



County may switch emergency alert providers after refinery fire

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Concerned about problems with Contra Costa County's emergency phone alert system during the Chevron refinery fire earlier this month, county health officials met Wednesday with a potential new vendor to administer the system.

The system, currently administered by CityWatch Notification Systems, sends alerts to landline phones to inform local residents of emergencies. The notification process is supposed to take no more than 30 minutes, county Supervisor John Gioia said.

Instead, it took up to three hours for many residents to receive a phone notification urging them to shelter in place, as thick black smoke spewed from the refinery the evening of Aug. 6.

"That's unacceptable -- it doesn't meet our expectations of what the vendor's performance should be," Gioia said. "We're going to look at whether new technology and a new vendor makes sense so we can inform the public in a much more timely manner. We all deserve to be informed quickly after an industrial incident."

Katherine Hern, who manages the county's emergency warning system, is meeting with a prospective new phone notification system vendor in San Diego Wednesday to weigh that possibility, said Randy Sawyer, Contra Costa Health Services' chief environmental and hazardous materials officer.

Sawyer said one problem with the current system is that on Aug. 6, it automatically re-dialed landlines where there wasn't a response or an answering machine. That glitch and other problems likely contributed to the system's slowness during the refinery fire, he said.

But Sawyer and Gioia said that the county emergency notification system's other elements, including sirens and calls to cellphones that are registered through the sheriff's office, worked much more efficiently than the landline system.

Residents can sign up to receive cellphone emergency alerts by visiting

<http://www.cococws.us/register.html>.

"We encourage people to register on their cellphone," Gioia said.

Gioia, a Richmond resident, said he received an automated call on his cellphone alerting him to the fire around 6:45 p.m. on Aug. 6, about 15 minutes after the fire was reported.

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