

# The Community Warning System

The Community Warning System (CWS) is a comprehensive system for alerting people in Contra Costa County to any imminent hazard to life or health. Built by a community coalition, funded by industry through the county's Health Services Department and operated by the Office of the Sheriff, the Contra Costa CWS is a thriving public-private partnership for public safety and homeland security.

The CWS uses a variety of systems to reach the greatest number of people as quickly and reliably as possible, including:

- Sirens in special safety areas
- Telephone notification (wired and cellular)
- Broadcast radio and TV
- Cable television
- NOAA Weather Radio

You can watch a brief [video demo](#) of the Community Warning System on YouTube. Also, users of [Google Earth](#) can add [current CWS alerts and test messages](#) as a network layer.

## The First Three Things to Do in Any Emergency

Emergencies can arise without any warning. Frequently, though, officials can provide alerts using sirens, telephones or other means. **What you should do depends on where you are and what's happening nearby.** Whatever the danger, though, and however you hear about it, your first steps should be:

1. Make sure you're in a safe place, or get to one;
2. Get more information from radio, TV, websites or other sources; and then,
3. Take specific protective actions as recommended.

## Protective Actions for You and Your Family

Even though there are many kinds of emergencies, protecting yourself and your family will usually mean taking of the following simple actions:

- **Shelter In Place** – If your local officials advise you to "shelter in place," that means you should go inside your home or office and protect yourself there. Close and lock all windows and exterior doors. Turn off all fans, heating and air conditioning systems.

Close the fireplace damper. Get your disaster supplies kit, and make sure the radio is working. Go to an interior room without windows that's above ground level. In the case of a chemical threat, an above-ground location is preferable because some chemicals are heavier than air, and may seep into basements even if the windows are closed. Using duct tape, seal all cracks around the door and any vents into the room. Keep listening to your radio or television until you are told all is safe or you are told to evacuate.

- **Evacuate** – If authorities ask you to leave your home, they have a good reason to make this request, and you should take their advice immediately. Listen to your radio or television and follow the instructions of local emergency officials. Keep these simple tips in mind:
  1. Wear long-sleeved shirts, long pants and sturdy shoes so you can be protected as much as possible.
  2. Take your disaster supplies kit.
  3. Take your pets with you. Bring food, water and leashes or carriers for them.
  4. Lock your home.
  5. Use travel routes specified by local authorities—don't use shortcuts because certain areas may be impassable or dangerous.
  6. Stay away from downed power lines.
  
- **Prepare to Evacuate** – If time permits, local authorities may ask you to get ready for a possible evacuation, but not to go yet. This is your opportunity to take steps that will help make an evacuation go more smoothly if it does become necessary:
  1. If you haven't already done so, put together an evacuation supplies kit in an easy-to-carry container such as a duffel bag or small plastic trash can.
  2. Include "special needs" items for any member of your household (infant formula or items for people with disabilities or older people), first aid supplies (including prescription medications), and pet food.
  3. Pack a change of clothing for each household member, a sleeping bag or bedroll for each, a battery powered radio or television and extra batteries, food, bottled water and tools.
  4. If possible include some cash and copies of important family documents (birth certificates, passports and licenses) in your kit.
  
- **Attempt to Locate** – Occasionally local officials may ask for your help in locating a missing person or object. They'll provide some information, but they may not disclose all the details because of privacy or legal concerns. If you receive such a request, follow the

directions on how to report any information you may have. Do not attempt to detain or handle the object of a search yourself.

Remember, there's no such thing as a "perfect" warning system that will always warn everyone, everywhere about every hazard. If you receive a warning from an official source, do what you can to share it with others nearby, especially any who are elderly, hard-of-hearing, vision-impaired or disabled. And if you observe a hazard yourself, don't wait for a warning, take action immediately to protect yourself, your family and your community.

### Getting More Information During Emergencies

Radio and television broadcasts are usually the best source of ongoing information about emergencies. Be aware, though, that different stations and channels serve different areas. You may need to tune around a bit to find information for your particular area. **In the San Francisco Bay Area radio station KCBS (740 AM) may be a good place to start.**

If you have Internet access, websites can be a valuable source of detailed information. Sometimes special websites are set up to provide emergency information to a particular area; these sites will be advertised on radio or TV. A few permanent websites that may be helpful include:

- [Contra Costa County Office of Emergency Services](#)
- [Contra Costa County Health Services](#)
- [American Red Cross](#)
- [National Weather Service](#)
- [Community Alert and Emergency Response \(CAER\)](#)

### Your Family Communication Plan

Make sure your family know how to get back in touch if they are displaced or separated during an emergency. Choose an out-of-town contact your family or household will call or e-mail to check on each other should a disaster occur. Your selected contact should live far enough away that they would be unlikely to be directly affected by the same event, and they should know they are the chosen contact. Make sure every household member has that contact's—and each other's—e-mail addresses and telephone numbers (home, work, pager and cell). Leave these contact numbers at your children's schools, if you have children, and at your workplace.

Your family should know that if telephones are not working, they need to be patient and try again later or try e-mail or text messaging. Many people flood the telephone lines when emergencies happen but e-mail or text messaging can sometimes get through when calls don't.

## Controlling Rumors

Not everything you may hear during an emergency will be accurate. Before spreading information you've heard, ask yourself "Who Says So?" An official? A trustworthy member of your community? Do they know for themselves, or are they only repeating something they heard from someone else? Or are they just guessing?

If you can't say for sure where the information came from, it makes sense to be skeptical. And if you do know the source, make sure you share that along with the information so other people will know Who Says So?