

COUNTY OF MILWAUKEE
Inter-Office Communication

Date: February 18, 2022

To: Marcelia Nicholson, Chairwoman, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors

From: Christopher McGowan, Deputy Director, Office of Emergency Management

Subject: From the Deputy Director, Office of Emergency Management providing an Informational Report regarding the tornado siren malfunction on January 30, 2022.

File Type: Informational Report

REQUEST

To provide the Health Equity, Human Needs and Strategic Planning Committee with an Informational Report regarding the tornado siren malfunction on January 30, 2022.

BACKGROUND

Milwaukee County Office of Emergency Management (OEM) operate a system of 58 tornado sirens that are scattered throughout the County. While Milwaukee County owns and maintains a majority of the sites, several are owned and operated by individual municipalities. The siren system is quite robust, and the siren sites are well distributed throughout the County. There is a very good coverage rate, and the system is very reliable.

In April 2017, there was an incident in Dallas, Texas where computer hackers were able to infiltrate the siren system and purposefully activated them several times. When that occurred, Milwaukee County, through our maintenance contractor, went through the system and made upgrades, to prevent this from occurring here. The programming within the siren system and the sites was upgraded to prevent that form of infiltration.

After the upgrade to the programming, we began experiencing spurious activations and have had a total of 9 in four years. There were four events in 2018, two in 2019, two in 2021, and the event on January 30th of this year. After each event, OEM investigates and documents the event, as well as engages our maintenance contractor for any needed repairs.

BODY

In the early morning of January 30th, at approximately 4:10 a.m., the siren at Lincoln Memorial Cemetery experienced a spurious activation. Upon notification of the activation from both a citizen and OEM employee from their home, it was verified that the siren was not activated by the system and that there was no possible storm in the

area to warrant an activation. The siren shutdown command was processed and sent from OEM Dispatch and the siren fell silent.

The Emergency Management Division employee that witnessed the event, went to the site to begin investigating and found that there was no obvious damage or signs of tampering to the site. He did locate a burnt ground wire that came from the control unit, but that was the only damage found. The unit was polled and was reporting an issue with the AC power, causing the siren not to activate from that point on, until repaired. OEM engaged our maintenance contractor, and the needed repairs were made to the siren. It was fully back up in operation later that day.

In late 2021, prior to this event, OEM entered into a contract with American Signal Corporation for the purpose of updating and upgrading the control boxes and radio components for all 58 sirens in the county. The project will convert the activation radio signal from UHF frequencies, over to the digital OASIS radio system, upgrade several of the internal control components, upgrade programming within the Dispatch facility, replace aging back-up batteries and add lightning protection for each site. Although this upgrade project was not intended to fix the spurious activation issues, many of these repairs have been factors in previous events.

RECOMMENDATION

This report is an Informational Report at the request of the Health Equity, Human Needs and Strategic Planning Committee Chair Supervisor Martin and Committee Vice Chair Supervisor Rolland. No recommended Board action at this time.

FISCAL EFFECT

All of the costs associated with the siren radio upgrade have already been set aside from 2021 operating funds. No addition fiscal impact at this time.

VIRTUAL MEETING INVITES

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cc: Kelly Bablitch, Chief of Staff, Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors
Janelle M. Jensen, Legislative Services Division Manager, Office of the County Clerk