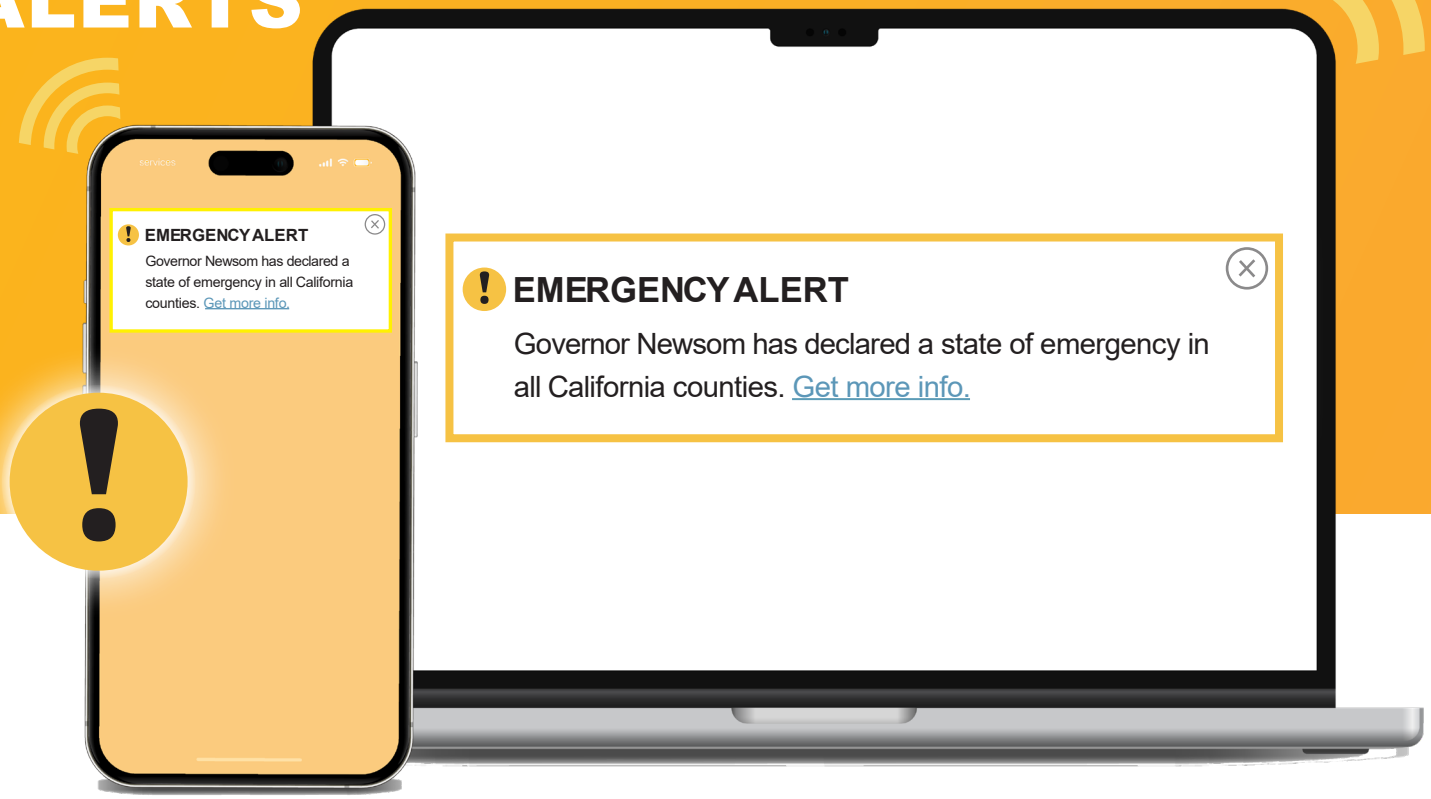
State of California

DEPARTMENT WEBSITE EMERGENCY ALERTS



Category: Information Communications Technology Innovations

Project Dates:
January 2023 - March 2023

California Department of Technology (CDT)
California Government Operations Agency

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Disasters are a reality in California. With a population of nearly 40 million and the third largest land area among the states, California frequently experiences natural events that impact communities demanding quick, coordinated responses. Last winter, California faced unprecedented storms that turned neighborhoods into lakes, unleashed sewage into floodwater and spurred state of emergency proclamations in 51 of its 58 counties. Despite a proactive approach to emergency preparedness, communications lapses exist, hindering the dissemination of critical information to all affected individuals, exacerbating the impact of disasters.

To address these disparities and supplement the state's existing emergency communication methods, the California Department of Technology (CDT) created an alert system that enables authorized state staff to post alerts to state of California websites (i.e. websites with "ca.gov" domains) to convey important emergency information to the public in a consistent, coordinated, and timely manner. Tasked with quickly developing a secure, portable, and platform-agnostic emergency notification banner system, CDT delivered a solution consisting of:

- a direct and concise alert message box.
- a back-end administrative console.
- a front-end embeddable code snippet that reads emergency messages from a central site.

Product development was completed within five weeks, from initial inception to working product, ensuring the state is equipped to efficiently communicate with its citizens during emergencies.

IDEA

What problem or opportunity does the project address?

The State Department Website Emergency Alerts project addresses the critical need for timely, coordinated, and accessible emergency communication across California's government websites. As the state frequently faces natural and unexpected disasters, the existing communication methods often fall short in reaching all affected individuals, exacerbating the impact. The California Department of Technology (CDT) responded by developing a secure, portable, and platform-agnostic alert system within five weeks. This innovative solution includes a direct alert message box, an administrative console, and an embeddable code snippet, ensuring consistent, real-time dissemination of emergency information. By standardizing and simplifying the alert process, the project not only improves the efficiency of emergency responses but also significantly enhances citizen engagement and access to vital information during crises.

Why does it matter?

The initiative addresses the need for cohesive and accessible emergency communication across California government websites. The State Department Website Emergency Alerts project streamlines the dissemination of critical information, reducing the risk of miscommunication and delays during emergencies. By implementing a secure, platform-agnostic notification system across high-traffic state websites, the alert system ensures consistent messaging, reaching millions of residents swiftly and accurately. Without this system, emergency communications would remain fragmented, potentially leading to greater harm and confusion during crises. This innovative solution not only enhances public safety but also optimizes resource allocation, allowing state agencies to focus on direct emergency responses rather than redundant communication efforts.

What makes it different?

What makes the State Department Website Emergency Alerts project innovative is its transformative rapid development, design, and comprehensive reach. Unlike traditional emergency communication methods, this system was developed and deployed in just five weeks, demonstrating an unprecedented response time. Its platform-agnostic nature allows seamless integration across all government websites, ensuring that critical information reaches the widest possible audience without disrupting existing services. Moreover, the system's centralized administration and embeddable code snippet enable consistent and coordinated messaging across multiple agencies, significantly enhancing California's emergency preparedness and response capabilities. This streamlined, efficient, and inclusive approach sets the project apart from other initiatives, ensuring equitable access to vital information during emergencies.

What makes it universal?

The State Department Website Emergency Alerts project addresses universal challenges faced by all states, including the need for efficient emergency communication, compliance with cybersecurity frameworks, and enhancement of digital government services. This secure system aligns with the NASCIO State CIO Top Ten Priorities by ensuring consistent, timely dissemination of critical information across all government websites. It enhances citizen engagement, supports statewide emergency preparedness, and improves the digital experience for millions of residents. By streamlining emergency alerts, the project mitigates risks, maximizes resource efficiency, and ensures equitable access to vital information, setting a precedent for digital transformation and resilience in state government operations.

IMPLEMENTATION

What was the roadmap?

The State Department Website Emergency Alerts project fits seamlessly into California's enterprise IT strategy, aligning with Vision 2023 by enabling streamlined, effective digital communication during emergencies. It followed an agile project management approach, with CDT organizing a series of four-day sprints to develop and deploy the system rapidly. Each sprint involved meticulous task tracking and coordination through coda.io, and design and UX review using Figma. The project's success will be assessed through its ability to deliver timely, consistent alerts across the state's most trafficked websites, ensuring maximum reach and minimal disruption. Successful implementation is characterized by the seamless integration of alerts across multiple agencies, immediate public access to critical information, and the enhanced ability of state emergency communications officers to manage alerts efficiently and securely.

Who was involved?

The successful development and implementation of the State Department Website Emergency Alerts project involved a collaborative effort from multiple stakeholders that included the California's Government Operations Agency (GovOps), which provided oversight and strategic direction. State executives from various agencies served as advocates, ensuring alignment and support for the initiative. Webmasters from high-traffic state websites were crucial for implementation, integrating the alert system into their platforms. To secure buy-in and awareness, the project team conducted a kickoff meeting with key stakeholders, followed by regular updates and sprint reviews using tools like coda.io for task tracking and Figma for design concepts. Approval and adoption were facilitated through comprehensive support documentation and walkthroughs, enabling seamless integration and operation of the alert system. Communications and marketing efforts included direct engagement with state agencies and user guides to ensure widespread adoption and understanding of the new system.

How did you do it?

The State Department Website Emergency Alerts project required a focused allocation of resources, including financial investment, dedicated human capital, and an expedited timeline. CDT leveraged a team of skilled developers and project managers, to utilize agile methodologies, and organize the project into a series of four-day sprints tracked via coda.io. The technical architecture featured a secure, platform-agnostic design with a direct alert message box, an administrative console, and an embeddable code snippet to ensure consistent, timely information dissemination. This project stands out for its use of emerging technologies and adherence to leading cybersecurity and accessibility practices, ensuring data protection, user privacy, and broad accessibility. This robust, scalable solution not only enhances emergency communication but also aligns with best practices in digital government, setting a new standard for state-level emergency response systems.

IMPACT

What did the project make better?

The State Department Website Emergency Alerts project significantly transformed California's emergency communication landscape. Before its implementation, emergency alerts were fragmented and inconsistent, often requiring individual efforts from multiple agencies to reach residents, leading to delays of information and potential miscommunication. With the new alert system, critical information is disseminated rapidly and uniformly across all high-traffic state websites. This seamless integration ensures that nearly 40 million Californians receive timely, accurate alerts during emergencies, enhancing public safety and trust. For CDT and other state agencies, the system has streamlined processes, reducing the need for redundant efforts and allowing staff to focus on direct emergency response. This project not only boosts operational efficiency but also exemplifies California's commitment to leveraging technology for the public good, ultimately improving the state's preparedness and resilience in the face of disasters.

How do you know?

The State Department Website Emergency Alerts project has demonstrated significant tangible benefits and outcomes. The system has drastically improved the speed and consistency of emergency communications, ensuring that critical information reaches millions of Californians promptly. During the recent record-setting storms that ravaged California, the alerts were disseminated across the state's most trafficked websites, providing real-time updates and contributing to enhanced public safety. This optimized approach resulted in cost savings by reducing the need for redundant efforts across multiple agencies, allowing staff to focus on direct emergency response activities. Additionally, the secure platform-agnostic design of the alert system leveraged existing infrastructure and minimized additional IT expenditures. Usage metrics indicate high engagement, with substantial traffic to the alert messages during emergencies. The system's effectiveness and efficiency underscore its alignment with California's Statewide IT Strategic Plan, Vision 2023, and significantly enhances the state's digital government capabilities and provides a scalable model for other states to follow.

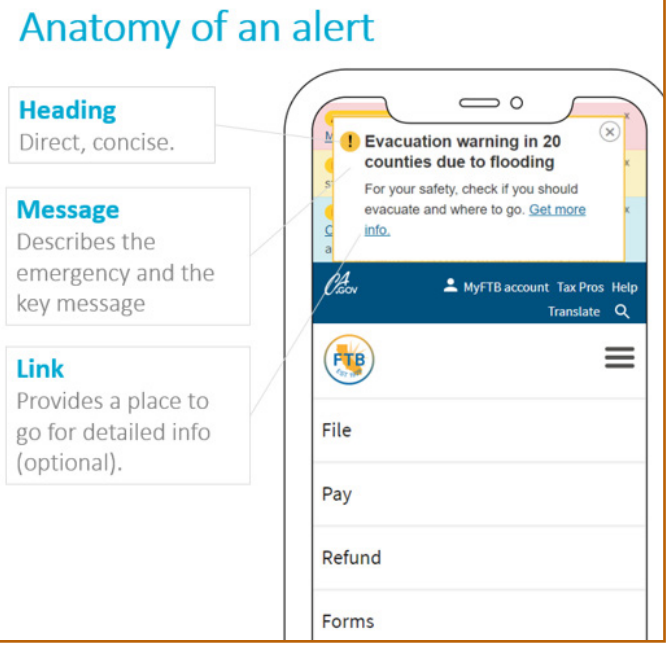
What now?

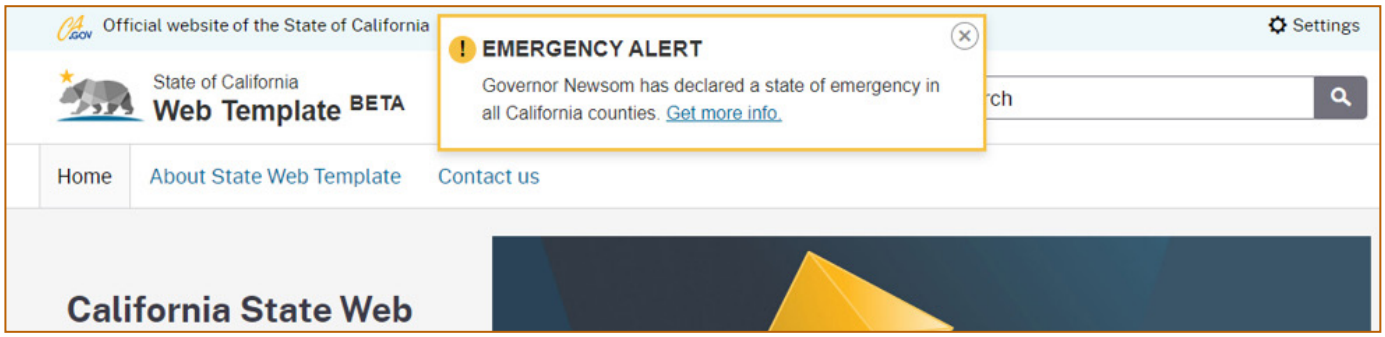
The long-term plan for the State Department Website Emergency Alerts project includes ongoing maintenance and updates to ensure the system remains secure, efficient, and effective. CDT will continue to oversee the project, provide regular updates, technical support, and user training to ensure smooth operation. A continued focus will be to get the web alert embed code adopted by all State of California websites to maximize its reach and impact. The system will be iteratively improved based on feedback from the GovOps, state departments, and the latest technical innovations. This project is worthy of the initial and ongoing investment due to its critical role in enhancing emergency communication across the state. By streamlining and standardizing the alert process, the system has already proven its value during recent disasters, improving response times and ensuring consistent information dissemination to millions of residents. The platform-agnostic design and scalability of the system allow for continuous improvements and adaptation to new technologies and emerging threats, making it a resilient and future-proof solution that enhances public safety and government efficiency.

SCREENSHOTS

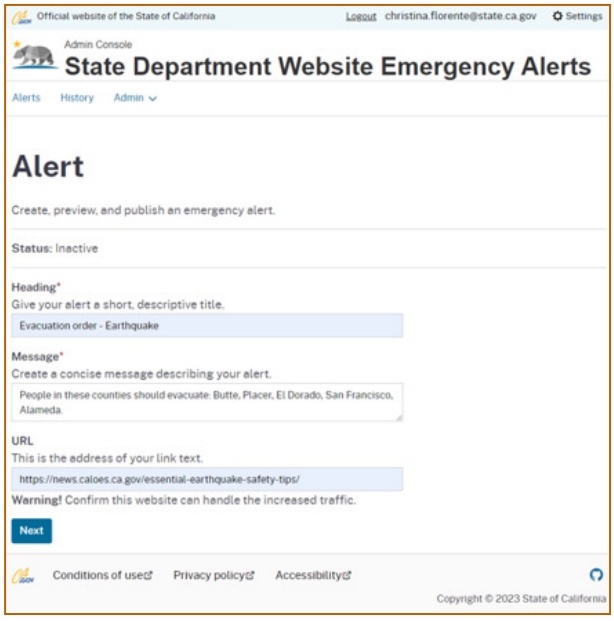
External alert

- Mobile first
- Short and direct (think tweet)
- Performant / minimal site impact
- Not conflict w/website styles (modal)
- One alert at a time





Create alert



Preview