

Methodist University

Location: Fayetteville, North Carolina

Campus Type: Rural

Enrollment: Approx. 2,400

Faculty/Staff: Approx. 600

Campus Size: 617 acres

Number of buildings: 51

Challenge

During the semester, higher education institutions face the daily task of keeping students and faculty safe. While school administrators and safety officials take this responsibility seriously by having emergency preparedness plans in place, many of them recognize the need to improve their school's current emergency communication system.

The administration at Methodist University, a small private school in Fayetteville, NC, recognized this need as they knew they had major issues providing effective emergency notifications. "Some of the challenges we had with our system included getting timely notifications out to the students," said Janet Bird, Assistant Director of Public Safety for Methodist University.

During an emergency, the school's infrastructure often struggled to handle the high volume of outgoing mass notification emails and phone calls. This would cause a major delay in delivering emails and phone calls. Also, the air siren used for outdoor notification had limited range and did not have the capability to relay audible emergency information and instructions.

"If the emails got bogged down and the phone message did not get through, all people heard was a siren going off," explained Bird. "There was no real way to let students, faculty, and visitors know why the sirens were being activated."



The campus' hilly terrain and layout also hampered emergency notification efforts. "Our campus is not just flat, and that provided a challenge as we were trying to set up our outdoor speakers to provide the best coverage," Bird added. "Also, the sporting venues and golf course are spaced far out from the main campus buildings."

Total System Makeover

When a snowstorm hit the region and impacted the campus, it expedited the need to improve the school's emergency communication efforts. "It does not snow very often in this area, so it's a big deal when it does," Bird explained. "We encountered the same problems of getting safety information out to the students in a timely manner."

Bird knew Methodist would need an entirely new mass notification system. She began researching the Alertus® Emergency Notification System after hearing it was implemented successfully at North Carolina State University. "Alertus seemed to have everything we needed to help solve our notification issues," she explained. "We got rid of the system we had before and went full force with Alertus."

To create the new comprehensive notification system from the ground up, Methodist deployed the Alertus Alert Beacon® (at least one in each campus building), Alertus Mobile Apps, Alertus Desktop™ Notification, digital signage override, high power speaker array with text-to-speech interface, ThreatWatcher weather notification, and panic buttons with USB connectivity.

The Alertus Mobile App has become the most popular feature of the system among the students. "The mobile app has been amazing and has been very well received by the students and their parents," said Bird. "They're college students, so they always have their phone on them."



The Alertus Activator App allows authorized dispatchers to quickly send emergency notification alerts to faculty, staff, students, or personnel via Android or iOS tablets or smartphones.

Methodist Public Safety has incorporated the mobile app training into freshman orientation to help increase personal notification coverage among the student body. "During the orientation, we have the new students pull out their phones so we can show them the steps needed to download the app," said Bird. For returning students and faculty who may not have the app, continuous education through emails that highlight the app's features are regularly sent to encourage downloads. "We want everyone to download the app to their phone as I know it will be their new best friend," she exclaimed.

As another way to directly reach students, Methodist is planning to eventually deploy cable TV overrides throughout the campus, including the student living facilities. "The reality is college students have their TV's on all the time so we want the ability to send them emergency notification that way as well," Bird added.

With most of the emergency notifications issues on campus addressed, the next step for Methodist is to expand the coverage of the new speakers to improve the emergency communication on the sports fields and the golf course. "You can hear the message on the new speakers, but it's not completely audible," Bird explained. Adding more Alert Beacons and enhancing them and the current Alert Beacons with text-to-speech self-amplified speakers is also planned as Methodist continues to build a robust mass notification system.

Ready if the Time Comes

Fortunately, the school has not had to activate the system for an emergency, but Bird knows they are ready if the time comes. They test the Alertus System regularly and have incorporated it into their emergency training which included an active shooter simulation drill.

"During the simulation, the Alertus System gave us a timely warning and functioned without any issues. Everything worked flawlessly, Bird said. "Every concern we had with the past system has been addressed as the Alertus System far surpassed our expectations."



The wall-mounted Alert Beacon sounds, flashes, and displays an alert message in the event of an emergency.