

TIP #29: WEA and the Web

IPAWS enables alert originators to embed web addresses – Uniform Resource Locators or URLs – into Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEAs). URLs can link to additional information that typically wouldn't fit in a WEA such as: more detailed instructions, multimedia, alternate languages, and links to products and services that assist those with disabilities and access and functional needs.

**Due to the variety of wireless providers, mobile phones, operating systems and software versions in use, this Tip cannot guarantee universal success with your URL. However, read on for guidance on how to avoid known pitfalls and how to best use this capability to alert and warn the public.*

Format Links Correctly

A hyperlink in a WEA can be clicked to launch a website. (WEA technical standards also allow phone numbers as links in alert content.) The link will typically render to the user in color and/or underlined, but its appearance can vary depending on phone model, operating system and software version.

A link will only be "live" if a URL was applied to the link text when the WEA was prepared. Not all phones support live links. Most newer handsets will work, but older handsets may simply display the text of the link but not allow for clicking to launch a website.

Your agency should use the correct URL as defined by your web host or webmaster. A fixed or constant URL that directs the public to a fixed destination reduces the chance of an error when messages are created.

In practice, alert originators frequently enter an entire URL as text in the WEA. Keep in mind that using a URL does count against the WEA character count. To save space, some agencies employ a third party URL shortening service to redirect WEA links to the agency website. Your alerting origination software provider can explain how to apply a URL to WEA content.

Prepare for Heavy Usage

Understand where your link is sending everyone for more information. Some agency websites failed when thousands of users visited their site from a WEA. Before composing a WEA with a link, consider if your web host can handle the high influx of traffic in a short period of time.

After public response to WEA alerts stressed web servers of the California Highway Patrol (CHP), the agency began to direct WEA links not to its own website, but to a [special high-volume Twitter account](#) instead.

In a [2019 Recap IPAWS Webinar](#), Sgt. Ed Bertola described how CHP now "tweets" images and details about the incident or missing individual. CHP includes an [explanatory FAQ graphic](#) among its tweets.

FEMA's IPAWS Office does not necessarily endorse using Twitter as a host for alert content as an alternative to conventional web hosting. An alerting authority would have to negotiate such arrangements with Twitter.



FEMA

Test for Mobile Usability

In February 2020 the FCC [denied the City of Aliso Viejo, California](#) a waiver to conduct a public WEA test that would not use the State/Local Test code. The City told the FCC that it wanted to conduct a public preparedness and proficiency training exercise to test how WEA functions in light of the WEA enhancements and the region's risk of wildfires.

A "mobile friendly" website should be usable on small screens. One public safety agency site we reviewed requires visitors to read a disclaimer notice, check a box and tap a button. This notice is called a *modal* in web terms. The user must consent and click the modal to dismiss it before the site will display vital information.

It is impossible to tap, or even read, the entire modal on some phones. Even if a user can dismiss the modal and display the site, its design, fonts and maps are too small for effective use on a phone.

Ensure that your website will not block phone users from seeing alert and warning content and from using menus and maps, if any. All text should be readable even on small screens.

The best way to evaluate a website for mobile usability is on a phone. A mobile viewer, however, is built into all modern browsers. It will display any website as it would appear on small screens. You can even select the device model and screen size.

To open a mobile viewer In the Microsoft Edge and Google Chrome browsers, press Ctrl-Shift-I and then Ctrl-Shift-M. In the Firefox browser, press Ctrl-Shift-M.

Practice

Nothing can make up for a lack of practice and experience. Take the time to use the IPAWS Lab and go through your process repeatedly. The IPAWS Lab Message Viewer cannot confirm that your link will work on all phones, but it does enable you to obtain alert validation independent of Lab support.

Work through any issues in a safe environment and become experts in the process, because when the moment arrives the time to prepare is over.

Contact Us

If you would like the PMO to cover a specific topic in these IPAWS Tips, please share your ideas at ipaws@fema.dhs.gov.

Disclaimer

This communication is provided by FEMA's IPAWS PMO to highlight program announcements and does not endorse any non-government organizations, entities, or services.