

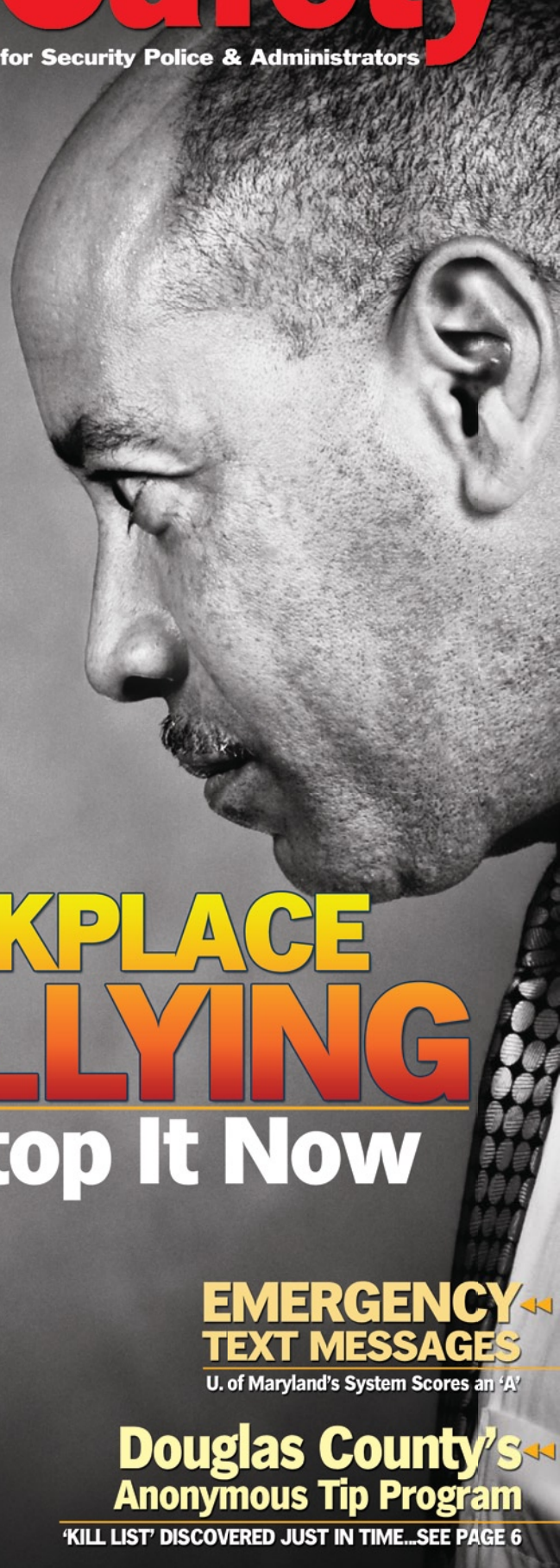
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Anonymous Tip Program

'KILL LIST' DISCOVERED JUST IN TIME...SEE PAGE 6

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U.S. POSTAGE
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UMD's Tried and True Text Alerts

Shortly after the Virginia Tech mass shooting, the University of Maryland adopted a text message emergency alert system. Nearly three years after its deployment, *Campus Safety* checks in with the school to see how the technology has fared.

BY ROBIN HATTERSLEY GRAY

O ON APRIL 16, 2007, THE WORLD OF HIGHER EDUCATION SAFETY and security changed forever. On that fateful day, a deranged 23-year-old Virginia Tech student shot and killed 32 people and wounded many more in the worst mass shooting in U.S. history.

Immediately after the incident, the public questioned how Virginia Tech, as well as other U.S. colleges and universities, could do a better job of informing students, faculty and staff of imminent, life-threatening dangers, such as active shooters. Thus began the higher education community's mad scramble for improved mass notification systems.

Like other institutions of higher learning, the University of Maryland, College Park soon adopted a text messaging emergency alert solution that can send messages to cell phones, PDAs, pagers and E-mail addresses. "I had been looking at text messaging systems for quite a while but couldn't get the money to implement it," says Maj. Jay Gruber, who is the commander of the technology services bureau for the campus' department of public safety. "But shortly after Virginia Tech, our university president was very interested in getting text messaging for our campus."

So interested in fact, that only two days after the tragedy, the school had its Cooper Notification Roam Secure Alert Network (RSAN) up and running, and registering subscribers. The procurement process took about four hours.

Emergency Alert Best Practices

Maj. Jay Gruber, commander of the technology services bureau for the University of Maryland, College Park's department of public safety, recommends the following when deploying a text message notification system:

- ✓ Campuses should test their mass notification systems more than once a semester. "You want to make sure everything is working properly and give people a monthly reminder that they need to take responsibility for their own safety and security."
- ✓ Let students know early on that the systems will only be used for dynamic, life threatening emergencies. Be certain to obtain support for this approach from campus administrators.
- ✓ Don't send spam. It turns people off.
- ✓ Use the opt-out rather than the opt-in approach to register users.
- ✓ Because 25-30 percent of the student population turns over every year, a campus must continually market the system and encourage people to register.
- ✓ Work closely with campus IT personnel and student registration personnel.
- ✓ White list so messages will not be blocked by spam filters (usually done by the vendor).

With such a fast turnaround time, one might wonder if there was a rush to judgment by the university. Gruber, however, was confident in the new system's vendor and technology because he had done his homework. In the year prior to the Virginia Tech incident, he researched and vetted the mass notification solutions available on the market and selected Cooper Notification because he liked and trusted the company.

More importantly, since the solution's deployment, it has proven its value by quickly and effectively delivering emergency messages to students, faculty and staff. The main hurdles that had to be overcome were some of the policies supporting the system.

Purchasing System Results in Long-term Savings

During the procurement process, University of Maryland officials determined it would make the most sense to purchase their new RSAN outright. They determined that the purchase price of \$70,000 and yearly maintenance cost of \$7,000 would be less expensive than paying a yearly fee for the institution's 50,000 students, faculty and staff. Today, Gruber still believes his institution's decision to buy the system was correct.

"If we stop paying the maintenance costs and offsite hosting fees, we own the system," says Gruber. "We can still use it, and we don't have to pay any other costs. However, we choose to pay the upgrade and maintenance costs because they are minimal and keep us state of the art. We have access to their technicians to ask questions and tweak things."

That access to Cooper technicians

helped recently when the campus transitioned from an opt-in sign-up process to an opt-out approach. "Our IT department worked with Cooper in a secure way to transfer all of those E-mail addresses," says Gruber. "Cooper did all of the back-end work to make sure there weren't duplicates and to get people on the system."

Opt-Out Approach Encourages Participation

Gruber determined the campus needed to adopt the opt-out method for signing up users because the opt-in approach wasn't getting enough participation. "We did a lot of marketing and pushes to get people to sign up, and we were still just shy of 50 percent," he says.

Now, everyone who has a campus-issued E-mail is automatically enrolled in the E-mail emergency alert system. "We send a welcome message to all of the new users, letting them know that if they don't want to get these messages, they can reply to the E-mail with the word 'stop,'" says the major. "If they want to add text

messaging, they need to click a link that directs them to the system where they create a password and put in their cell information."

To make the opt-in process even more effective, the school will add a field to the class registration page so that students can provide their cell numbers at the beginning of the school semester. Gruber estimates this update will take about a year to accomplish, however, because the process of change is slow.

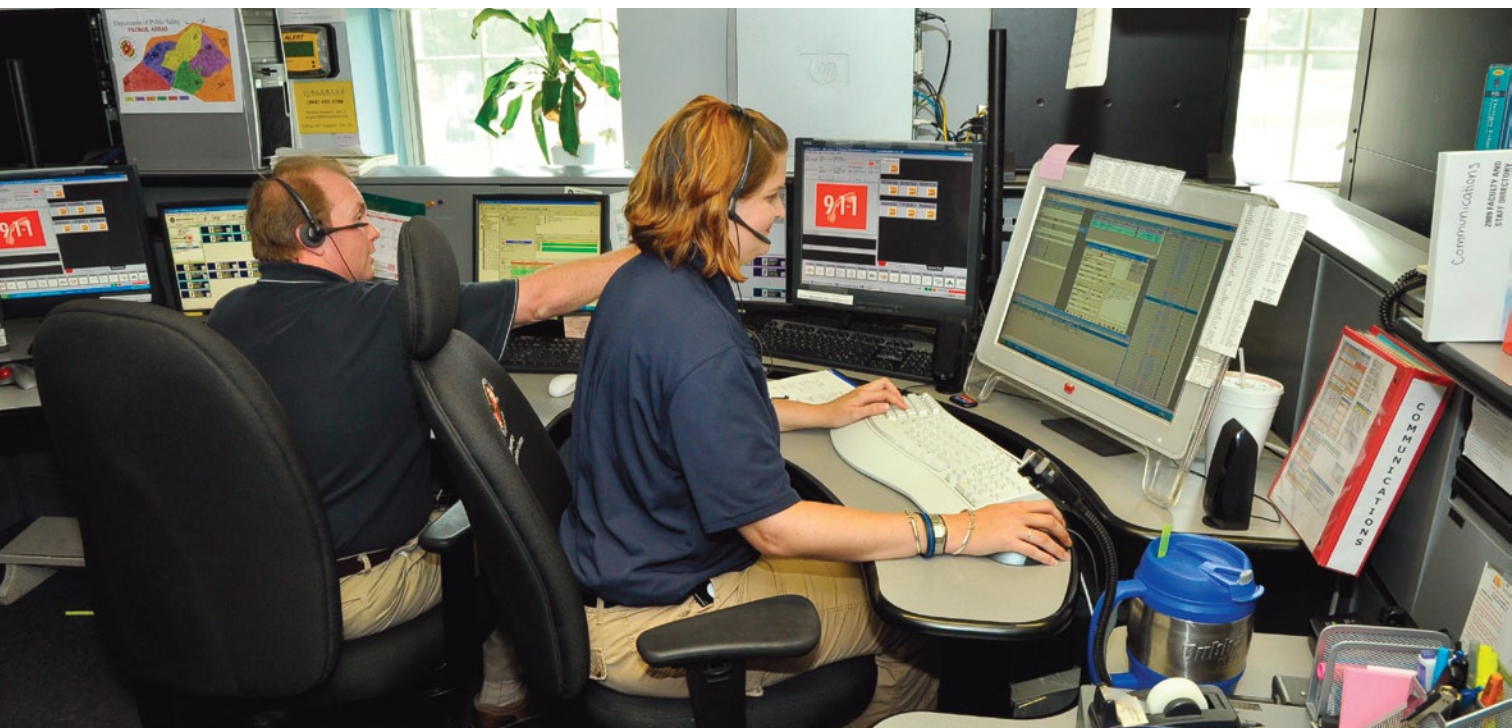
In the meantime, RSAN has a rapid enrollment feature that is an easy way for new students to sign up for the service. "We capture a large number of people when we do safety and security presentations, sexual assault presentations, alcohol and drug awareness presentations, and parent and new student orientations," says Gruber. "A police officer who is presenting asks, 'How many of you are registered for the text alert system?' Not many people raise their hands. He or she then asks 'How many of you have a cell phone on you right

What's an Emergency?

"We deem emergencies as anything that is dynamic and life threatening," says Maj. Jay Gruber who is the commander of the technology services bureau for the University of Maryland, College Park's department of public safety. "If a student was robbed at 3 a.m., we're not sending that text message out. We'll send it out via E-mail to make sure we hit all of the Clery standards, but it's not a dynamic, life threatening emergency."

The campus has only issued two real emergency text messages since 2007. One was regarding an armed car jacking that had just occurred, and the other was for tornados near the campus. The school also uses the system to let students know about early campus closures, late openings and school being closed.

"If we keep people off the road or get them out of here quickly before bad weather hits, we're going to potentially save lives," says Gruber.



When the UMD Department of Public Safety tests the campus' mass notification equipment, it takes about five minutes to activate all of the solutions.

now?' and everyone raises their hands. The officer says 'Take them out and let's do this together.' We get people in bulk that way."

Cooper Notification also helps with the system's database management. After three unsuccessful attempts to reach a person via E-mail or text, the person is automatically dropped.

Testing the System Verifies Throughput Speed

Testing the system regularly also helps with database management. On the first Wednesday of each month, all of the school's mass notification systems, including its sirens, texting, E-mail and Alertus boxes are tested. After three months of bounce-backs from an E-mail or text test, a user is removed from the system.

Additionally, testing helps campus officials determine how quickly messages are being received. According to Gruber, 96 percent of the text messages sent to the school's more than 25,000 subscribers arrive within three to four minutes. The E-mail emergency alerts also are received quickly by the campus' 65,000 E-mail addresses. "An E-mail automatically generated here by our mega mail system can take up to 45 minutes to get to everyone," says Gruber. "The

Campus at a Glance:

Campus: The University of Maryland is in College Park, Md., and is eight miles north of our nation's capitol. The institution has a total daytime population of about 50,000, which includes 35,000 students and 12,000 faculty. The campus has more than 300 buildings and covers an area of about two square miles.

Department: The University of Maryland's Department of Public Safety has 100 fully sworn and armed police officers. The department is responsible not only for law enforcement, but also security and emergency management.

Challenge: University officials wanted an additional way to communicate emergency information to students, faculty and staff.

Solution: Cooper Notification Roam Secure Alert Network (RSAN) text messaging system. Now school officials can reach 96 percent of the system's more than 25,000 registered text message users in three to four minutes.

E-mails generated by Cooper get out instantaneously."

When it comes to testing the system from the back-end, the University of Maryland is an overachiever. About 50 drills are conducted a year. Basically, everything is done but pushing the button to send a test to the students. The drills, however, do involve first responders and facilities personnel so they'll remain current on the system.


U. of Maryland Works Hard to Gain Student Trust

Despite the overall success of RSAN, when the system was first deployed, many students were worried it would

send them non-emergency messages and general crime alerts. Gruber and school officials were able to soothe the students' fears through PR, newspaper interviews and Web site information postings.

"We assured them that the ones that aren't dynamic, life threatening and happening now would only be sent over the E-mail in a timely fashion," he says. "They need to understand that they will only get a message if something very bad is happening, and they need to take some action."

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