



Nassau County Introduces Smartphone App for School Emergencies

Public school alert system will notify first responders of a major event

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Nassau County is introducing a smartphone-based emergency alert system to some of its public schools that officials say will instantly notify police in the event of a mass shooting or any other major crisis.

Three years after county officials said public schools would be equipped with handheld panic alarms after the killing of 26 at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut in 2012, school roiled the nation, the county is instead beginning to roll out the \$1.48 million cellular-phone-based application in about a dozen of its 56 school districts. It has plans to eventually link all the county's public and private schools and private entities - such as shopping centers - to the system.

County Executive Edward Mangano said county officials are planning seminars to reach out to school districts and other facilities to sell them on the system, which would be provided at no cost to the schools, many of which already have closed-circuit surveillance cameras. He blamed the three-year lag time from the first announcement to the most recent plan on "county bureaucracy" and changes in technology.

"This allows the responding officers to have a real-time view of what's going on in the affected facility," Mangano said. "That information will shorten the time in which to make an apprehension or terminate the action."

The application, installed on smartphones, gives the user the ability to set off the alert for an active shooter or to call for service from fire, police or medical responders by touching the corresponding icon, according to a demonstration of the system.

A selected number of personnel in each building will have the application on their phones. When activated, it will instantaneously alert the police department's Communications Bureau in Westbury through a 911 call, as well as send text alerts to selected police and county personnel, beginning the automatic deployment of police and first responders.

The system will give operators the precise location of the caller through the phone's GPS. To avoid inadvertent activations or potential abuses of the system, the application won't work outside of a set distance from the designated building, officials said.

Inside the Communications Bureau, where 911 calls are fielded, the school's floor plan overlaid on Google maps immediately pops up on a supervisor's computer screen to give the viewer the location where the emergency is unfolding.

The operator also has access to internal surveillance cameras. This gives first responders real-time eyes inside the school, which police say will provide them with an advantage over a shooter. The alert will also be broadcast over a loudspeaker in the bureau.

"This is unique in that all of these features come directly here to the police department for immediate operational advantages," said Chief of Department Steven Skrynecki, who said other systems route calls to another entity, such as an alarm company, which would then contact police.

Skrynecki said he envisions police supervisors eventually having access to the cameras on their smartphones or other electronic devices and on computers in officers' patrol cars.

So far, 13 school districts - Bethpage, Farmingdale, Herricks, Island Park, Levittown, Lynbrook, Manhasset, Merrick, BOCES, North Shore, Oyster Bay, Sewanhaka and Valley Stream - have signed the required memorandum of understanding for police to access their camera systems, said Brian Nevin, a Mangano spokesman. Several others have tested the system and expressed interest, and Nevin said an estimated 20 districts will be ready to go live on the system by the end of September.

Joseph Famularo, president of the Nassau County Council of School Superintendents and Bellmore's schools superintendent, said the system has been tested in his district and others with positive results.

"The concept and the potential is, I think, outstanding," Famularo said. "I will be promoting that it's very positive. I don't see a downside to this."

But he said signing up for the system will likely require board of education approvals, which his school system has not received.

"It's a lot of details," he said. "You have to make sure everything is done correctly. You have to follow procedure."

Jim Saitta, director of school facilities in the North Merrick school district, said he's in the process of uploading pictures and other information to the system and hopes to have it running in the next couple of months. He said it complements security measures the district already has in place in its three school buildings.

"Heaven forbid there was an active shooter in the building," he said. ". . . The police are able to sign into the computer and have access to our cameras. . . . that would definitely save lives."

Nassau acting Police Commissioner Thomas Krumpter said meetings with the school districts have yielded "very positive feedback" and he plans to demonstrate the system when he attends a meeting of the Major Cities Chiefs Association in November in San Diego.

"There's nobody that's doing anything remotely close to what we're doing here," Krumpter said. "Someone may have cameras interface, somebody may have a panic alarm, but in terms of the complete interoperability of everything working together, there's nothing like it anywhere. This is a game changer."

But the commissioner acknowledged he's concerned there won't be universal buy-in.

"To me, honestly, that's the biggest risk here: They don't have the desire to enter into an agreement with the county for this particular item," Krumpter said. "It's a no-cost item for them, so it's not like it's a financial lift. If there's a philosophical belief, to me, is the only risk that there is."

School district approval has been an issue in the past.

After running into a series of roadblocks to the panic alarm device - a handheld device akin to a car key fob - that the county first proposed, including contractual issues with a vendor and a lack of enthusiasm from some school officials, county officials abandoned that device and opted for the phone-based application.

The county had budgeted \$3.2 million in grant money for about 4,000 of the push-button devices, which have a two-way microphone to connect to 911.

Deputy County Executive for Public Safety Chuck Ribando, who worked closely with Skrynecki on perfecting the new system, said the money and the devices won't be wasted - they will be deployed for use by domestic violence and store robbery victims.

Skrynecki said a top concern among the districts is the department's ability to access live video feeds, and the potential for abuse. But Skrynecki said there are measures that will prevent that

from happening.

Massapequa-based IntraLogic Solutions was awarded the contract and built the software. Subcontractor Rave Mobile Safety, of Framingham, Massachusetts, created the phone application.

Lee Mandel, IntraLogic CEO, said 51 of Nassau's school districts already use forms of his software, easing integration of the systems.

Mandel said his company also has provided similar services to 30 school districts in Suffolk County and others in Florida, Texas and upstate New York, but none is as comprehensive as what he designed for Nassau County, which was heavily influenced by feedback - and demands - from the police department.

"This is a custom product built just for the police department," Mandel said. He said it is the first of its kind nationally because of its inclusion of the application alarm, camera access, instant access to police 911 and the ability to lock and unlock doors.

"We can literally follow the shooter in the building and determine where they are, so by the time the first responders get on site, I can literally remotely release the door," Mandel said.

Skrynecki said he "cannot imagine" that every school district wouldn't want the system.

"We'll be offering this program to all of the major businesses in Nassau county, shopping malls, movie theaters, any place we look at as a potential soft target for terrorist activities. It's going to be a slow roll out - unfortunately we can't say, OK, everyone's online."

How the app works

- School districts, in conjunction with the police, will determine which staff members will get the application on their phones, depending on factors including the size of the school.
- Once the "active shooter" icon is pressed on the cellphone app, a 911 call is initiated and text alerts are sent to designated police officials.
- Simultaneously, an alarm sounds inside the police department's Communications Bureau, or 911 center, in Westbury and key information about the school appears on a collection of computer screens, allowing access to live cameras inside the school.
- Officials would also have the ability to lock and unlock doors in the school building.

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