

- SUBJECT:** Standardizing emergency communications during and after a disaster
- COMMITTEE:** Homeland Security and Public Safety — committee substitute recommended
- VOTE:** 9 ayes — Nevárez, Paul, Burns, Calanni, Clardy, Goodwin, Israel, Lang, Tinderholt  
0 nays
- WITNESSES:** For — Rhonda Sepulveda, Catholic Charities of the Archdiocese of Galveston-Houston; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Amanda Fredriksen, AARP; Michael Barba, Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops; Dan Finch, Texas Medical Association; Bryan Hebert, United Ways of Texas; CJ Grisham)  
  
Against — None  
  
On — Nim Kidd, Texas Division of Emergency Management and the Emergency Management Council; (*Registered, but did not testify:* Aimee Bertrand, Harris County Commissioners Court; Chris Adams, Health and Human Services Commission)
- DIGEST:** CSHB 2325 would require the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM) to develop standards and applications to improve and standardize official digital communication during disaster response.
- Standards for social media use.** CSHB 2325 would require TDEM to consult with appropriate state agencies or private entities to develop standards for the use of social media as a communication tool by governmental entities during and after a disaster. These standards would:
- require state agencies, political subdivisions, first responders, and volunteers that use social media during and after a disaster to post consistent and clear information;
  - optimize the effectiveness of social media use during and after a

- disaster; and
- require certain official social media accounts be used during and after a disaster only for providing credible sources of information.

**911 text messages.** TDEM, in consultation with the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service, would be required to coordinate state and local governments' efforts to make 911 emergency services capable of receiving text messages from wireless communication devices.

**Mobile application.** TDEM would develop a mobile application to communicate critical information during a disaster directly to disaster victims and first responders. The mobile application could provide information on road and weather conditions during a disaster and disaster response and recovery activities.

**Disaster web portal.** TDEM would develop a comprehensive disaster web portal. This portal would:

- provide disaster information to the public, including information on programs and services available to disaster victims and funding for disaster assistance programs;
- include information on disaster response and recovery activities; and
- provide information on obtaining assistance from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, state agencies, organized volunteer groups, and any other entities providing disaster assistance.

**Data analytics.** To the extent feasible, TDEM would use data analytics software to integrate data from federal, state, local, and nongovernmental sources to more effectively manage disaster response and recovery.

**Study on standard communication format.** TDEM would conduct a study on the use of a standard communication format by first responders to create a common interoperable operating framework during a disaster.

The study would:

- examine the costs and benefits of promoting the use of a standard communication format;
- identify any equipment costs first responders could incur in complying with a standard format; and
- identify necessary actions to adopt a standard communication format.

TDEM would be required to issue a report on the study's findings to the governor, lieutenant governor, and members of the Legislature by September 1, 2020. Provisions relating to this study would expire on December 1, 2020.

**Community outreach.** To the extent practicable, the following entities would be required to conduct community outreach, including public awareness campaigns, and education activities on disaster preparedness each year:

- municipalities and counties;
- the Department of Public Safety (DPS), including TDEM;
- the Texas Education Agency;
- the office of the comptroller;
- the Texas Department of Insurance;
- the Texas Department of Transportation;
- the Texas Department of Housing and Community Affairs;
- the Health and Human Services Commission; and
- the Department of State Health Services.

**Emergency registry plans.** CSHB 2325 would require a political subdivision's emergency management director to develop a plan to use information from TDEM's emergency assistance registry during disaster response. The director would publish the plan on the political subdivision's website and on TDEM's site.

TDEM would develop a process by which a plan developed by a director could be published on the DPS website and designate an area of the website where the public could view such plans.

The bill would take effect September 1, 2019.

**SUPPORTERS  
SAY:**

CSHB 2325 would improve disaster response by standardizing communications and ensuring that the most accurate and up-to-date information was sent out during and after disasters. The bill also would address the lack of clarity concerning the purpose of the State of Texas Emergency Alert Registry by requiring local officials to create plans to use the registry during a disaster response.

Effective communication during a disaster is critical for disaster response efforts. However, current law insufficiently addresses the requirements for disaster-related communications. CSHB 2325 would standardize these communications and enable state agencies, first responders, political subdivisions, non-profits, and volunteers to share information with the public during and after disasters.

Standardizing communications across the state is critical to ensuring the public receives accurate information during and after a disaster. The bill would ensure local governments distributed consistent advice and information to citizens in order to avoid confusion. The bill would also go further than the existing emergency alert systems managed by the federal government, which are general and do not provide the same level of specificity that the Texas Department of Emergency Management and local authorities could provide to Texas citizens.

The bill would leverage existing resources to standardize disaster communications across statewide agencies and local governments, resulting in no cost to the state.

**OPPONENTS  
SAY:**

The bill could infringe on the ability of local governments and emergency response units to use discretion in disseminating information to the public.

Local governments should have flexibility to address the needs of individual communities during and after disasters. CSHB 2325 could limit their ability to respond appropriately by imposing top-down standards. Requiring use of a designated social media account for disaster information could undermine existing social media outreach by local governments.

CSHB 2325 could duplicate existing emergency alert systems. The Federal Emergency Management Agency already maintains the Integrated Public Alert and Warning System, available for use by states and local governments. The Federal Communications Commission also maintains the Wireless Emergency Alert system. Both systems can provide information to the public on disaster conditions, making a state-specific alert system redundant.

The bill also would mandate creation of a mobile application that could require costly maintenance and updates by the state. To avoid this, the bill should require the state to use a mobile application or platform currently in existence that did not potentially require state funds to operate in the future.