

DeltaAlert system to be introduced to residents next week

by Meghann Evans

Managing Editor

01.25.12 - 11:58 pm

Next week county residents with landlines can expect to receive an introductory call from the DeltAlert® system, an emergency and mass notification system now being utilized by Stokes County.

The web-based mass notification system will be used in the future to allow a few authorized government officials to create and distribute time-sensitive announcements to county residents with a mass call, similar to software used by school systems to send automated messages to parents.

At the end of the message to be sent out next week, residents will learn of an option to remove their names from the calling list, but county officials hope people choose to remain in the call database. County Manager Rick Morris said they want to make sure people know that the county does not want to abuse the free service, but to use it to present people with urgent information, such as notifications about man-made or natural disasters, public health issues, escaped convicts, or missing children or adults.

“It’s such a valuable communication asset,” said Morris. “We’re always looking for better ways to communicate information to citizens, especially in emergency situations.”

Jessica Watkins, preparedness coordinator for the county health department, said, “A priority of emergency management is infrastructure and the safety of citizens, to protect, to disseminate warnings in a timely manner.”

The commissioners decided at a meeting last month to allow the county to participate in the DeltAlert system, which the Stokes County Family Health Center received a grant to purchase last year. The health department used the system three times in the fall to advise people about the availability of flu shots, and Watkins said it was received pretty well. There were some complaints, she said, that the electronic voice was hard to understand in the messages, but Watkins said the county also has the option to record its own messages instead of using an electronic voice generated message.

The message will go out to everyone on the list, which at this point is all numbers in the 911 database. That encompasses all landlines in the county, just under 20,000 numbers. People can go to www.co.stokes.nc.us/e911/ and click on the DeltAlert® symbol to add other numbers to the database so that they can receive cell phone calls, texts or emails. The system will be able to send a message to up to three phone numbers and two email addresses per person.

In the future, the county could also use the system to send messages to specific areas of the county or to county employees in cases of inclement weather or the need for emergency assistance. Personal or political messages are prohibited under the county policy.

The information stored in the system database will not be shared with businesses, vendors or other government agencies, the county assures. Multiple physical and virtual layers of firewalls are used to maintain data security, according to the county.

The only officials who will be authorized to use the system are the county manager, health director, health department emergency preparedness coordinator, sheriff, emergency management director, emergency communications director, fire marshal and social services director. Department heads may request access to the system for non-emergency or public information purposes. All notifications, whether matters of emergency or public information, will have to be approved by the county manager or his designee before being sent out. If the county manager or designee is not available, the chairman of the board of commissioners must approve the notifications.

Those still wishing to opt out of the service can do so at the end of the message to be sent out next week. They can also call Watkins at 593-2532. She can also help people add alternate numbers if they do not have access to Internet or answer questions.