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News

2,800 households contacted in test of Durham notification system

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By JENNIFER SPRAGUE, Press staff

DURHAM — Saturday around 11:30 a.m., phones were buzzing in Durham as the town tested its new emergency notification system, which will be used to provide essential information in emergencies such as severe weather, fires, floods, unexpected road closures or evacuations.

About 2,800 households were dialed or e-mailed in about five minutes, many through multiple means of communication, and of those contacted, roughly half confirmed the messages, letting town officials know they had been reached.

In the event of a true emergency, Durham's Emergency Management Director Francis Willett said the system can be customized to call people until they respond.

"If we set it up as an emergency call, we have the choice of repeating the notification," Willett said. "If you hung up, it would call you again. We didn't want to inundate to force confirmation, but in an emergency we could force confirmation."

Calls could be made, for example, every hour until a person is reached, Willett said. Saturday's test, he said, helped town officials identify the initial response rate as well as how quickly the messages could be sent.

"It taught us a lot about how the system works, how quick it is," he said. "Within minutes of sending out the notifications, we can actually see 500, 600, 700 people picking up and confirming."

Although each household can list several means of communication — such as a home phone, a cell phone or an e-mail address — the system recognizes a household has been reached when it receives confirmation from one of the phone numbers or e-mail addresses.

"Because you responded with your e-mail address, we stopped communication," Willett said, as an example. "Whichever is the first way you respond, we would not continue to inundate you."

Testing the system Saturday was also a way to confirm the data on file, which constantly changes. Information voter registration records, Willett said, requires some updating.

"It wasn't 100 percent perfect, but that was the point of the test," he said. "We found there were people on that database who were no longer in town or no longer alive. We need to work on cleaning up the database. The system is only as good as the data that's in it."

Of the approximately 2,800 households in the system, more than 1,000 had opted in and supplied preferred methods of

contact such as a cell phone. The remainder came from public phone records and voter registration data. Willett said he hopes the test helped get the word out about the system to people who had not yet supplied their cell phone numbers and e-mail addresses. Those who were not contacted can go to townofdurhamct.org/safedurham to input their information.

A feature of the system, Willett said, is its ability to work from any computer with an internet connection. He ran Saturday's test remotely, from his laptop in a Philadelphia coffee shop.

"I wasn't even in town," Willett said. "Emergencies don't wait for [First Selectwoman] Laura [Francis] and me to be in our offices."

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