



## Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA)

The Wireless Emergency Alerts system is an essential part of America's emergency preparedness. Since its launch in 2012, the WEA system has been used more than 33,000 times to warn the public about dangerous weather, missing children, and other critical situations – all through alerts on cell phones.

WEA is a public safety system that allows customers who own certain wireless phones and other enabled mobile devices to receive geographically-targeted, text-like messages alerting them of imminent threats to safety in their area.

WEA enables government officials to target emergency alerts to specific geographic areas – lower Manhattan, for example.

WEA was established in 2008 pursuant to the Warning, Alert and Response Network (WARN) Act and became operational in 2012.

Wireless companies volunteer to participate in WEA, which is the result of a unique public/private partnership between the FCC, FEMA and the wireless industry to enhance public safety.

### How does WEA work?

A pre-authorized national, state or local government authority may send alerts regarding public safety emergencies – such as evacuation orders or shelter-in-place orders due to severe weather, a terrorist threat or chemical spill – using WEA.

The alerts from authenticated public safety officials are sent through FEMA's Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) to participating wireless carriers, which then push the alerts to mobile devices in the affected area.

### Who receives the alerts?

Alerts are broadcast to coverage areas that best approximate the zone of an emergency. (Beginning November 30, 2019, participating wireless providers must [improve geo-targeting of alerts](#) even further.) Mobile devices in the alert zone will receive the alert. This means that if an alert is sent to a zone in New York, all WEA-capable mobile devices in that zone can receive the alert, even if they are roaming or visiting from another state. In other words, a customer visiting from Chicago would receive alerts in New York so long as they have a WEA-enabled mobile device in the alert zone.

### How much do consumers pay to receive WEA?

Alerts are free. Customers do not pay to receive WEA.

### Do consumers have to sign up to receive alerts?

Consumers do not need to sign up for this service. WEA allows government officials to send emergency alerts to all subscribers with WEA-capable devices if their wireless carrier participates in the program.



## **What alerts does WEA deliver?**

Alerts from WEA cover only critical emergency situations. Consumers may receive only three types of alerts:

1. Alerts issued by the President
2. Alerts involving imminent threats to safety or life
3. Amber Alerts

Participating carriers may allow subscribers to block all but Presidential alerts.

## **What do consumers experience when they receive a WEA?**

A WEA alert appears on the screen of the recipient's handset as a text-like message. The alert is accompanied by a unique attention signal and vibration, which is particularly helpful to people with hearing or vision-related disabilities.

## **Are consumers able to receive WEAs on a prepaid phone?**

Yes. Consumers with prepaid phones can receive WEAs as long as their provider has decided to participate in WEA and the customer has a WEA-enabled device. These consumers receive the alerts just as customers with postpaid, monthly service do.

## **Does WEA track my location?**

No. WEA is not designed to – and does not – track the location of anyone receiving a WEA alert.

## **Are WEAs text messages?**

No. Many providers have chosen to transmit WEAs using a technology that is separate and different from voice calls and SMS text messages.

## **Do consumers need a new phone or a smart phone to receive alerts?**

Some phones may require only software upgrades to receive alerts, while in other cases a subscriber may need to purchase a new WEA-capable device. Consumers should check with their wireless carrier regarding the availability of WEA-capable handsets.

## **Is WEA available everywhere?**

Participation in WEA by wireless carriers is widespread but voluntary. Some carriers may offer WEA over all or parts of their service areas or over all or only some of their wireless devices. Other carriers may not offer WEA at all. Even if you have WEA-enabled device, you would not receive WEAs in a service area where the provider is not offering WEA or if your device is roaming on a provider network that does not support the WEA service. Consumers should check with their wireless carriers to determine the extent to which they are offering WEA.

## **Can consumers block WEAs?**

Partially. Participating wireless carriers may offer subscribers with WEA-capable handsets the ability to block alerts involving imminent threats to safety of life and/or AMBER Alerts; however, consumers cannot block emergency alerts issued by the President.



## **Why can't consumers block WEAs issued by the President?**

In passing the WARN Act, Congress allowed participating carriers to offer subscribers the capability to block all WEAs except those issued by the President.

## **How will subscribers know if their carrier offers WEA?**

The FCC requires all wireless carriers that do not participate in WEA to notify customers. Consumers should check with their wireless carriers to determine the extent to which they are offering WEA.

## **My friends and I have the same wireless carrier. They just received a WEA over their cell phones, but I have not. Why?**

Some participating carriers may offer WEA on some, but not all, of their mobile devices. Consumers should check with their wireless carriers to find out if their cell phone is WEA-capable.

## **How geographically precise is WEA?**

When the WEA program launched, participating wireless providers were generally required to send the alerts to a geographic area no larger than the county or counties affected by the emergency situation. As of November 2017, however, all participating wireless providers are required to transmit alerts to a geographic area that best approximates the area affected by the emergency situation, even if it is smaller than a county. In addition, beginning November 30, 2019, participating wireless providers must [improve geo-targeting of alerts](#) even further.

## **What is the FCC's role in WEA?**

The WARN Act directed the FCC to adopt technical and operational requirements for WEA service. Wireless carriers that participate in WEA must adhere to the FCC's WEA rules.

## **Does the FCC send alerts?**

No, the FCC does not send alerts. WEA alert originators include other federal agencies (such as the National Weather Service) and state and local government authorities. Alerts from authenticated public safety officials are sent through FEMA's IPAWS system to participating wireless carriers.

## **Consumer Help Center**

For more information on consumer issues, visit the FCC's Consumer Help Center at [www.fcc.gov/consumers](http://www.fcc.gov/consumers).

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Last reviewed 01/31/18

