscribers to update their own contact information. This improves the results and reach of a broadcast. Opt-in processes for collecting data help protect the provider from unlawful use, because each recipient is giving the notification provider permission for future contact.

Timing

Automated notification systems are quick, but not instantaneous. Time is required:

* To prepare the message
* To direct the message to appropriate audiences (e.g., customers in specific subsections of the distribution system)
* To distribute the advisory
  + Voice systems may only make 1,000 calls per hour
  + E-mail or text message distribution to similar numbers occurs in minutes, and
* For the recipient to listen to or read the message and take action.

Content

The purpose of an automated broadcast notification is to prompt people to seek information and take appropriate action. Messages for automated notification systems must be simple and concise. It is not practical to use language from standard public notification templates. Because these messages must be short, they cannot convey the detail required in EPA’s Public Notification Rule.

Key elements of abbreviated messages related to water quality concerns are:

* + Whom the message is from,
  + What actions consumers should take,
  + Whether alternative water supplies are available, and
  + Where consumers can obtain additional information (e.g., telephone number, website).

Automated Messages, continued

1. **Abbreviated Message Template— Boil Water Advisory**

The [name of water system] is asking customers to boil tap water or use bottled water.

For more information, go to [www.watersystemwebsite.org] or call [###-###-####].

**Abbreviated Message Template— End of Boil Water Advisory**

[Name of water system] customers no longer need to boil tap water. For more information, go to [www.watersystemwebsite.org] or call [###-###-####].