Enhancing Disaster Preparation in the Human Service Sector

ideas42

Strategies to expand participation in the New York City Human Service Council's emergency alert system

The New York City Human Service Council (HSC) has a sector-specific emergency alert tool, called HSAlert. It is designed to provide timely, targeted information to help human service professionals support their clients and communities during and following a disaster. Unfortunately, sign-up for the alert has been low, despite the ever-present possibility of a disaster. ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) partnered with HSC to provide insights and design solutions aimed at improving communications about HSAlert, in order to increase enrollment and participation.

Summary

We don't always know when a disaster or emergency is going to strike and place people in harm's way. The power can suddenly go out during a heat wave; in the span of a few hours, a mighty hurricane can disrupt large segments of our transit system and destroy homes and businesses. As we are all well aware, a fatally infectious virus like COVID-19 can spread through our communities and alter our day-to-day lives at a rapid pace. And with a changing climate and a more inter-connected world, such disasters may only become more frequent going forward.

Highlights

▸ Human service professionals have indicated interest in a sector-specific emergency alert system.

▸ However, sign-ups for and use of the HSAlert system in NYC was low.

▸ Incorporating behavioral design into communications about an alert system can make its value clearer and make it simpler to access.

While it is unpleasant to think about such emergencies, it is critical to be prepared and know how to best respond. This is especially true for human service non-profits responsible for the coordination and delivery of crucial services to hundreds of thousands of New Yorkers. That is why the New York City Human Services Council (HSC)—a membership organization that supports a diverse network of human service non-profits and advocates for the sector—created a non-profit disaster alert system called the Human Services Alert (HSAlert).

A well-intentioned alert with low enrollment

The HSAlert is a free emergency communications system, designed specifically for non-profit human service professionals. The system was conceived in response to Hurricane Sandy in 2013, when HSC leadership realized they didn't have a means to communicate with some of their members during power outages. The alert is meant to offer disaster-related information and notifications (even during a power outage) that aid human service organizations in providing their communities with essential services, from food assistance to elder care, at the most critical times, and help them recover after major emergencies and disasters. In order to receive this information, organizations must sign up for the alert.

HSC launched the alert several years ago, and spread the word about it to member and non-member

human service professionals through emails and in-person events. They also created a HSAlert system sign-up page on their website, where anyone can learn more about the alert and enroll.

Sign-up numbers have remained low despite these efforts. HSC staff sensed that people don't fully understand the benefits of participating in the alert. To help solve this problem, ideas42's NYC Behavioral Design Center (BDC) partnered with HSC to take a behavioral lens to the HSAlert sign-up process and HSC's communication strategies, with the goal of clarifying the benefits of the alert and persuading more human service professionals to use it, ultimately strengthening the city's response to disasters.

Investigating the reasons for low sign-up

Given the importance of initial sign-up, we looked first at how HSC was encouraging its target audience to take that step. To learn how the sign-up process itself might deter enrollment, the BDC team went through an exercise of signing up ourselves, with a critical eye on the way information on the webpage is framed and displayed and how this presentation might prevent someone from understanding the purpose and benefits of the alert and then signing up for it.

In addition to assessing the alert's sign-up page, the BDC:

▶ Reviewed HSC's past communications promoting the alert as well as internal alert planning and strategy documents

▶ Talked with members of the Disaster Resilience and Recovery Workgroup—a group of direct service providers, umbrella organizations, government partners, and others who meet quarterly to discuss trends in the disaster preparedness world, share resources, and identify needs and opportunities to create a more resilient New York

▶ Sent an online survey to human service professionals from both member and non-member organizations asking about their knowledge and opinions of, and interest in, disaster alert systems in general and the HSAlert in particular

At the start of this project, the COVID-19 pandemic began, disrupting life for all New Yorkers and making many of the supports that human service organizations provide more critical than ever. The BDC examined how HSC was using the HSAlert to disseminate information to its enrollees as they adapted and responded to ongoing COVID-related challenges.

Behavioral barriers to alert enrollment

First, as the COVID-19 pandemic unfolded, we found that the way the HSAlert works and the types of messages disseminated through it are not clearly understood among current HSC staff—or the field at large. For example, HSC didn't send communications regarding the pandemic to organizations through the HSAlert, largely because staff were not sure what types of messages were appropriate to send through the alert versus HSC's regular communication channels, such as eblasts and weekly conference

calls. This informed our recommendations, as both staff and those who enrolled would need a clear understanding of specific uses of the alert.

Furthermore, findings from our survey of human service professionals indicated that while they are interested in a sector-specific alert system, few (63%) are aware that HSC already has an alert system in place. And, most (70.6%) of those who were aware of the HSAlert tool did not know that it is free to use and available to all non-profit organization staff. Respondents identified several features of a human service-specific alert system that would be valuable to the sector, including:

- **A platform that allows human service organizations to coordinate and share relevant, timely information** to help staff respond to disasters or emergencies so they are better able to serve New Yorkers
- **Guidance on actions that organizations and individual providers can take during** an emergency or disaster in order to protect and assist New Yorkers
- **An information hub** for important emergency and disaster response resources and contacts

Strategies to improve the HSAlert, enhance outreach, and increase sign-up

In order to improve the sign-up page and other outreach messaging about the alert, it was necessary to determine how the alert system would evolve going forward. We recommended a number of improvements to the webpage itself, as well as clarification of its overarching purpose and scope.

Our findings revealed that HSC wasn't quite sure what types of information to send, or disasters to address, through the alert. Therefore, the first recommendation was for HSC to develop a plan for how to manage the alert, and establish a clear protocol for the who, what, when, and how of sending messages through the platform, including whether it should serve as a platform for connecting enrollees and facilitating information and resource exchange among them. One important question to consider is how the alert system will differ from other HSC communication channels, as well as other alert systems commonly used in New York. We provided recommendations to engage the Disaster Resilience and Recovery Workgroup in devising a plan and strategy for managing the alert moving forward.

Redesign the sign-up page

The BDC provided a prototype redesign of the HSAlert online sign-up page. The redesigned elements focus on making it easier for users to understand the purpose and benefits of the tool, and reducing the effort it takes to sign up.

The redesigned page starts with an attention-grabbing header: "Be Prepared When Disaster Strikes!" along with the HSAlert logo. This is followed by a brief description of what is being asked:

"The Human Services Council wants all human service providers to be prepared to respond to their clients' needs during an emergency or disaster. That's why we created New York City's Human Services Alert –HSAlert. Please sign up for the free HSAlert emergency communication system below so we can provide you timely, relevant, human service-specific updates whenever an emergency occurs. You do not have to be an HSC member to sign up–the alert is for all human service non-profits!"

The sign-up fields appear in a call-out box immediately after this brief introductory paragraph, below a bolded header stating: "Sign up to receive human service-specific emergency alerts through HSAlert!," to make the call-to-action clear and easy to complete. The more information that someone has to process or provide, the greater the hassle, and the less likely they'll be to take action. For this reason, the prototype includes only four simple sign-up fields: first name & last name, organization & title, preferred email, and preferred phone.

In the original design, participants had the option at sign-up to join one or more of three specific groups; we removed this option in the prototype redesign to prevent decision fatigue or uncertainty that may stall action. We know from behavioral science that simplicity helps prevent people from procrastinating or giving up on the task at hand. The redesign also includes a bulleted FAQ section, so that someone who is on the fence about signing up can easily obtain additional information that may alleviate any doubts or concerns.

Enhance communication and outreach

In order to promote enrollment in the HSAlert, HSC must effectively communicate the value of being signed up, especially when a disaster takes place. Research shows that defaulting people into programs that they approve of—and giving them the option to opt-out—is an effective strategy to increase participation.[1],[2] Therefore, once the alert's purpose is clearly defined, the BDC recommended that HSC default its members into the alert system and inform them directly through individual, personalized emails that they have been enrolled (while providing an option to opt-out). The BDC also recommended regularly mentioning the alert at HSC meetings and events to remind people of this resource and encourage non-members to enroll. Communications should also remind managers to make sure that the right person at their organization is the designated contact.

Our guidance for making alert-specific communications stand out included the following:

- Sending them separately from HSC's weekly eblasts
- Creating a distinct design or logo to differentiate HSAlert communications from other HSC communications
- Using catchy and personalized subject lines to increase the chance that the recipient will read the message

[1] Johnson, Eric J., Goldstein, Daniel. (2003). Do Defaults Save Lives? Science. 302(5649): 1338-1339.

[2] Patel, Mitesh S. et al. (2016) Generic Medication Prescription Rates After Health System—Wide Redesign of Default Options Within the Electronic Health Record. JAMA Internal Medicine. Research Letter. 176(6):847-848.

✔ Sending communications related to disaster preparation at regular intervals during non-disaster times to keep the alert's value salient

Other behavioral strategies to make alert communications more salient and persuasive included:

✔ **Highlighting the need for an alert** by reminding people of recent emergencies in NYC and other scenarios that are within the realm of possibility. These communications could include evocative images of New Yorkers responding to a recent emergency, along with relevant emergency preparedness information

✔ **Highlighting benefits** by succinctly explaining how the alert will provide support

✔ **Invoking social norms** to encourage participation by showcasing the large number of well-known and respected organizations that have signed up. For example, communications can refer to the number of current alert members, feature quotes from individuals representing major member agencies, and use phrases like: Join dozens of your fellow nonprofits signed up for HSC's HSAlert; or *"Many human service agencies, large and small, throughout the five boroughs are already enrolled..."*

✔ **Considering loss framing** to highlight the potential loss of valuable information. Loss aversion research demonstrates that losses loom larger than gains and the pain of losing is psychologically about twice as powerful as the pleasure of gaining.[3] So communications that encourage non-members to enroll in the HSAlert could highlight statements such as: *"Don't miss out on crucial, human service-specific information during a disaster"*

✔ **Incorporating a commitment device** such as a pledge to sign up (e.g. *"I am signing up today"*) in mailed, or email promotions, and at in-person events, to increase the likelihood that people will follow through on an intention to sign up and use the alert.

Next Steps

The BDC joined a Disaster Resilience and Recovery Workgroup meeting to talk about the project, share the findings, and let the workgroup members know that we had recommended that HSC leverage their expertise in identifying strategies to refine and manage the HSAlert system moving forward.

In addition to continuing this discussion with the workgroup, HSC will be revising the HSAlert sign-up page based on our prototype redesign. Once this is complete, HSC will increase communication and outreach about the alert and use the behaviorally informed framing we provided to encourage more human service professionals to sign up for the alert in order to enhance their ability to continue their important work during a disaster.

Planning for disasters and fostering communication with tools like the HSAlert can reduce disruption by enabling essential services to continue supporting New Yorkers—and ensuring that alerts are behaviorally informed helps broaden their impact.

[3] Daniel Kahneman and Amos Tversky. "Prospect Theory: An Analysis of Decision Under Risk". Econometrica. March 1979: Vol. 47, No.2, pp. 263-292.

HSC will also be working with the NYC Department of Health and Mental Hygiene to map HSC's reach in neighborhoods hit hardest by COVID-19 throughout the City. HSC will analyze which neighborhoods have fewest member service sites, and then prioritize signing non-member organizations up for HSAlert in those areas in order to increase impact and broaden the alert system's overall reach. This has the potential to impact the lives of many New Yorkers both during and beyond the current COVID-19 crisis.

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