NYC

Emergency
Management

Testimony of Benjamin Krakauer
Director of Watch Command
New York City Department of Emergency Management
Before the New York City Council Technology Committee
October 6, 2016

Good afternoon Chairperson Vacca and members of the Technology Committee. I am Benjamin Krakauer, Director of Watch Command for New York City Emergency Management. I am joined here today by Don Sunderland, Deputy Commissioner for Application Development at the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunications.

It's a privilege to be here today to discuss the Notify NYC program, its history, procedures, and the steps that we have taken and – and are continuing to take – to ensure all New Yorkers have access to official, near real-time information from the City during an emergency.

As you know, the mission of NYC Emergency Management is to plan and prepare for emergencies, to educate the public about preparedness, to coordinate the City's response and recovery operations, and to collect and disseminate critical information to key stakeholders and the public during emergencies. During an emergency, we issue media releases, update social media, provide information to 311, and send messaging to our partners through a variety of distribution networks including Corp Net, which goes to our private sector partners, the Advanced Warning System, which goes to our special needs partners, Citizen Corps, which goes to our non-profit partners, and to all elected officials and community boards through emails and conference calls spearheaded by our Intergovernmental Affairs Unit. Notify NYC is one of the many tools – and one of the most effective methods - we use to provide information to the public.

Notify NYC began as a pilot program in 2007 following the tragic Deutsche Bank fire on Liberty Street. It is designed to provide city residents, businesses, and visitors with near real-time information about emergency activity and possible disruptions in their communities. The program went citywide in 2009 and now has more than 440,000 subscribers. Registration is free and open to anyone who self-registers using their landline phones, mobile phones, instant message or email address, and is also available through social media, including Twitter and our RSS feed. Access to a computer in order to register is not required as registration is also available by calling 311.

All subscribers are automatically enrolled in the Emergency Alert group – messages that direct them to take a protective action, such as evacuate an area for any reason. Outside of that,

subscribers can personalize their alerts by choosing additional notification features targeted to their area or areas of interest and tailored to the category of messages they wish to receive such as significant events like large fires, major mass transit disruptions, major road closures, public health notifications, Department of Education school closures/delay advisories, and emergency suspensions of Alternate Side Parking rules.

In 2014, Notify NYC began incorporating American Sign Language videos with audio and subtitles into many of our messages to ensure the deaf and hard of hearing community were able to receive emergency information. Today, more than 86 of our most commonly issued messages can be issued in a generalized form in the 13 most commonly spoken languages in the City in addition to American Sign Language. The translated version of these messages is available via a hyperlink at the bottom of the Notify NYC e-mail. Additionally, we worked closely with our colleagues at the Department of Information Technology and Telecommunication (DoITT) to make the Notify NYC website and registration portal available in multiple languages. We are in the final stages of making 35 additional messages available in multiple languages, bringing the total to 121.

Since the program's beginning in 2007, Notify NYC has sent out more than 7,500 separate messages.

The current set up is the extent to which we are able to provide language access options without additional personnel and financial resources.

We are currently working with DoITT's insource team on the development of a Notify NYC mobile application that will allow users to get emergency information based on their present location and not based on pre-selected addresses. Development is going well and we hope to be able to release the application to the public in 2017.

With regards to the legislation at hand, we would first like to discuss Section 1A of the proposed bill, where we are directed by City Council to send out messages via the federal government's Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) system in languages other than English. It is important to note that there are limitations beyond our control that impede our ability to fulfill part of this legislation. First, NYC Emergency Management is not the owner of the Wireless Emergency Alert system; it is a system run by the federal government and as users of it we are limited by the rules, regulations, and technical limitations that exist within the system.

In recognition of these limitations, we worked tirelessly over the last year to advocate needed changes to the system and are pleased to report that just last Thursday, the FCC adopted rules strengthening the system. The updated rules will increase the maximum length of WEA messages from 90 to 360 characters; require participating wireless providers to support the inclusion of embedded phone numbers and URLs in all WEA alerts, including WEA Amber Alerts, which will enable the public to click to see a photo or to call authorities; require participating wireless providers to deliver the alerts to more granular geographic areas; create a new class of alerts to convey essential actions to save lives; support transmission of Spanish-language alerts; and make it easier for participants like New York City to test, train personnel, and raise public awareness about the service. Depending on the improvement, wireless carriers

have up to 30 months to implement the new rules. These dates, of course, are subject to change based on any appeals or petitions filed by the carriers.

We are pleased with the new rules adopted by the FCC but are not done advocating for even more change. For example, while the system will now allow us to message in Spanish, it is still not designed to support non-English characters, such as Russian, Chinese, or Arabic. Also, cell phone users do not have, and cannot choose, a language preference.

Operationally, if mandated to provide these alerts in more than one language, this means that recipients of these messages could receive an English message and then several minutes later the Spanish message. It is also possible that, depending on an individual's coverage, that they may only receive the English and/or Spanish version and not both. This concerns us because, with the exception of alerts issued by the President, individuals are permitted to opt out of WEA messages and if people receive multiple messages in a language that is not their own they may opt out of the system and not receive future messages. Also, we cannot control which message they receive first and if a message is received first in a language other than English there may be either panic and confusion, or people will ignore a potentially lifesaving message.

Finally we will continue to advocate that the opt-out option from user cell phones be removed so that there is no question that those targeted to receive an emergency alert will, in fact, receive it. We would welcome the City Council's support as we continue to advocate at the federal level for meaningful improvements to the Wireless Emergency Alert system.

With respect to Section 2A of the proposed bill, which directs us to offer Notify NYC messages in seven languages in a disaggregated form via e-mail, telephone, text message, and internet-based feed, we, again, support the Council's intent and are confident that we can meet the legislation's obligations provided we are given the necessary resources to ensure the messages are crafted correctly and issued in a timely fashion.

Currently we always have a Public Warning Specialist on-duty whose primary mission is to evaluate all of the information coming into Watch Command, our 24x7 operations center, evaluate it against our established action thresholds, craft messages, and send them out to the public. With emergency messaging, time is of the essence, and we currently have an average message issuance time of 7 minutes with 87.5% of our messages being issued in 10 minutes or less. In order to ensure that not one, but seven, messages to different delivery points, are sent out within that timeframe we would need to have two Public Warning Specialists on-duty at all times. Financial resources would be needed to support pre-translation of messages, increased vendor costs for sending out messages in multiple languages, and costs associated with an expanded user base.

To be clear, under the paradigm described, we would still be sending out a generalized version of each message. For example, the Spanish versions of the message about a road closure impacting the FDR Drive would include everything in Spanish except the location of the closure, which would be inserted in English.

In order to do true, real-time message translation we would need to have personnel on-duty 24x7 who could speak, read, and write each of the seven most commonly spoken languages. We feel

3

strongly that such an effort is cost prohibitive and would require, in addition to more than 40 additional employees, an expansion of our operating space. That said, we are committed to attempting to recruit bilingual or multilingual staff for future Public Warning Specialist positions which will allow us, where possible, to offer directly translated messages in some languages.

In summary, we support both the intent and content of the legislation that would impact our Notify NYC program and, even without legislation, have already started moving in that direction as both technology and resources permit. Language access to emergency information has been and continues to be of critical importance to Emergency Management. Ready New York – our flagship public emergency preparedness program – educational material is available in 13 languages and has been since 2009. However we need to be very clear that without additional personnel and financial resources we will be unable to meet the bill's requirements.

Before closing, I would like to thank the Council for the collaborative way that this legislation was developed. We had several conversations and meetings with Council staff where we expressed our concerns with early drafts and this cooperative effort allows us to feel that the legislation before you is reasonable and developed in a way that will give us an opportunity to make an already effective program even better.

Finally, permit us to note that we are proud that we have built a world-class emergency public notification system that keeps New York City informed and we never stop looking for ways to improve. Allowing registrants to select their preferred notification language and receive messages in a language that is comfortable for them is a natural next step to the program and we are eager to work on implementation.

Thank you for your interest and continued support of the Notify NYC program, we are happy to answer any questions that you have.

THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

| Appearance Card |

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: _Don Sunderland_

Address: _Deputy Commissioner for_

I represent: _Application Development_

Address: _at DoITT_

♦ Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms ◄

THE COUNCIL
THE CITY OF NEW YORK

| Appearance Card |

I intend to appear and speak on Int. No. _____ Res. No. _____

☐ in favor ☐ in opposition

Date: _____

(PLEASE PRINT)

Name: _Ben Krakauer, Director of Watch Command_

Address: _105 Cadman Plaza_

I represent: _NYC Emergency Management_

Address: _____

♦ Please complete this card and return to the Sergeant-at-Arms ◄