# Harford County, Maryland

# COUNTY USES BLACKBOARD CONNECT TO KEEPING RESIDENTS SAFE AND INFORMED DURING DEVASTATING BLIZZARD

When a devastating blizzard hit Harford County, Maryland, county personnel turned to the Blackboard Connect service to help keep residents safe and informed. Messages directed residents to the Harford County Information Line for all storm-related questions, thus freeing up the 911 center to address true emergencies. According to County Emergency Management Director Rick Ayers, "Blackboard Connect allowed us to inform residents of our information hotline, which in turn kept general storm inquiries out of the 911 center. The service has been instrumental in ensuring our 911 center could focus on life-threatening emergencies."



#### **CHALLENGE**

Located in the northeastern part of the state along the Susquehanna River, Harford County, Maryland has a population of 265,000. The county is a major transportation hub for the east coast; both Maryland Route 40 and I-95 run through the area, as do major railroads. The county's population is expected to rise significantly in the next few years due to the BRAC Initiative; base realignment will shift, bringing workers and families from a recently closed base in New Jersey to the nearby Aberdeen Proving Ground.

# **QUICK FACTS**

- Located in northeastern Maryland
- ▶ Population: 265,000
- Used the Blackboard Connect service to keep residents informed and out of harm's way during a blizzard

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Rick Ayers County Emergency Mgmt. Harford County, MD On February 7, 2010, a large snowstorm hit Harford County. The county was placed under a National Weather Service blizzard warning, and over the next few days more than 8,400 residents lost power. As the storm progressed, timely communication with residents became critical. Residents needed to be kept apprised of the storm's progress and informed of storm-related safety measures. Critical, too, was ensuring residents knew about the county's emergency hotline. "During a weather emergency, we don't want everybody calling 911, asking when streets are going to get plowed or asking questions about the weather, so we operate the Harford County Information Line," said Ayers. "People can call and ask questions about transportation, hospital services, even where they can get dialysis or prescriptions during the storm. Hotline operators field these questions, which helps keep our 911 operators free to deal with real emergencies."

## **SOLUTION**

To reach out to residents, Harford County turned to their existing Blackboard Connect service. The service had been implemented in January 2009 to address a lack of county-wide communication coverage. "We don't have county-wide siren coverage, and our old communication system relied on ten phone lines," said Ayers. "We knew we needed a better system after Hurricane Isabel. We used the old system during the hurricane to warn people of flooding potential. We only sent out 5,000 messages, and yet five days later, the system was still calling people because it could only use ten phone lines at a time." The county developed a list of criteria for a new communication system and began reviewing potential vendors. "Out of all the systems we looked at, Blackboard Connect was the only system that could do everything that was on our list."

Storm-related communication began on February 7 and continued through the week. The county was able to reach more than 90,000 households with critical safety-related messaging. Residents were instructed to stay home, avoid street parking, and keep roads clear for plowing efforts. Most importantly, the messaging directed residents to the Harford County Information Line for non-emergency calls instead of 911 for shelter locations and other critical storm updates.

### **RESULTS**

Using the Blackboard Connect service to direct residents to the hotline was a critical factor in the preservation of county safety and security during the storm. "Since our residents knew about the hotline, we were able to keep many calls out of the 911 center," said Ayers. "The 911 operators were free to deal with stranded motorists and other life-threatening emergencies." Messages also proved helpful in ensuring

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residents stayed home. "People listened to the messages and stayed off the road. We had very few accidents during the storm."

The county was also able to communicate key safety instructions to the community when the blizzard was at its peak; at that point, county residents were experiencing near white-out conditions with drifts up to six feet. "We instructed people whose automobiles became stuck or disabled to not leave their vehicle, and instead call 911 and report their location," Ayers said. County first responders eventually rescued stranded motorists who were disabled for more than 12 hours during the height of the storm. "We asked people to keep fire hydrants clear in case of a fire near their home," recalled Ayers. "We also gave residents with flat roofs instruction on signs that indicate a possible building collapse. In fact, we had several structures collapse, including a local VFW."

While the Blackboard Connect platform is an important component in the county's emergency management plan, the county has expanded use of the service in non-urgent situations as well. All three county municipalities are allowed to use the service to keep their own residents informed of community events and emergencies, and the department of public works uses it for notification of road and bridge closures, water main breaks, and gas leaks. Most recently, the county used the service to address the need for H1N1 vaccinations. "During National Vaccination Week, we sent out a message to everyone in the county encouraging them to get their H1N1 shot," said Ayers. "Even though cases of H1N1 are on the decline, pandemics have historically come in three waves. We wanted to make sure we were proactive in addressing the ongoing H1N1 crisis."

As the county encompasses over 440 square miles, the service's geographical targeting feature has been useful in ensuring messages reach the intended audience. "Recently, we had an increase in daytime home invasions, and our local law enforcement used the Blackboard Connect service to inform residents in a particular area of the county to be on the lookout for suspicious activity," said Ayers. "The state police also used it one night when they were chasing a vehicle and

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they had two people flee the car. They sent a message out to just that geographic area letting people know to be on the lookout for those individuals."

Rick Ayers recommends the Blackboard Connect platform to other counties that need to keep residents informed in a timely, cost-effective manner. "There are systems out there that are cheaper, and there are systems out there that can do some things. Blackboard Connect is the only service that we looked at that could do everything we requested. I recommend it."