

Chapter 35

Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency—Alerting the Public about Imminently Dangerous Events

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency uses the SaskAlert program, which leverages a national alerting system, to notify the public of emergencies in real time via mobile devices (e.g., cell phones), radio, television or on its website. Authorized participants (like municipalities) create alerts in Alert Ready.¹ Timely, accurate and clear public alerting can help residents and visitors to Saskatchewan adequately prepare for situations posing risks to their health and safety.

As of March 2021, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency made some progress to improve its processes related to alerting the public about imminently dangerous events, but further work is needed.

The Agency updated and entered into written contracts for day-to-day administration of the SaskAlert program with the program administrator. These contracts clearly outline key responsibilities for the Agency and the program administrator, including the program administrator supporting authorized participants in creating and issuing public alerts.

While the Agency made some improvements in monitoring the program administrator's operations, the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions impacted its ability to fully monitor all key responsibilities (e.g., conduct quarterly site visits).

In addition, the Agency did not always take action to ensure only authorized participants, who regularly demonstrate they know how to issue accurate alerts, can issue public alerts (e.g., did not remove the ability of authorized participants to issue public alerts when they did not complete the required quarterly practice alerts).

Active and regular monitoring could help the Agency identify authorized participants at a higher risk of issuing inaccurate, unnecessary, or untimely alerts. Issuance of such alerts could negatively affect the public's confidence in the SaskAlert program. Loss of public confidence may result in the public not paying sufficient attention to risks and dangers outlined in the alerts and increasing undue risks to their health and safety.

2.0 INTRODUCTION

2.1 Alerting the Public about Imminently Dangerous Events

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency is responsible for providing or supporting public safety services for and with the people, municipalities, Indigenous peoples, public safety

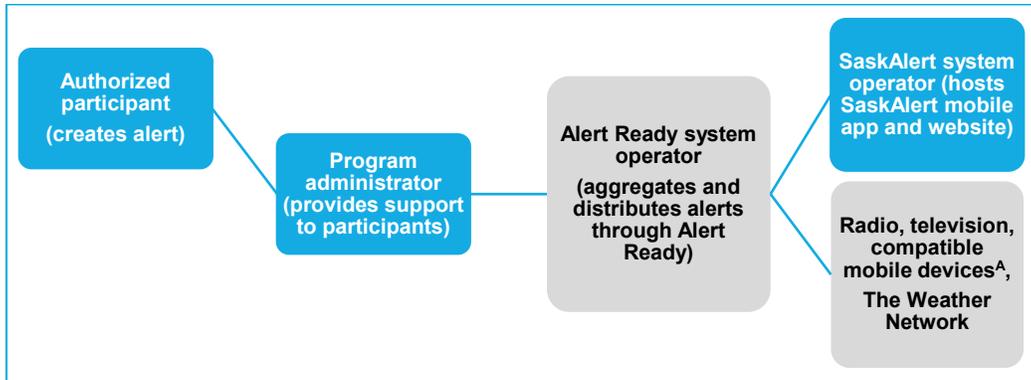
¹ The SaskAlert program leverages the federal National Alert Aggregation and Dissemination system (Alert Ready) to issue public alerts. Authorized users are individuals from municipalities, First Nations, Saskatchewan RCMP, or provincial government agencies who voluntarily agree to participate in the SaskAlert program.



service providers, and the Government of Saskatchewan.² The Agency is also responsible for the SaskAlert program (previously the responsibility of the Ministry of Government Relations).³

The SaskAlert program provides the public with critical information on emergencies in real time.⁴ It includes communicating alerts via the SaskAlert website (SaskAlert.ca) and the SaskAlert mobile app. It leverages the Federal National Alert Aggregation and Dissemination System to issue public alerts, commonly called Alert Ready.⁵

Figure 1—Key Parties Involved in Issuing Public Alerts for SaskAlert Program



Source: Adapted from information provided by the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency.
^A Compatible devices at April 2021 include Android devices with version 4.2 and higher, and iPhones with version 8 and higher. Blue boxes indicate provincial responsibility (SaskAlert program). Gray boxes indicate federal responsibility of the Alert Ready system.

As shown in **Figure 1**, a number of key parties assist the Agency in delivering the SaskAlert program. They include authorized participants (approximately 200 active participants at March 2021), a program administrator, the Alert Ready system operator, and the SaskAlert system operator. Authorized participants include individuals from municipalities, First Nations, Saskatchewan RCMP, and provincial government agencies who voluntarily agree to participate in the SaskAlert program.⁶ Authorized participants are responsible for creating alerts issued to the public.

2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our first follow-up audit of management’s actions on the four recommendations we made in our *2019 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 6, about the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency’s processes for alerting the public about imminently dangerous events that may pose risks to public health and safety.⁷

² *The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency Act, 2019*, s. 2–3(1).
³ Order in Council 269/2019 dated June 24, 2019.
⁴ www.saskpublicsafety.ca/at-home/saskalert (9 September 2021).
⁵ In 2008, the Federal Government engaged the operator of The Weather Network to develop and implement the National Alert Aggregation and Dissemination System.
⁶ In Saskatchewan, municipalities are responsible for safe communities under *The Municipalities Act* (section 4). www.publications.gov.sk.ca/freelaw/documents/English/Statutes/Statutes/M36-1.pdf; *The Northern Municipalities Act, 2010* (section 4) www.publications.gov.sk.ca/freelaw/documents/English/Statutes/Statutes/N5-2.pdf; and *The Cities Act* (section 4) www.publications.gov.sk.ca/freelaw/documents/english/Statutes/Statutes/c11-1.pdf. (8 April 2021).
⁷ Find the original report regarding these recommendations at www.auditor.sk.ca/publications/public-reports. We reported the original audit work in *2019 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 6, pp. 77–93. The audit assessed the 12-month period ending January 31, 2019.

To conduct this audit engagement, we followed the standards for assurance engagements published in the *CPA Canada Handbook—Assurance* (CSAE 3001). To evaluate the Agency’s progress toward meeting our recommendations, we used the relevant criteria from the original audit. The Agency’s management agreed with the criteria in the original audit.

In performing this follow-up audit, we interviewed Agency staff and management responsible for SaskAlert program administration. We examined management records relating to monitoring its program administrator, tested samples of practice as well as live alerts, and examined the appropriateness of user access to the Alert Ready system.

3.0 STATUS OF RECOMMENDATIONS

This section sets out each recommendation including the date on which the Standing Committee on Public Accounts agreed to the recommendation, the status of the recommendation at March 31, 2021, and the Agency’s actions up to that date.

3.1 Written Contracts in Place for SaskAlert Program Administration

We recommended the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency (formerly the Ministry of Government Relations) maintain a robust and enforceable written contract with the party providing day-to-day administration for the SaskAlert program. (2019 Report – Volume 1, p. 83, Recommendation 1; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 26, 2020)

Status—Implemented

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency maintains robust and enforceable written agreements with its service provider responsible for day-to-day administration of the SaskAlert program.

The Agency signed a service agreement and related terms of reference with the program administrator (service provider) effective January 1, 2020 and February 26, 2020 respectively.⁸ We found these documents clearly outlined key roles and responsibilities of the Agency and the program administrator as shown in **Figure 2**.

Figure 2—Key Responsibilities of the SaskAlert Program Administrator and the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency

Key Responsibilities	
Program Administrator	Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Using Agency guidance, train participants to create alerts in Alert Ready^A Provide assistance to participants to issue practice alerts Review accuracy of quarterly practice alerts in Alert Ready test environment and monitor their 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set overall SaskAlert program policy direction and operational program requirements Set training requirements for participants Set up participants in Alert Ready with access aligned to their jurisdiction’s responsibilities

⁸ The Agency and the program administrator agreed to revised Terms of Reference effective March 16, 2021, with no termination date. The revised terms of reference require program administrator staff to submit quarterly practice alerts to the Agency for review.



Key Responsibilities	
Program Administrator	Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency
<p>completion by authorized participants and program administrator issuing alerts (notify Agency within two weeks where participants do not complete alerts as expected)^D</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operate a 24/7 helpline to support participants creating alerts^B • Issue alerts when requested by authorized participants • Review live alerts issued by participants for accuracy and follow up with participants as required^C • Submit reports on participant completion of quarterly practice alerts within two weeks of quarterly requirements, as well as submit training course evaluation results (when available) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Monitor and update authorized participants' access to Alert Ready (e.g., change status to suspended where a participant does not complete quarterly practice alerts) • Perform quarterly site visits to evaluate the program administrator's operation of the SaskAlert program, and review records

Source: Adapted from Amended and Restated Service Agreement effective January 1, 2020 to March 31, 2028 and SaskAlert Program Management and Operations Terms of Reference effective February 26, 2020 with no termination date.

^A In 2020, the Agency developed a training curriculum and materials for the program administrator to deliver to new participants. Materials include the program administrator's contact information for practice alerts (phone number and email), and for the 24/7 helpline (phone number and email).

^B The program administrator staffs its helpline with approximately 55 individuals.

^C Alert Ready IT system automatically issues an email for every live alert issued, updated, and cancelled in SaskAlert to the program administrator. It also automatically tracks any changes made to an alert. In addition, the program administrator can document in the system conversations with authorized participants (i.e., SaskAlert events call log).

^D Revised Terms of Reference effective March 16, 2021, with no termination date, require program administrator staff to submit quarterly practice alerts to the Agency for review.

Having a current robust agreement and terms of reference with its program administrator helps ensure each party has a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. They also provide the Agency with a basis to monitor and evaluate the program administrator.

3.2 Not Sufficiently Monitoring, Partly Due to COVID-19 Pandemic

We recommended the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency (formerly the Ministry of Government Relations) document its regular monitoring of all key responsibilities of its SaskAlert program administrator. (2019 Report – Volume 1, p. 88, Recommendation 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 26, 2020)

Status—Partially Implemented

We recommended the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency (formerly the Ministry of Government Relations) actively monitor whether SaskAlert participants complete timely and accurate alerts, and take action where necessary (e.g., suspend system access). (2019 Report – Volume 1, p. 89, Recommendation 4; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 26, 2020)

Status—Partially Implemented

While the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency monitored some of the SaskAlert program administrator's key responsibilities, it was unable to fully evaluate all key operations because of the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. In addition, the Agency did not always take action to ensure only authorized participants who demonstrate they know how to issue accurate alerts have access to Alert Ready.

Between March 2019 and March 2021, the Agency conducted two site visits rather than eight because of COVID-19 pandemic travel restrictions. The Terms of Reference indicate the Agency will visit the site quarterly to evaluate the program administrator's operations, and review records.⁹ We found:

- In its July 2019 site visit, the Agency discussed the findings from the administrative review completed in May 2019. The Agency reviewed the appropriateness of user access in the Alert Ready system, and the completeness and accuracy of the program administrator's files. However, it did not review the program administrator's records for providing helpline support to participants, or participants' training, or live alert monitoring.
- In its March 2021 site visit, the Agency established processes for subsequent quarterly site visits rather than evaluating the program administrator's SaskAlert operations and reviewing its related records. It plans to resume its quarterly site visits in 2021–22 (depending on COVID-19 pandemic restrictions).

Between March 2019 and March 2021 (our audit period), the Agency carried out the following activities to monitor the program administrator's operations and key responsibilities.

In early 2019, the Agency completed an administrative review of the program administrator's SaskAlert files. At the Agency's request, the program administrator submitted its files to the Agency. The review identified numerous issues (e.g., missing and incomplete documentation, inappropriate access to Alert Ready). The Agency held various meetings with the program administrator discussing the review's results as well as steps to address identified issues (e.g., met in July 2019, September 2019, March 2020, and September 2020).

The Agency also monitors complaints from authorized participants about the program administrator's supports, if any. We noted the SaskAlert program website includes the Agency's contact information that participants can use if they wish to report issues about the program administrator's support, or lack thereof.¹⁰ During the audit period, the Agency received one complaint. Our testing found the Agency reported the concern to the program administrator promptly and they took appropriate action to resolve the concern.

With respect to training: The Agency updated its program training in 2020 to reflect changes to the SaskAlert program (e.g., incorporated participants' ability to phone the program administrator to issue alerts on their behalf). During 2021, the program administrator facilitated one virtual training session in January 2021 for new alert issuers. Agency staff attended, and were satisfied with, the training delivered.

With respect to reviewing participants' quarterly practice alerts and changes to participant access in Alert Ready: Throughout the year, the Agency received emails listing authorized participants who did not complete quarterly practice alerts as required. Based on emails from the program administrator, the Agency follows up on participants' quarterly practice alerts, as well as updates its master user list and participant access in

⁹ The Terms of Reference in place with the program administrator prior to the Terms of Reference approved in February 2020 also included an expectation that the Agency perform quarterly site visits to evaluate the program administrator's operation of the program and review records.

¹⁰ www.saskatchewan.ca/residents/emergency/saskalert (15 April 2021).



the Alert Ready system (e.g., suspend participants' access who did not meet quarterly practice alert requirements). Practice alerts are designed to confirm authorized participants know how to issue accurate alerts and when to issue them.

We found the Agency documented its quarterly practice alert review in its SaskAlert program master user list.¹¹

Our testing of 23 participants determined whether the Agency followed up on authorized participants not completing practice alerts as required; we found the Agency:

- Did not document its follow up for three participants we tested. Also, contrary to the Agency's standards of practice, one of these three participants' ability to issue alerts continued (i.e., active status in the Alert Ready system).
- Did not receive information on whether program administrator staff who issue alerts on behalf of program participants completed quarterly practice alerts as required. The program administrator employs approximately 55 staff who can issue alerts on behalf of program participants. Our testing included two of those 55 employees. The revised Terms of Reference, effective March 16, 2021, now require the program administrator's employees to submit quarterly practice alerts to the Agency for review.

We also found, contrary to the Terms of Reference, the program administrator does not always notify the Agency on participants' quarterly practice alert completion within the expected two-week timeframe (14 days). For December 2020, the program administrator notified the Agency 28 days after the quarter. Timely notification helps the Agency ensure authorized participants know how to issue accurate and timely alerts; and enables the Agency to take prompt action when issues arise. Participants who do not complete ongoing practice alerts increase their risk of being unable to create a timely or accurate alert in notifying the public about a real emergency when it occurs.

With respect to operating the 24/7 helpline, issuing alerts when requested, and reviewing live alerts from participants: The program administrator does not provide the Agency with information on these key responsibilities to allow the Agency to actively monitor the operation of the helpline or issuance and review of live alerts throughout the year. This increases the importance of the Agency completing site visits.

The Agency noted it informally reviews live alerts issued through the Alert Ready system. It keeps support of its review of live alerts only when it requests changes. For example, in April 2021, the Agency identified an alert issued for the entire province of Saskatchewan rather than for a certain jurisdiction as intended. The Agency asked the program administrator to cancel and re-issue the correct alert.

Our testing found the program administrator provided authorized participants with support. We tested 25 live alerts issued, and found the program administrator, consistent with its assigned responsibilities, documented call details with authorized participants in the

¹¹ SaskAlert program master user list is an excel spreadsheet the Agency uses to maintain current participant information. This includes, but is not limited to: email address, phone number, type of alert issuer (new trainee, Alert Ready user, deactivated Alert Ready user, phone-in only participant), Alert Ready practice training and base alert requirement completion, and Alert Ready system access activation date.

SaskAlert event call log.¹² We also found for these 25 alerts, the program administrator confirmed caller credentials before issuing an alert, documented details of alerts issued, and updated, cancelled, and issued alerts based on resolutions between multiple jurisdictions.

The key role of the program administrator is to support authorized participants to help ensure they issue appropriate and accurate alerts. Irregularly monitoring the program administrator's key responsibilities increases the risk of participants issuing inappropriate or inaccurate alerts, or not issuing alerts, when necessary. Issuing inaccurate or unnecessary alerts pose a threat to the SaskAlert program's credibility.

3.3 Periodic Review of User Access to the Alert Ready System Required

We recommended the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency (formerly the Ministry of Government Relations) work with the operator of Alert Ready (the National Alert Aggregation and Dissemination System) to obtain information needed to enable a periodic review of the appropriateness of user access to the System. (2019 Report – Volume 1, p. 88, Recommendation 3; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 26, 2020)

Status—Partially Implemented

As at February 2021, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency was setting up a process to enable periodic review of the appropriateness of user access to Alert Ready, but had not yet carried out its first review.

During 2019, the Agency obtained reports from the Alert Ready system operator outlining user access in Alert Ready, and reviewed the appropriateness of access granted, in detail. It updated user access to Alert Ready accordingly. After this review in 2019, the Agency obtained access to the details of access granted to SaskAlert users in Alert Ready (e.g., the Agency can generate user access reports to enable review of user access).

Since the 2019 detailed review, the Agency updates user access and details about authorized users in the system and its master SaskAlert user list based on the following:

- Its ad hoc review of alert activity reports in Alert Ready for participants who have not completed quarterly practice alerts, as well as results of its follow up with jurisdictions to determine whether that participant continues to require user access¹³
- Periodic reporting from the program administrator on authorized participants who do not complete quarterly practice alert requirements, as well as the results of its follow up
- Identified changes directly received from authorized participants (e.g., user no longer requires access, change to email address)

¹² SaskAlert event call log includes details from calls to the helpline including event number, time created, time closed, date, employee identification, and discussion. The program administrator maintains the log. The Agency does not obtain a copy.

¹³ Alert activity reports in Alert Ready provide the Agency with the date authorized participants completed practice alerts.



Our testing found that the Agency's updating process does not always ensure users have appropriate access in Alert Ready. At February 2021, the Agency had 227 users with access to Alert Ready. We tested 23 Alert Ready users and found the Agency appropriately included each user in its SaskAlert program master user list.

However, for seven of the 23 users tested—five authorized participants and one program administrator staff (who can issue alerts)—users' access in Alert Ready was not appropriate. Each missed two or more practice alerts but continued to have alert issuing capabilities contrary to the Agency's statement of practice, and one participant with phone-in only status inappropriately had the ability to issue alerts.¹⁴

In addition, the Agency does not ask participating jurisdictions with authorized participants to review the appropriateness of user access to the Alert Ready system. Good practice suggests at least an annual review. At February 2021, the Agency expects to carry out its next detailed user access review in July 2021. The Agency plans to conduct these reviews quarterly going forward.

Having participants with inappropriate access increases the risk of inappropriate alerts being issued, which could negatively affect the SaskAlert program's credibility. Timely, accurate and clear public alerting help people adequately prepare for imminently dangerous events.

¹⁴ Phone-in status means the participant calls the program administrator to issue an alert based on information given by the participant.