CTIA and ATIS Have Concerns on Proposal for Wireless Alert Templates
June 17, 2024 by Howard Buskirk

CTIA and other commenters raised concerns about an FCC notice seeking comment on rules for implementing multilingual wireless emergency alerts. Comments were due last week in dockets 15-91 and 15-94 on a notice from the FCC Public Safety Bureau (see 2405130047).

CTIA said concerns are widespread about using preinstalled templates and whether they’re “suitable” for delivering alerts. If the bureau moves forward, “there are many more issues that will need to be considered than what is set forth in the Public Notice,” CTIA said. The notice doesn’t “clearly address the range of technical developments that may be necessary to manage, update, securely store, and make templates available to device manufacturers, operating system providers, Participating [carriers] and Alert Originators,” the group said: “In particular, standards bodies will need to develop a mechanism to signal devices which template should be displayed, and when.”

ATIS noted that AI offers advances beyond using templates. As such, it recommended against templates for Amber alerts or active shooter incidents “because event-specific details are critical to the effectiveness of these alerts; static instructions for these alert types could be ineffective or even harmful.” Alert templates including “shelter in place” or “evacuate now” instructions could be “useful but instead likely cause confusion and panic and increase milling,” ATIS said. “‘All-clear’ templates that do not specify which emergency has concluded may create confusion and panic, particularly if an ‘all-clear’ is sent for a single event when multiple events are active.”

Should templates be adopted, industry and standards groups will have a lot of work ahead of them, ATIS said. Moreover, the FCC’s proposed 30-month deadline for implementing templates in English and 13 other languages, plus American Sign Language, “does not provide enough time for necessary design work, updates to ATIS standards and [3rd Generation Partnership Project] specifications, development, testing, integration testing and end-to-end testing, and first deployment for support of static templates,” it warned.

The Federal Emergency Management Agency supported the move to offer alerts in multiple languages, saying it will “promote advances in diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility.” FEMA recommended that the FCC consider “additional message content, as appropriate,” in the proposed templates. The Research Foundation for the State University of New York at Albany “determined that hazard information, location, time, source, and guidance information increases message recipients’ understanding, belief, and personalization and improves (public) protective action decision-making,” FEMA said about a study it commissioned.
Various agencies in Colorado stressed the importance of local control. “Due to the unique geography in Colorado, and the substantial public information and community engagement undertaken by the undersigned agencies (and other alert originators in Colorado), the inclusion of regionally important information in emergency alerts is of the upmost importance,” the filing said: “Colorado alert originators must maintain the capability, authority, and autonomy to issue and translate emergency alerts as they determine is necessary and effective for their jurisdictions.”

Several commenters urged adding languages beyond those listed in the notice, with the Port of Seattle, for example, suggesting Somali, Ukrainian, Amharic, Punjabi, Japanese, Cambodian, Laotian, Farsi, Tigrinya, Oromo and Samoan. The notice lists Arabic, Chinese, French, German, Haitian Creole, Hindi, Italian, Korean, Portuguese, Russian, Spanish, Tagalog and Vietnamese.

“The work the FCC is doing to expand” WEAs “to include more languages is critical,” said Restoring Dignity, a group serving refugees. It noted that 322,000 Burmese-speaking refugees have fled to the U.S. as have 400,000 Nepali speakers. Q’anjob’al is a Mayan language that at least 77,000 people in the U.S. speak, the group said.