

## Common alert protocol standards expected by end of December

A computer data standard that could provide interoperability to emergency communications systems is scheduled to be finished before the end of the year, according to project leaders.

The Common Alerting Protocol (CAP), developed by an industry-government group called the Emergency Interoperability Consortium (EIC), uses a version of the XML data language to allow different emergency communications platforms to simultaneously exchange public warnings.

"Currently, the emergency notification infrastructure in the United States is built on disparate systems," said Matt Walton, chairman of the EIC and vice chairman of E Team Inc., a Los Angeles-based company that makes Web-based incident management software.

XML is a format increasingly used to transmit data over the Internet and other networks. CAP was created in conjunction with OASIS (Organization for the Advancement of Structured Information Systems), an influential XML-based standards body.

CAP provides a data format that allows a consistent warning message to be sent simultaneously over many different systems. It can also be used to predict hazards or hostilities by detecting emerging patterns. In October, the first set of standards for CAP was published, followed by testing and public comment. The standards are scheduled to be finished this month.

The consortium was formed "a little over a year ago," Walton said, "when ten companies came together based on the understanding that interoperability was a real problem that had to be addressed. On 9/11, it became crystal clear that lives had been lost at the World Trade Center because of the inability of institutional responders to effectively share information with each other."

The consortium now has more than 70 members, including the Department of Homeland Security, the National Emergency Management Association, Boeing, IBM, Unisys, Microsoft and Oracle.

The EIC conducted a proof of concept for CAP at the end of September. State, county and local first-responder agencies and officials at the Federal Emergency Management Agency reacted to the simulated release of toxic sarin gas in St. Louis.

"A single message was originated in CAP and that message was passed electronically to two different alarm systems, blasted out to tens of thousands of people via e-mail and automatically posted to several public websites," Walton said. "It also went out over incident management systems like ours, which immediately sent out notifications to predefined people, from chiefs of police to departments of health."

For Dan Miklovic, vice president and research director at Gartner/G2 in Seattle, the CAP effort may be worthwhile but it represents just the tip of the iceberg

for first-responder interoperability.

"Sharing alert information across state boundaries is important," he said. "CAP has real value and is an excellent use of XML."

But the real challenge, according to Miklovic, is sharing information before an alert. CAP alerts are "post-event," he said, "and there are a whole lot of other activities and messages that need to be dealt with. The challenge is driving it down to the level of cop-to-cop or cop-to-EMS communication."

Walton hopes CAP will end what he calls the "paralysis in the emergency management community around making a commitment to a particular system. They don't want to embrace something they can't interface with. With the emergence of real standards, they can be assured that whatever they are committing to is not going to be dead-ended."

— Peter A. Buxbaum (pab001@aol.com)

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