March 2017

Sounding the Alarm: The People and Process Behind All of the Text Alerts

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"ISU Alert is a system for quickly delivering emergency phone, text and email messages to Iowa State University students, faculty and staff" is the official description provided on the Iowa State website about the service.

For Aaron DeLashmutt, the interim chief of the Iowa State Police Department, the service carries additional meaning. DeLashmutt is one of three people with the authority to send these alerts to the thousands of members in the system, and he does not take the responsibility lightly.

“It’s just a tough situation every time. I care deeply about our community and want everyone to feel and be safe,” says DeLashmutt.

The process of sending an ISU Alert is a matter of assessing the threat that is being presented. An alert is to be sent within 30 minutes of the threat being reported. The system could be used not just for dangerous situations such as an armed person or a bomb threat but also for severe weather situations. According to Deputy Chief Carrie Jacobs, the fastest alert has been sent was within 20 minutes.

An armed man was seen leaving State Gym and had gotten into an SUV. Witnesses were able to contact the police with an accurate description of the person, the color of the vehicle and license plates. The police were able to construct an alert to help the community be aware and catch the armed man.

However it’s not always this speedy — in 2013, a speed chase ended up on campus and the alert was not sent out until police stopped the driver on central campus and secured the area. When an alert is sent it causes an immediate response of alertness by the public, and police fear that if people get the alert too soon they might end up wanting to go straight to the threat.

“The first thing that comes to my mind when being faced with these situations is automatically securing the area and keeping the public safe from the threat,” says Jacobs. “I’m scared if we leak the information too early we might end up with people wanting to see what is going on.”

A big concern during the event of 2013 was deciding when to send an alert.
The concern came from the fear of people wanting to leave the surrounding buildings to see what the situation was. The driver was out of control on central campus and if people would’ve tried to go see for themselves they could have put themselves in a position to be hit by the driver, or interfered with the police doing their job.

The police were able to get the situation under control during class time, so the area was kept as safe as possible before alerting the community of the situation. Although the police delayed the alert with public safety in mind, some students shared their concerns about having received late notifications.

The Iowa State police emphasize that the system is a tool strictly meant for ISU students, faculty and staff. Its focus is on the Iowa State community only because it is the population directly affected by the information.

“It doesn’t do any good for someone other than yourself to get the alert due to the fact that you are the one here and they are not. It limits a person’s resources on how you can receive the alert,” says Jacobs.

ISU Police has procedures in order to help make sure the safety of the community is the number one priority when assessing a situation.

“ISU Police may not notify in cases where it would place the community or a victim at greater risk or would compromise efforts to contain, respond to or mitigate the emergency,” explained DeLashmutt.

On occasions, the situation may not be alert-worthy, so the police turn to other outlets.

Social media has given police another platform to help share information and keep the community informed. Through their active accounts, the police are able to share news that may not be an emergency but is something they’d like to make everyone aware of. Social media has been an effective tool for the police in improving relations with the community, as well as sharing important public information.

ISU Alert is meant to be for emergencies only — if alerts were sent out the way tweets or Facebook posts are, then that could take away from the effectiveness that comes from receiving alerts.

“Using an emergency alert too often may have a numbing effect. When we believe an alert is not warranted, we still understand our community wants to know what is happening. Social media is a good way to inform our community of situations,” says DeLashmutt.

The ISU Police department is trying to improve the safety of the community in several different ways. There is a Threat Assessment Team that is available to help in hard situations where people feel they are in a danger. The team can help by giving them action plans through the situation, listening to them or providing safety procedures. They are also growing the Help Van services and have created a “SafeRide” app. Developing relationships with the community is also something important to the department.

“When a known threat exists, you can count on ISU Police to provide information in additional ways, including ISU Alert,” says DeLashmutt.

The ISU Police Department wants to be more than just campus law enforcement, and help students respond to situations, whether they are deemed worthy of an ISU alert or not.

“As a police department we want to go above and beyond and it’s important for us that our community is successful. We may be limited by our laws but we aren’t by compassion. Although we may get told not to be more than just the police, we want to be the people you call when you need someone or something. We will take every single phone call even if someone just wants to talk and we’ll be here to figure out the best plan for someone,” says Jacobs.