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Sacred Heart University's Online Emergency Plan Boosts Interagency Cooperation

By Paul J. Healy, Executive Director, Emergency Management and Department of Public Safety, Sacred Heart University

Summary

Taking its responsibility to students, faculty, and staff seriously, Sacred Heart University wanted a highly effective emergency response plan, one that could be updated at any time, with information always available to first responders and other authorized users. For this lifesaving function, the university built a Web site based on Microsoft® Office SharePoint® Server 2007. The result is more detailed and updated plans and better interagency coordination. Sacred Heart university is serious about campus safety, as you can find a direct link to their Public Safety Department on the university's home Web page, which contains a rich site of information for the entire campus community.

Business Needs

Virtually every organization can benefit from a disaster-recovery plan — but colleges and universities are among the few institutions that are federally and/or state mandated to maintain emergency and incident management plans.

Connecticut's Sacred Heart University was subject not only to the federal requirements, but also to state requirements that call for such plans to be shared with "first responders" such as local police, firefighters, health officials and emergency medical personnel. The concern stems both from the threat of natural disasters such as Hurricane Katrina-affected gulf state colleges and universities and from the threat of criminal incidents.

Sacred Heart University met those requirements with more than 100 pages of plans held in a three-ring binder and reproduced in binders for the offices of the state and municipal emergency services first responders. But that "paper" medium had severe limitations. Binders might not be updated, might not be available to first responders when and where needed, and might never have been shared with all the university personnel who needed them.

What the university wanted instead was a solution that would make information always available to campus users wherever they were, that would limit access to sensitive information to authorized users, and that would be a central repository for information.

In addition to text-based information, the solution had to hold campus maps and blueprints and interior photos of the buildings on campus. The system needed to be as accessible to off-campus first responders as it was to authorized campus personnel, and flexible enough to continually reflect new needs and new information.



Sacred Heart University Public Safety Leadership Team (R-L) Paul Healy, Jack Fernandez and Addlie Dennis-Manson

In the wake of shooting incidents at other campuses, officials at Sacred Heart also wanted a system that would permit anonymous reporting of suspicious behavior.

Solution

For its Comprehensive All-Hazard and Business Continuity Plan, Sacred Heart University first explored the use of commercially available software packages — until it realized that those packages would cost between U.S. \$40,000 and \$140,000, depending on licensing and consulting costs.

The Public Safety Department then began to explore alternatives already in place elsewhere at Sacred Heart. Paul J.

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Healy, Executive Director, Emergency Management and Department of Public Safety, Sacred Heart University, put together a team to examine the options for the department. The one the department focused on was Microsoft® Office SharePoint® Server 2007. The SharePoint Server had the attributes the team was looking for; it was structured to live on the Web and was capable of holding a large document repository and making that repository accessible to users through highly detailed software permissions. Development was easy and uploading documents was as simple as clicking and saving them.

Healy and his team developed their online Comprehensive All-Hazard and Business Continuity Plan on their own over a two-month period, largely by configuring standard features of Office SharePoint Server 2007, rather than developing custom code. In September 2009, they unveiled the system to the (federal, state and municipal) first responders who are responsible for working with it.

The plan exists as a password-protected SharePoint site within the main Sacred Heart University Public Safety site, and its home page includes tabs for Building Plans, Vulnerabilities, Municipal Partners, State and Federal Partners, Training and Silent Witness Program, which enable first responders and other users to go immediately to relevant sections of the plan. The Public Safety department uses the Active Directory® service, a feature of the Windows Server® 2008 operating system, to grant access to specific parts of the plan based on a user's role or even the user's unique Active Directory account in the university system. First responders have been granted Active Directory accounts for the purpose of accessing the emergency plan.

Anonymous reporting of suspicious behavior is made possible by the Sacred Heart University Silent Witness Anonymous Tip Form on the SharePoint site. When a form is completed, the system automatically notifies the campus security dispatcher. A team of university personnel known as the ECT — Early Care Team — evaluate threats that are not

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deemed to be emergencies, and students identified through the program may be encouraged to go to counseling.

Benefits

The financial savings of up to \$140,000 and the fact that extensive staff training was unnecessary are the least of the benefits derived from putting the university's Comprehensive All-Hazard and Business Continuity Plan on a SharePoint site.

The highly detailed information is organized in an intuitive way, enabling time-pressed personnel responding to an incident to get all the information they need faster than is possible from three-ring binders. Moreover, that information is more valuable by being up-to-date. The goal is to make public safety information available at the convenience of faculty, staff and students whose daily schedules are full of academic, athletic, volunteer, cultural and social activities. SharePoint fits this dynamic very nicely.

The law requires the department to annually update the plans. Working with paper-based plans required enormous staff time and effort and allowed only an annual update. With SharePoint Server, even daily updates are possible and simple so it contains not only more information, but also better information — information that could help save lives during an emergency.

The permission-based system gives students, faculty, and staff access to public information about responding to emergencies, but not to all aspects of the underlying plans themselves. First responders have read-only access to all the underlying plans, but they can edit or change only the plans related to their own agencies' tactical documents.

The flexibility of Office SharePoint Server makes it easy to add plans for university departments such as the public

safety aspects of the athletics and international study programs as needed. There are structured separate functional tabs for these departments to post their emergency plans and/or procedures. The flexibility of Microsoft technology in general provides even greater benefits. For example, the Public Safety department is now providing access to the Silent Witness tip program from Windows® phones and other mobile devices.

Results

Sacred Heart University has won independent praise for its site as well, winning the 2009 Technology & Innovation Award from the International Association of Emergency Managers (IAEM); the award presentation was conducted in October at the 57th IAEM Conference in Orlando, Florida.

IAEM, with more than 5,000 members in 58 countries, is a non-profit educational organization dedicated to promoting the goals of saving lives and protecting property during emergencies and disasters.

About the Author

*After 25 years in active law enforcement serving in a municipal police department, state police and the Chief Prosecutor's Office in Connecticut as Chief Inspector, **Paul Healy** was given an opportunity to bring his knowledge and experience to a university campus public safety department as the Executive Director, Emergency Management and Department of Public Safety, Sacred Heart University. Healy is a graduate of the FBI National Police Academy and holds ASCJ, BSBM and MSBM degrees.*

In just over a year, the newly formed Sacred Heart University Public Safety Leadership Team composed of Healy, Director Jack Fernandez and Manager Addlie Dennis-Manson at Sacred Heart University has garnered a federal grant for \$100,000 to enhance surveillance capabilities, created an outstanding Web site of information on contemporary security topics, created a Silent Witness Program to provide timely information to university officials and rolled out an award winning new Web-based emergency management plan using Microsoft® Office SharePoint®.