

WAS*IS Workshop Application Interest Statement

My interest in the WAS*IS workshop comes from seeing the need to integrate social science and meteorology from actual experiences I have encountered during emergency events while working the fields of TV broadcasting and Emergency Management. I have been in situations where public messages were issued and due to citizen misinterpretation or confusion of the warnings people severely suffered. As the Engineering Director at RFD TV, a nation wide TV network, I was responsible for overseeing the Weather Department for the station. Since we covered nationwide weather 14 hours 'Live' daily we would issue many severe weather warnings and get calls from confused viewers not understanding what they were supposed to do. As an Emergency Preparedness Manager my office issues multiple warnings and I get calls from citizens not understanding the messages or see them doing the exact opposite of what we want them to do.

An example of this just happened last May when we had a tornado warning issued for our county/city by the National Weather Service (at 8:00 PM). There was a possibility the tornado could hit the South end of our city (advise of NWS) so we activated the "Outdoor Warning" sirens. While the sirens were activated a popular local TV station's weather meteorologist stated on air "I do not know why the tornado sirens in Independence are sounding, but residents in Independence are in no danger from this storm". A local high school was just ending a senior play production that night and school officials realized the sirens had been activated. So they turned on the TV where they were told by this trusted TV meteorologist this storm posed no danger to Independence, so they told everyone to go home it was safe. Fortunately all tornadic weather stayed to the South of the City and no one was hurt unless you factor in the possibility, based on this experience, a certain number of people that may ignore a warning next time and get hurt.

Not more that a few weeks later at 1:50 AM the KC Metro area had a very strong bow echo storm move through the area. Only severe thunderstorm warnings were issued by the NWS so jurisdiction's did not activate their "Outdoor warning" sirens because they were not tornadic in nature. This storm brought 85 MPH winds and caused millions of dollars in damage with over 980 homes damaged in Independence. Many citizens were angry the sirens were not activated to warn of this impending storm. Now many jurisdictions are trying to determine at what non-tornadic wind speeds the sirens should be activated. Now out of 40 jurisdictions in the KC Metro area there are 20 different siren activation policies in place.

Until we start developing messages that are written in the way the human psyche can understand, not how emergency planners think they should be interpreted, we will never issue effective warnings with functional results. This is becoming a critical issue with today technology because of the increased number of warning sources now available to the public. The traditional official sources of warnings associated with linear dissemination have found themselves in competition and unable to compete. Individuals today are exposed to warning messages from an exponential increase in unofficial sources whose messages may be unreliable or contradictory causing the recipient to question "official" information or delay and decide not to engage in proper protective actions.

This means all warning sources must coordinate messages together reducing or eliminating contradictory messages. To initiate the first step of solving this problem I have been fortunate enough to be involved with the creation of an Integrated Warning Team (IWT) in the KC Metro Area. This group brings partners from the National Weather Service, emergency management, first responders, news media, sociological/psychological academia, local health departments, private sector communications companies and other associated players. The main goal of the IWT (based on the WAS*IS) program is to initiate dialog between IWT members to start coordination and improve warnings that increases the proper public response to severe weather events.

My interest in attending the WAS*IS Workshop is to increase my knowledge base on how to integrate social science partners and meteorological research/practice into the K.C. IWT group in a comprehensive and sustained way. These social science partners will help the Integrated Warning Team understand the gaps in our present warning systems caused by the lack of knowledge regarding how people receive and act to warnings. With a diverse background in broadcasting, emergency management and public safety I have seen the problems first hand when warnings are not properly received. As an Emergency Manager responding to the aftermath of hurricane Katrina and devastating floods in South West Kansas I have come to realize our emergency operations plans have not taken into account human nature.

Attending this workshop will allow me to strengthen my understanding of the WAS*IS program and help me to continue the implementation of the social sciences into our warning messages. I would appreciate the opportunity to attend the workshop.

Sincerely
Mark Widner
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