CASE STUDY

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DELGADO COMMUNITY COLLEGE
ALERTING AND INFORMING A COMMUTER CAMPUS POPULATION THROUGH HURRICANE SEASON

Delgado
COMMUNITY COLLEGE

CLIENT: Delgado Community College

LOCATION: New Orleans, LA

CAMPUS: Commuter campus, 7-site locations, 14,500 students from a five parish region

CHALLENGE: Quickly communicate emergency alerts during hurricane season and beyond to staff and students via a variety of communication channels.

SOLUTION: Omnilert

RESULTS: Informed students and empowered staff before, during & after an aggressive Gulf Coast storm season.

Closing the loop of communication between college faculty, administrators, staff and students in an emergency – wherever they are located – has become a mission critical objective for our nation's college and universities.

In hurricane-threatened locations such as New Orleans, fast-paced storms with shifting paths means that college administrators need to be able to react quickly and communicate emergency plans decisively with on-the-go college populations.

This is why Delgado Community College, Louisiana's largest and oldest community college, turned to Omnilert's emergency notification system to link its students and staff with emergency information via text, email, and voicemail in anticipation of the aggressive 2008 hurricane season.

THE CHALLENGE: ANTICIPATING NATURE'S FURY

June 1st is the official start of the hurricane season. For the senior staff and administrators at Delgado Community College (DCC), this

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date was also a deadline for the selection and implementation of a college-wide emergency notification system that would provide a communication bridge between DCC's Hurricane Emergency Preparedness Team and the entire college staff and student population during the storm season and year-round.

DCC's Hurricane Emergency Preparedness Team realized early on in their emergency notification planning that traditional communication channels, even relatively modern ones such as email, were limited. As a result, the College's Information Systems Council commissioned an emergency notification subcommittee to research, recommend, implement and test a text messaging solution for the College.

The Emergency Notification Team, led by DCC Assistant Vice-Chancellor/Chief Information Officer, Thomas Lovince, knew that to be effective, any notification system had to address the challenges of reliably and effectively reaching its large and commuter college campus body of students and staff across seven disparate locations, most of whom rely wholly on cell phones to stay current and in touch.

In addition, it was a critical requirement for DCC that any system was fully-redundant and hosted off-site to ensure uptime during storm evacuations and the resulting loss of power. The team also needed a solution that was web-based and easily accessible from any Internet connection. In a worst case scenario, they needed a solution that could be activated by making a simple phone call.

THE SOLUTION: RELIABLE, REDUNDANT, AFFORDABLE EMERGENCY NOTIFICATION

In early 2008, Delgado Community College turned to Omnilert to support their 2008 Emergency Notification Strategy. Omnilert provides higher education institutions with a self-service and full-service mass notification system that allows schools to send time-sensitive messages to students, faculty, and staff. Omnilert is a web-based system offering a centralized interface to instantly and simultaneously send advisories to thousands of people anywhere, anytime, on any device.

"We needed a broad, comprehensive technology solution for emergency messaging that gave us as many channels as possible to communicate alerts and notifications about college evacuation plans and re-openings. Omnilert was the only provider who met all our selection criteria – giving us a solution that offered ease-of-use and reliability, as well as the option for integration with other notification technologies such as digital signage and desktop alerts down the road," said Lovince.

"A critical value add in selecting Omnilert was the peace of mind that its offsite data center-hosted solution afforded us. When a storm hits, we have to assume that we will have access to nothing, so if and when we need absolute redundancy to administer alerts when the college systems are down, as well as the failsafe reliability of an SMS-based text delivery solution that performs when all other delivery mechanisms are jammed. Omnilert gives us all of that and more," Lovince continued.

THE RESULT: COMMUNICATING WITH CONFIDENCE THROUGH THE STORMS

By the time the 2008 hurricane season was underway, DCC had the confidence of a fully-redundant emergency notification system that would sustain instant one-to-many alert services through any storm or emergency scenario.

Playing a major part in the success of the Omnilert deployment was the Emergency Notification Team's commitment to project path planning and management of critical tasks. From understanding the capabilities and the limitations of all available communication channels, to thorough system testing, and aggressive marketing of the solution that ensured maximum buy-in from students and staff.

The system and Lovince's team were soon put to the test. The first significant storm of the season – Hurricane Fay – had little impact on New Orleans; however its threat, together with a concerted effort by DCC to increase student enrollment to receive

Omnilert notifications saw open enrollment soar from 2,000 students in early August to nearly 7,000 by the time Hurricane Gustav entered the Gulf of Mexico on August 26.

Beginning Wednesday, August 27, the DCC Hurricane Emergency Preparedness Team met daily to monitor the situation. As the storm tracked towards New Orleans, DCC put its Hurricane Emergency plan into effect monitoring conditions and preparing facilities for college closure. Communications via email and website postings were provided to faculty, staff and students to inform them that the Hurricane Emergency Preparedness Team was keeping an eye on the storm and further communications would follow regarding college closure.

On Friday, August 29, the decision was made to close the college and DCC used Omnilert to send text and email alerts to students and staff. The DCC Hurricane Emergency Preparedness Team was soon evacuated to the DCC Emergency Operations Center in northern Louisiana, where Omnilert alerts continued to be sent via the Web to maintain student and staff communications throughout this critical time.

On Monday, September 1st, as Gustav was making landfall, a second emergency notification was thought judicious as the college announced plans to remain closed for another week to allow for re-entry and recovery plans in New Orleans. This kept students and staff from returning too soon and informed them about reopening status, while allowing recovery teams to focus on priorities instead of directing traffic or answering questions. Once physical damage assessments for each location were complete, a final notification was issued confirming the resumption of classes.

Within days the Hurricane Emergency Preparedness Team was reassembled as Hurricane Ike, soon to be the third most destructive hurricane to hit the U.S., swirled in the Gulf. When it made landfall in Galveston, TX, on September 13, the Hurricane Emergency Preparedness Team had already closed the college and used Omnilert notifications in four instances to alert students.

"Before Omnilert, our capability was mostly limited to students and staff hearing about closures on local news programs or calling our switchboard. This Omnilert is a much more proactive approach to connecting and communicating directly with our students.

PLANNING FOR THE FUTURE

Looking beyond the successful deployment of Omnilert and its proven value in delivering quick and reliable multimodal campus alerts during hurricane season, DCC has its eyes on future integration of Omnilert with other emergency notification mechanisms, such as digital signage and desktop alerts.

With this visionary layered approach to building a college-wide emergency notification infrastructure, Lovince is hoping that DCC sets the standard that others choose to follow.

"We pride ourselves on having used both technology from Omnilert and the skills of our Emergency Notification Team to deliver a comprehensive solution for reaching DCC's large and commuter campus population during times of crisis. DCC has set a successful standard for emergency notification policies and student/staff safety that I hope other institutions can learn from," said Lovince.

About Omnilert

Omnilert is the pioneer in emergency notification and management solutions and a leader in the higher education market. Its reliable product offerings provide organizations with peace of mind by streamlining instantaneous communications and response efforts to promote safety, security, and compliance.

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