

PUBLIC INFORMATION & WARNING

Annex C of the Knox County Emergency Operations Plan

4/23/2026



For all Agencies, Participant Organizations and Staff serving Knox County

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Primary Agency: Knox County Emergency Management Agency

Support Agencies: Knox County Commissioners
Knox County 9-1-1
Knox County Sheriff
Pathways/2-1-1

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Purpose

The purpose of this annex is to establish uniform policies for the effective development, coordination and dissemination of public information and warnings to the community due to an emergency or disaster.

During disasters, the flow of public information concerning the event and government's response to save lives and to protect human health, property, and the environment must be consolidated. The descriptions and warnings provided to the public must reflect the most accurate information available.

This annex further ensures that all public information and warning efforts are culturally and linguistically appropriate, accessible, and inclusive of the whole Knox County community, including individuals with access and functional needs. Public messaging will be developed and disseminated in a manner that does not create barriers to understanding due to language, disability, age, socioeconomic status, or technological access.

B. Scope

This annex has been developed to provide guidance to all agencies, jurisdictions and organizations serving Knox County who have a role in providing public information and warning.

C. Policy

It is the policy of Knox County to develop plans and procedures that incorporate the concepts of the National Incident Management System (NIMS), the Incident Command System (ICS) and the National Preparedness Goal.

Knox County will ensure that all public information and warning strategies incorporate principles of equity, accessibility, and inclusion. This includes providing information in multiple formats and languages as appropriate and ensuring compliance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) and other applicable laws and standards.

D. Core Capabilities

This annex addresses the following Core Capabilities as defined in the National Preparedness Goal:

- Operational Coordination
- Public Information and Warning

II. SITUATION AND ASSUMPTIONS

A. Overview

Knox County is at risk to many hazards. Depending on the nature and magnitude of the emergency, different levels of public information and warnings will be required.

Knox County includes populations with diverse communication needs, including individuals with limited English proficiency (LEP), disabilities (hearing, vision, cognitive, and mobility), older adults, and individuals without access to traditional communication technologies. Effective public information strategies must account for these populations to ensure equitable access to life-saving information.

B. Situation

1. Public information may be the primary requirement during an emergency. This may occur when the public perceives the issue to be a bigger than what is actually happening due to media coverage, rumors or other misinformation. These misperceptions can cause unnecessary distress among citizens, provoke counter-productive public actions, and impede response or recovery efforts.
2. Knox County will utilize multiple methods to provide warnings to the public. These methods may include, but are not limited to: Wireless Emergency Notification Systems (WENS), Reverse 9-1-1 Systems, the Integrated Public Alert Warning System (IPAWS), the Emergency Alert System (EAS), weather radios, outdoor warning sirens, radio broadcasts, public address systems, social media, and door to door notifications.
3. Once the initial warning is accomplished, Public Information Officers (PIO's) have the task of keeping the public informed of what to do to prevent injury or property damage, and what actions the local government is taking to address the situation. Normal means of communications may not be available. In those situations, nontraditional means of communicating with the public must be established and utilized.
4. PIOs focus on managing rumors and providing accurate and timely information using all appropriate dissemination methods.
5. The general public and media will demand information about the emergency situation and instructions on proper protection/response actions.
6. A variety of communication options exist. Not all may be available. PIOs will use available methods depending on the circumstances. Telephone communication may be sporadic. Local and regional radio/television stations without emergency power may also be off the air.

7. The emergency organization will become overwhelmed by the demand for information if a sufficient number of trained staff is not available. Likewise, having little information or inaccurate information will increase anxiety and may cause the public to make poor decisions.
8. If the scale of the disaster requires, a Joint Information Center (JIC) will be established. One preplanned location for the JIC is 11540 Upper Gilchrist Road, Mount Vernon. This will be the central location used to provide briefings to all media representatives, and develop coordinated releases of public information among responders.

C. Assumptions

1. Multiple warning methods will be available to provide warnings to the general public. Public warning messages must be accessible to individuals with disabilities, including those who rely on assistive technologies.
2. A portion of the population may not speak English as their primary language and may require translated messaging.
3. Media resources will provide emergency information to those working, visiting and living in Knox County.
4. News outlets will receive releases from one source in the county. This source will be the incident commander or their PIO, the JIC if established, or from the officially designated county PIO or spokesperson.
5. Partner organizations (e.g., Pathways/2-1-1) will assist in disseminating accessible and culturally appropriate messaging.
6. Each political subdivision that owns warning devices will ensure those devices are maintained and functioning properly.
7. State-level news releases will be coordinated with the Knox County PIO and will not conflict with county-level releases.
8. Rumor control procedures directed by the Knox County PIO will help prevent incorrect information from affecting emergency response activities.
9. If electrical systems fail during the emergency, protective action information will be announced door-to-door and/or by bullhorns or public address systems by first responder personnel. Some individuals may lack access to digital communication platforms and require alternative outreach methods.

III. CONCEPT OF OPERATIONS

A. Overview

The Knox County 9-1-1 Dispatch Center may be notified of warnings by various sources. Upon receipt of a warning, 9-1-1 will notify the appropriate governmental officials and emergency response personnel utilizing established communication protocols. If needed, 9-1-1 personnel will consult with the Knox County Emergency Management Agency (EMA) Director or designee on appropriate warning and notification.

Knox County PIOs prepare and distribute disaster information to the public before, during, and after disaster and emergency events, using all available and appropriate media and

communication platforms. Public information will be phased in accordance with the size and scope of the emergency or disaster.

Initially, public information will be the responsibility of the on scene incident command. If the need for public information becomes too great for on scene personnel, the incident commander will request PIO support from the Knox County Emergency Management Agency (KCEMA) Director or designee. If the EOC is established, the public information function will be transferred to the County EOC.

Because of the nature of the incident(s), a PIO Team may be needed at the scene of an incident to work with the media to support an Incident Commander.

In a large-scale disaster, the PIO function will be conducted from a JIC which may include multiple jurisdictions. The purpose of the JIC is not to control the activities of other jurisdictions, but to provide a forum for the sharing of information between jurisdictions, insuring de-confliction of information and providing a central point for the media to get information.

9-1-1 will notify the general public utilizing WENS, Reverse 9-1-1 Systems, and outdoor warning sirens. Radio broadcasts and public address systems also can be used as necessary. Additionally, the Knox County EMA Director or designee may utilize IPAWS and EAS to further alert the public. EMA will also work with the PIO to inform the public through traditional and social media. When necessary, EMA will also work with emergency responders in coordinating door-to-door notifications.

Public information will be developed using plain language principles and formatted to ensure accessibility across multiple platforms, including visual, auditory, and multilingual formats. Messaging will be coordinated to ensure consistency while also being adaptable to meet the needs of specific populations within Knox County.

B. Warning Systems

The following are warning systems utilized by Knox County.

1. Emergency Alert System

The Emergency Alert System (EAS) has been designed to provide an operational public warning capability at the national, state and local government. EAS uses the facilities and personnel of non-government communications industry on a voluntary basis. It is operated in a controlled manner by industry under appropriate government regulations. It consists of broadcast stations licensed by the FCC that participating in the EAS.

The local EAS stations are part of Ohio's EAS and they broadcast information of peacetime disasters or emergencies especially weather, watches, warnings, and other natural or man-made disaster information. The local stations are:

- a. WQIO - 93.7 FM Mount Vernon, OH

- b. WMVO - 100.9 FM Mount Vernon, OH

2. Integrated Public Alert and Warning System

The Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) is designed to integrate and modernize the nation's existing population warning systems into one modern network and incorporate newer forms of communication such as cellular telephone and text message, satellite and cable television, electronic billboards and the internet. IPAWS is funded and managed by FEMA.

Knox County EMA has entered into an agreement with FEMA to access IPAWS through a third party vendor. The third party vendor utilizes their existing systems to send alerts to all IPAWS messaging outlets.

3. Wireless Emergency Notification Systems

The Wireless Emergency Notification Systems (WENS) is a third party vendor emergency mass notification system that allows 9-1-1 and EMA the ability to contact residents and businesses via phone messages, text messages, and emails in case of an emergency.

The system can be used as a reverse 9-1-1 system in which the system utilizes the telephone companies' 911 database to contact land-line telephone numbers, whether listed or unlisted. If the call is picked up by an answering machine, the system will leave a recorded message. If the number called is busy or does not answer, the system will redial the number up to 4 times in an attempt to deliver the message.

Persons wanting to receive the alerts on their cell phone or by email must register those telephone numbers and/or e-mail addresses by completing the on-line registration.

Outdoor Warning Sirens

Outdoor warning sirens are designed to warn persons who are outdoors of emergencies. Sirens are activated by the Knox County 9-1-1 Center. Sirens can also be operated remotely from other locations.

C. Preparedness Activities

To ensure effective public information is provided to those living and working in Knox County, the PIO in conjunction with the EMA Director will coordinate the following activities:

1. Develop and maintain relationships with local media for the dissemination of emergency public information.
2. Develop and maintain relationships with media and emergency management directors in adjacent counties in preparation for coordination of information during multi-county emergencies.
3. Develop and maintain relationships with local emergency response organizations for the coordinated release of public information through the county PIO.

4. Maintain/update listings of news media contacts and capabilities.
5. Identify and maintain a registry of community partners who serve populations with access and functional needs.
6. Provide media contacts with up-to-date hazard specific emergency public information that is ready for immediate release in event of an emergency.
7. Maintain an adequate supply of pamphlets and brochures containing hazard specific guidance that can be distributed to the public.
8. Train support staff and emergency responders in the dissemination of emergency public information in the event of power failures.
9. Ensure that the county JIC has the necessary equipment for briefings and that the location of the JIC is known to media representatives.
10. Provide regular presentations to county residents on protective actions to take during emergencies.
11. Develop pre-scripted emergency messages in multiple languages commonly used within Knox County.
12. Coordinate with community-based organizations to assist with culturally appropriate messaging and outreach.
13. Maintain access to translation and interpretation services for emergency communications.
14. Ensure all digital communications (websites, social media, alerts) meet accessibility standards (e.g., Web Content Accessibility Guidelines compliance).

D. Response Activities

In response to a disaster or emergency, the PIO will coordinate the following activities:

1. Coordinate with officials and with EOC representatives the release of information to the public describing the appropriate situational updates and the emergency services available; making sure that the information is in multiple languages as appropriate to the affected population as needed.
2. Refer inquiries about missing or injured persons to the Mass Care Coordinator or the Knox County American Red Cross representative.
3. Direct, coordinate and supervise the release of all public information through the JIC.
4. The JIC will produce accessible formats such as captioned video, audio messaging, large print, and screen-reader compatible text.
5. The JIC will coordinate with Pathways/2-1-1 and other partner organizations to reach vulnerable and underserved populations.
6. Provide regular briefings to the elected officials, EOC representatives, and the media.
7. Relay instructions on measures which will save lives and limit property damage.
8. Maintain a constant flow of official news through media resources in order to inhibit the development of rumors and panic and monitor communication effectiveness and adjust strategies to address gaps in reach or comprehension.
9. Utilize trusted community leaders and organizations to amplify messaging within specific cultural groups.
10. Brief Ohio EMA PIO on county-level activities.

11. Inform citizens of availability of disaster assistance.

IV. ORGANIZATION AND ASSIGNMENT OF RESPONSIBILITIES

A. General Organization

Knox County has predesignated PIOs. These lead PIO's may request additional personnel as needed. Those assisting may represent other departments, agencies, other jurisdictions, and may be assigned to handle specific public information functions.

B. Assignment of Responsibilities

1. Public Information Officer

The Public Information Officer (PIO) will provide guidance as appropriate to other departments/agencies on the release of emergency related information. The PIO's responsibilities include:

- Ensure that the public within the affected area receives complete, accurate, and consistent information about life safety procedures, public health advisories, relief and assistance programs and other vital information and verify that all messaging adheres to plain language standards to maximize comprehension.
- Ensure all public information is culturally appropriate, linguistically accessible, and compliant with ADA requirements and coordinate translation and interpretation services as needed by engaging with community organizations representing access and functional needs populations.
- Ensure that all rumors are responded to in a timely manner and with factual information
- Coordinate media releases with Public Information Officers at incidents or representing other affected emergency response agencies as required
- Develop the format for press conferences, in conjunction with the EOC Manager
- Maintain a positive relationship with the media representatives and respond to all media requests
- Supervise the Public Information function and the JIC, if activated

2. Joint Information Center (JIC)

When necessary, a JIC will be established to coordinate the handling of emergency public information operations for Knox County. The JIC is a central location (or a virtual meeting) that facilitates the coordination of information across all involved agencies and jurisdictions. It may be established at various levels of government, at incident sites, or can be components of federal, state, territorial or regional. A JIC will be established at a suitable location, removed from the EOC, but in close proximity to provide for effective management of emergency public information functions.

3. National Weather Service

The National Weather Service (NWS) of the U.S. Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) is the government agency responsible for the declaration and dissemination of "Severe Weather Watches and Warnings."

- The Cleveland Office of the NWS serves as the weather forecast office for Knox County.
- NOAA Weather Radio Stations, provide continuous broadcasts of the latest weather information directly from the NWS offices.
- All Ohio law enforcement agencies with Law Enforcement Automated Data System (LEADS) terminal equipment, receive rapid dissemination of NOAA severe weather warnings.

4. 9-1-1 Dispatch Center

9-1-1 serves as the continuous 24-hour warning station to alert key officials and activate the public warning systems.

5. 2-1-1

Pathways/2-1-1 serves as the Crisis Hotline & Information Center for Knox County and is available 24 hours a day, 7 days a week to provide information and support services to county residents.

Additionally, 2-1-1 serves as a critical partner in disseminating accessible and multilingual information and connecting individuals with access and functional needs to appropriate resources during emergencies.

6. Knox County EMA

EMA is the agency responsible for the integration, coordination and management of County's warning systems.

7. Local Emergency Responders

Law enforcement, fire, and emergency medical service departments may utilize their personnel and vehicles with public address systems to provide warnings for any disaster or threat by going street by street or door by door as necessary.

V. DIRECTION AND CONTROL

Knox County EMA is the agency responsible for direction and control of County's warning systems.

VI. CONTINUITY OF GOVERNMENT

- A. The line of succession for the Knox County Notification and Warning Officer is as follows:
 - 1. EMA Director
 - 2. EMA Deputy Director
 - 3. 9-1-1 Operations Director
 - 4. Knox County Sheriff
- B. During any activation of the EOC, those predesignated as a county PIO group will serve as the lead PIO. If not available, a PIO from another organization who is part of the PIO team or from surrounding counties will assume the duties of the lead PIO.

VII. ADMINISTRATION AND LOGISTICS

Timely dissemination of emergency public information and warning is essential. Copies of all emergency public information released will be maintained by the PIO and kept on file with KCEMA. When the EOC is activated, the county PIO on duty will keep a log listing all media contacts made, press releases issued, incoming and outgoing messages, and any other major PIO functions accomplished during that operational period. The incoming PIO and other EOC command staff should be briefed on activities and needs for the next operational period.

Knox County will maintain resources necessary to support accessible and inclusive communication, including translation services, assistive communication technologies, and partnerships with organizations serving individuals with disabilities and limited English proficiency.

VIII. PLAN DEVELOPMENT AND MAINTENANCE

- A. All political subdivisions and agencies involved in warning operations in Knox County are invited to be involved with review of this annex. Representatives of each are responsible for reviewing this annex and submitting proposed changes to the County EMA Director. These recommendations should be based upon opportunities for improvement identified through exercises, actual events, and changes in organizational structure.
- B. Knox County EMA will coordinate any necessary meetings to review the recommendations identified and incorporate any needed changes to this annex to include any state and federal requirements.
- C. The Knox County EMA will publish and distribute all changes to this annex and forward revisions to all responsible organizations listed in this annex.
- D. All agencies and organizations with responsibilities in warning operations are responsible for developing and maintaining departmental SOPs, mutual aid agreements, and warning equipment.

IX. AUTHORITIES AND REFERENCES

A. Authorities

1. Ohio Revised Code Section 5502.21

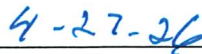
B. References

1. Joint Information System Handbook, E.M.I. 1988.
2. Federal Emergency Management Agency, National Warning System Operations Manual
3. Ohio Emergency Operations Plan, Emergency Support Function # 2, Communications and Information Technology
4. Comprehensive Preparedness Guide 101 (CPG-101)

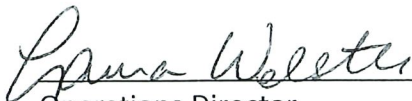
X. AUTHENTICATION



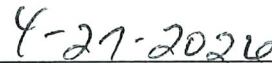
President,
Knox County Board of Commissioners



Date



Operations Director
Knox County 9-1-1



Date



Director
Knox County Emergency Management Agency



Date



Sheriff
Knox County Sheriff's Office



Date