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YARNELL HILL FIRE THE AFTERMATH

System failed to alert hundreds to evacuate

Technical glitches in Sheriff's Office automated warnings also delayed emergency calls to residents by 21 minutes.

Sean Holstege
The Republic • azcentral.com

Emergency evacuation calls during the Yarnell Hill Fire were delayed 21 minutes as dispatchers struggled to overcome technological problems, new records obtained by *The Arizona Republic* and

12 News show. Even then, only 79 calls went through, meaning hundreds of households in Yarnell and Peeples Valley were never notified, the records show. The new information contradicts previous claims by the Yavapai County Sheriff's Office that its automated alert system, CodeRED, worked as

it was supposed to. No one died during the evacuation, and there were only minor injuries. But many elderly residents had to make harrowing escapes from the fires because they received late or no notification. Among the problems highlighted in the records of 911 calls and other calls and radio transmissions from and to the

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Records show that emergency evacuation calls were delayed by technical glitches during the Yarnell Hill Fire. DAVID KADLUBOWSKI/THE REPUBLIC

INSIDE

Does your county have an automated emergency-alert phone system? **A16**

ONLINE

Complete coverage of last year's deadly Yarnell Hill Fire. **yarnell.azcentral.com**

Dems are bracing for tough midterm elections

GOP looks to capitalize on miscues by Obama to gain control of Senate.

Dan Nowicki
The Republic • azcentral.com

Legislating has all but ground to a halt on Capitol Hill as Republican and Democratic lawmakers focus on what promise to be bruising congressional midterm elections this fall that could shift control of the Senate to the GOP. Democrats, counting the two independents who caucus with them, hold a 10-seat advantage in the upper chamber. Republicans would have to win at least six seats to secure the majority, an outcome that is far from certain despite Republican momentum early in the year and President Barack Obama's clumsy health-care rollout that put Democrats under pressure. Neither of Arizona's two Republican-held seats is up for grabs in 2014. The Senate's complexion likely will be determined in races in Alaska, Arkansas, Colorado, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, North Carolina, Iowa, Montana and West Virginia.

No one is predicting that Democrats have a shot at retaking the House of Representatives, where Republicans have a 233-199 seat advantage. But Democrats are trying to hold their ground.

In Arizona, Democratic Reps. Ann Kirkpatrick, Ron Barber and Kyrsten Sinema likely will feel the most heat from challengers and big-money third-party groups that are already airing TV ads; the trio represent House districts that were drawn to be compet-

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MOTHER'S DAY

Always room in the heart for more



Loren Wise of Phoenix is mother to nine adopted children (soon to be 10), including Jayden (left), 9, and Gabriella, 2. CHERYL EVANS/REPUBLIC

She had six children already — adopted, all of them, when parents, foster families or care agencies had failed them. Six would have been enough to fill up a day, a household, a lifetime. But then the phone rang. There was a little boy in the hospital who might not survive the night. The family was about to change. Reporter **Shaun McKinnon** visits them to learn what happened next. **AZ Moments**, A25

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Deadly stress: A new study finds that frequent arguments and conflicts with friends and family can lead to an early death. **B1**

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From the Front Page || **Yarnell Hill Fire: The Aftermath**

Warnings

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sheriff's dispatch center:

» Officials knew early on June 30 that only 79, or one in eight area homes, got an automatic evacuation advisory. There is no evidence in the recordings or any other released documents that anything was done to improve outreach. Rather, dispatchers expressed satisfaction that the matter had been dealt with.

» Dispatchers delayed a mandatory evacuation 21 minutes because they didn't have information to map the alert zone. As a result, Peeples Valley residents who called the Sheriff's Office were told to flee immediately, before the fire changed directions and spared the community.

» Deputies were not redeployed to help people get out until after the first mandatory evacuation of parts of Peeples Valley and Yarnell was already underway, even though officials had begun planning for possible evacuations 12 hours earlier.

» A mobile command center didn't head toward Yarnell until 90 minutes after fire commanders requested evacuations.

With another wildland-fire season looming, the evacuation problems serve as a reminder to rural communities not to take robo-call systems for granted, safety experts say. The experts say any delay in evacuations adds danger, and advise counties to train, test and promote their systems, and have backup plans to get people to safety.

Without rigorous training and public education, "people get notification as the fire is licking their backside," said Ty Wooten, who has had a decades-long career in emergency response as a law-enforcement, fire and airport official.

"For every minute that you delay, the danger just continues to grow exponentially," said Wooten, now the operations director at the National Emergency Number Association, an Alexandria, Va.-based industry organization that represents 7,000 users of the 911 network.

In October, Yavapai County Sheriff's Office spokesman Dwight D'Evelyn said CodeRED performed "as designed" during the Yarnell Hill Fire.

The Florida company that developed CodeRED, Emergency Communications Network LLC, said at the time its technicians continuously monitored the system and reported no cause for concern during the fire. The company's marketing director, Stephanie Meyers, did not respond to new questions.

D'Evelyn said the county had not audited the performance of CodeRED and had no plans to.

Asked to comment now on the contents of dispatchers'



An aerial photo taken last July shows the aftermath of the Yarnell Hill Fire, which destroyed more than 125 homes and structures. New records show that many residents in Glen Ilah, Yarnell and Peeples Valley didn't receive automated emergency phone calls telling residents to evacuate. TOM TINGLE/THE REPUBLIC

recordings and to clarify how many residents signed up for and were contacted by CodeRED, D'Evelyn declined, citing "pending litigation against Yavapai County from some Yarnell residents."

Dozens of Yarnell-area residents have alleged in legal claims that officials gave them inadequate warnings and failed to ensure a safe and orderly evacuation.

"The evacuation became a preventable emergency filled with anxiety, panic, and terror," their claims for damages said. The officials "turned what could have been an orderly retreat into panic-filled flight."

How CodeRED works

Modern emergency call-back systems, such as CodeRED, have proven increasingly effective at reaching people in the system but are limited by how many people are included. Some residents assumed the notification was automatic, even on a mobile device.

Systems like CodeRED depend on a local database of contacts. This takes all of the listed landlines, and in some states unlisted ones as well. Then the numbers are matched to the Master Street Address Guide, which allows first responders to get to the correct address if a 911 call gets dropped.

To these are added "opt-in" accounts. Residents sign up, typically online, to be on the notification list. They provide other information, like cellphone numbers, e-mail accounts or other ways to be contacted. If their phone is a smartphone, location might not be an address, but a GPS coordinate.

All of this is entered into computer mapping systems, which become the backbone of the call-back.

Yavapai County has twice declined to say how many Yarnell-area residents are included or what efforts the

county made to sign them up before the fire.

During emergencies, incident commanders draw a perimeter around the affected communities, an area they call a "polygon." Every number in the database within the polygon gets called. Fire commanders call the Sheriff's Office to start the notifications. Once the area is defined, all that dispatchers have to do is record the message and hit the button. CodeRED does the rest.

Sometimes the databases don't match. The software from different legacy systems can mismatch. The mapping software might not be able to reconcile addresses and GPS data. Sometimes redrawing updated polygons, as a fire grows, doesn't work.

CodeRED called the numbers it had in its system, but the June 30 evacuation still went awry.

Many didn't get alerts

Evacuation struggles began early that Sunday as flames raced toward Peeples Valley, dispatch communications show.

At 9:30 a.m. a four-hour standby warning went out to residents in the fire's path. The CodeRED message advised them to prepare to leave and to expect a second warning one hour before they had to.

At 10:52 a.m., one dispatcher called her supervisor at home to report that the Yarnell Fire Department had called to ask why people whose phone numbers began with 427 prefixes weren't getting the alerts.

"I expected to get inundated with phone calls in here. And not a single person has called. So, there might be an issue with some of the residents not getting the evacuation notice for CodeRED," the dispatcher said.

Only 94 calls went out to phone numbers starting with 427, she noted, according to

the recording.

There are a combined 614 households in Yarnell and Peeples Valley, according to the 2010 census. An online white-pages service lists 159 landlines operated by CenturyLink and a total of 729 phone numbers with the 427 prefix in that area. It's unknown how many were disconnected or out of date. CenturyLink declined to discuss how many hookups it has, citing business competition.

At 10:58 a.m., commanders ordered that the Double Bar A Ranch area of Peeples Valley be cleared, the first mandatory evacuation of the day, records show. Dispatchers were still dealing with call-back problems related to the 427 prefix.

For the next five minutes, dispatchers took calls from first responders asking who was in charge of the evacuations and if they could be kept in the loop.

At 11:04 a.m., one dispatcher told the county's evacuation manager, "We can't get this CodeRED out."

She reported that they didn't have enough information, including street names, to draw the polygon. It is unclear why dispatchers were mapping the evacuation zone, when typically elsewhere that job is handled by evacuation coordinators working alongside fire commanders.

"Without a map in front of me, I can't help you," the sheriff's evacuation manager replied, noting he was not surprised people weren't getting notified. "Not a lot of people have landlines down there. And if they don't have the cellphones enrolled, they're not going to get them."

By 11:11 a.m., commanders were getting anxious.

"What's going on with CodeRED? Why are you having a hard time with the streets?" one deputy asked.

One dispatcher responded that she was using Google maps to pinpoint the evacua-

tion area and confided that she had "no idea if I'm getting the right dimensions."

At 11:16 a.m., a Peeples Valley resident called to ask if she had to leave and reported that she had been told not to. The dispatcher told her to get out immediately.

Dispatchers decided to guess at the CodeRED map. The alert went out at 11:19 a.m., 21 minutes after it was ordered.

At 11:29 a.m., a dispatcher and deputy discussed difficulties with the evacuation notices.

"We don't have a lot of people signed up on the CodeRED thing," the dispatcher said.

"As far as evacuations go, it looks like we kind of got hosed on this one. We kind of didn't get notified until too late," the deputy complained.

Other hiccups

Meanwhile, dispatchers were tracking down a duty roster and making calls to reposition deputies around the county, to cover for those heading to the fire to work on evacuations. The evacuation order already had come.

Then, at 11:22 a.m., the Sheriff's Office ordered dispatchers to find the Mobile Command Unit, used to coordinate evacuations in the field, and get it to the fire. The first call set the pattern. Dispatchers rang the first contact five times, but no one picked up. Over the next hour, they found another official who was out of state. Then another.

They reached one volunteer, but he couldn't drive the vehicle because he had to file a series of tax returns for clients the next day.

Ultimately, dispatchers found out at 12:40 p.m. that the mobile-command truck had left for the fire half an hour earlier. It had been sent 80 minutes after the first mandatory evacuation was ordered, for Peeples Valley.

Minutes after the command-truck issue was resolved, dispatchers were still dealing with the CodeRED call-back question.

Dispatchers were ordered at 12:47 p.m. to call the CodeRED representatives to find out what was going on and whether it could be fixed.

The CodeRED technician reported at 1:19 p.m. that 79 calls connected, but didn't say how many went to answering machines.

The problem with the number of CodeRED connections was never discussed again, though dispatchers talked all day about how all the calls hadn't gone through. There is no record further action was taken.

At 1:50 p.m., evacuation coordinators decided the entire region — Yarnell, Glen Ilah and Peeples Valley — needed a CodeRED call out. The weather had turned, and with it, the fire.

Safety expert Wooten, and emergency officials in Colorado who use CodeRED, said

Please see next page

Few counties in Arizona have automatic warning system

Sean Holstege
The Republic • azcentral.com

The peak of Arizona's fire season is right around the corner, but only one-third of the state's counties have an automatic evacuation warning system if flames get out of hand.

Outside Maricopa County, only one person in 20 could expect a warning call.

Safety experts tout the systems because they allow automatic switchboards to call hundreds of numbers a minute.

Historically, evacuation calls were limited by available phone lines at a county emergency office and the number of officials who could dial.

Most automated warning systems allow crisis managers to map evacuation zones, often in advance, and let the robotic dialer do the rest to reach everybody within the affected area. Safety officials consider these systems a vast improvement in capability.

But as the 2013 Yarnell Hill Fire and other catastrophic blazes have shown, these systems are limited, too.

Many residents falsely assume they are automatically covered. But only landlines, and in some cases only listed landlines, are part of the data-

EMERGENCY-NOTIFICATION SYSTEMS BY COUNTY

For information on how to sign up in counties that offer emergency-notification services, go to azcentral.com.

County	Population	Households	Countywide system	Landlines (residential)	Opt-ins (residential)
Apache	71,934	19,035	none	0	0
Cochise	129,473	49,220	Cassadian	33,000	0
Coconino	136,539	45,718	CodeRED	36,526	14,857
Gila	53,053	20,245	none	0	0
Graham	37,482	10,944	none	0	0
Greenlee	9,049	3,371	none	0	0
La Paz	20,324	10,497	none	0	0
Maricopa	4,009,412	1,402,149	Cassadian	2,300,000	21,000
Mohave	203,030	80,355	in testing	0	0
Navajo	107,322	34,867	Cassadian	11,695	NA
Pima	996,554	382,814	none	0	0
Pinal	389,350	122,746	none	0	0
Santa Cruz	46,768	13,918	none	0	0
Yavapai	215,133	91,168	CodeRED	4149	5703
Yuma	201,201	70,111	none	0	0
Arizona total	6,626,624	2,357,158		2,378,370	41,560

base used for calls. People without hard lines, or ones they don't answer, are encouraged to enroll their cellphones or e-mail accounts. Many people fail to enroll or never knew they needed to.

The Yarnell Hill Recovery Group last week began recom-

mending people watch an instructional video by Yavapai County about "evacuation issues, preparedness, and emergency notification." The group advised residents how the emergency system there works.

In Arizona, Maricopa, Co-

chise and Navajo counties use a system offered by Cassadian, while Yavapai and Coconino counties use the nation's most popular service, CodeRED, managed by Emergency Communications Network LLC of Florida.

Mohave County is testing a

system, and Pima County discontinued a system when federal Homeland Security grants, which paid for it, expired.

Statewide, 2.4 million landlines, cellphones and e-mail addresses are part of some residential call-back system. This figure does not include businesses or other accounts. All but 42,000 are landlines.

It's unknown how many Arizonans have cellphones, a trade association said. However, the Pew Research Center reported in January that 90 percent of American adults have a cellphone.

The vast majority of residents currently covered by an automatic alert system live in Maricopa County. Emergency officials there say they have 2.3 million landlines, and 21,000 opt-in accounts enrolled in their system, in a county of 4 million people, according to the most recent U.S. census data.

Outside Arizona's most populous county, there are 78,000 people with landlines and another 21,000 cellphone and e-mail accounts on the call-back lists. That's for a population of 2 million.

Even among the 600,000 people who live in rural counties with evacuation call-back systems, only one person in six can expect a call in an evacuation.

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such issues as mapping potential evacuation zones should be worked out in early fire planning, or even determined long before a fire.

In Colorado, predictable fire evacuation zones and CodeRED messages are entered into the computer before fire season, so adjustments can be made quickly in the event of a disaster.

Wooten said dispatchers are not supposed to be drawing the evacuation polygons. Still, he credited the dispatchers for their initiative. "If there is any positive in this, it's that they made the best of it, and for that they need to be commended," he said.

Fire and county officials did preplan the notifications for the earlier four-hour advisory that went out at 9:30 a.m. But by late morning, the fire was creating havoc.

The events offer an "interesting and valuable wake-up call that remote rural warnings are challenging," said Thomas Cova, director of the University of Utah's Center for Natural and Technological Hazards. He's studied wildfire evacuations for 20 years.

"I think they did what they could, but it begs for other jurisdictions to test their systems. They could be faulted for not knowing this in advance — they learned too much on the fly," he said.

Works elsewhere

In other parts of the country, CodeRED has worked well, clients say.

In Colorado, authorities in Jefferson County switched to CodeRED after fatal glitches with a previous system.

In March 2012, during the Lower North Fork Fire west of Denver, a different system run by First Call Network Inc. called all 15,000 numbers in the data bank, far more than in the polygon. Jefferson County officials halted the call-back. But that crashed the system and, by the time it was rebooted, 18 minutes had passed.

The fire burned 4,300 acres and 21 homes and killed three residents. One of them was on the list and never got a call, said Mark Techmeyer, spokesman for the Jefferson County Sheriff's Office.

After the fire, the Jefferson County Emergency Communications Authority switched vendors and this year brought in CodeRED.

"It's performed well," said the agency's executive director, Jeff Irvin.

In a 1,100-acre fire, CodeRED reached close to 90 percent of the homes, Techmeyer said.

Jefferson County is the poster child for how CodeRED should work, said Meyers, the company's spokeswoman.

In Yarnell, nothing about the fire would have taxed the infrastructure, she said. During Superstorm Sandy, 40,000 people signed up for alerts in two days. Last year, CodeRED handled 100 million calls. And during a recent test in New York, it pushed out 200,000 calls in an hour.

Just because somebody is in the system doesn't mean CodeRED, or its competing systems, will connect, however. Often there are busy signals. People often call relatives and friends during emergencies. The phone system can be overloaded. Or the number has been disconnected. Or it's paired with a fax machine. Or the disaster itself has knocked out power or phone service.

In Yarnell, power and some telephone landlines went out at about 4:35 p.m. People still there would not have received calls.

The CodeRED technician told dispatchers they called each number and let it ring for 30 seconds. After three attempts, the system assumes no one is home.

Of the 79 calls that went through, "a couple" were answered by a human.

There's no way evacuation officials can know if the people listen to the recorded alert.

In 2012, during the Waldo Canyon Fire, a system called MassCall

reached fewer than one-quarter of the targeted residents in the Colorado Springs, Colo., area, according to a special investigation commissioned by El Paso and Teller counties.

Ultimately, the success of any evacuation hinges on the effectiveness of the humans managing the technology, experts agree.

"Some public-safety agencies are too technology-dependent," Wooten said.



Glen Ilah resident Barbara Potter (left) hugs Patty Cooper after the Yarnell Hill Fire. MICHAEL CHOW/THE REPUBLIC

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