

Chapter 27

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

1.0 MAIN POINTS

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency uses SaskAlert to notify the public of emergencies in real time via mobile devices (e.g., cell phones), radio, television or its website. Timely, accurate and clear public alerting can help residents and visitors to Saskatchewan adequately prepare for situations that pose risks to their health and safety.

Authorized participants (like municipalities) create alerts in an IT system called Alert Ready.¹ Alert Ready pushes alerts to the public through the SaskAlert website and mobile app. The Agency uses a SaskAlert program administrator to support authorized participants in creating and issuing public alerts.

As of January 2023, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency improved its processes related to alerting the public about imminently dangerous events.

The Agency monitored the SaskAlert program administrator by holding quarterly meetings and by reviewing periodic reports provided by the administrator. The reports summarized live and practice alerts completed by authorized participants. The Agency confirmed authorized participants completed practice alerts each quarter (which demonstrates these participants know how to issue accurate alerts) or removed authorized participants when they did not complete required quarterly practice alerts.

Active and regular monitoring helps the Agency to identify authorized participants at higher risk of issuing inaccurate, unnecessary, or untimely alerts.

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 service providers, and the Government of Saskatchewan.² Since 2019, the Agency is also responsible for the SaskAlert Program (previously the responsibility of the Ministry of Government Relations).

The Program provides the public with critical information on emergencies in real time.³ It includes communicating alerts via the SaskAlert website (SaskAlert.ca) and the SaskAlert

¹ The SaskAlert program leverages the federal National Alert Aggregation and Dissemination System (Alert Ready) to issue public alerts. Authorized users are individuals from participating local governing jurisdictions (e.g., cities, rural municipalities, First Nation communities), provincial government agencies and Environment Canada that voluntarily agree to participate in the SaskAlert program.

² *The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency Act, 2019*, s. 2-3(1).

³ www.saskpublicsafety.ca/at-home/saskalert (20 October 2023).

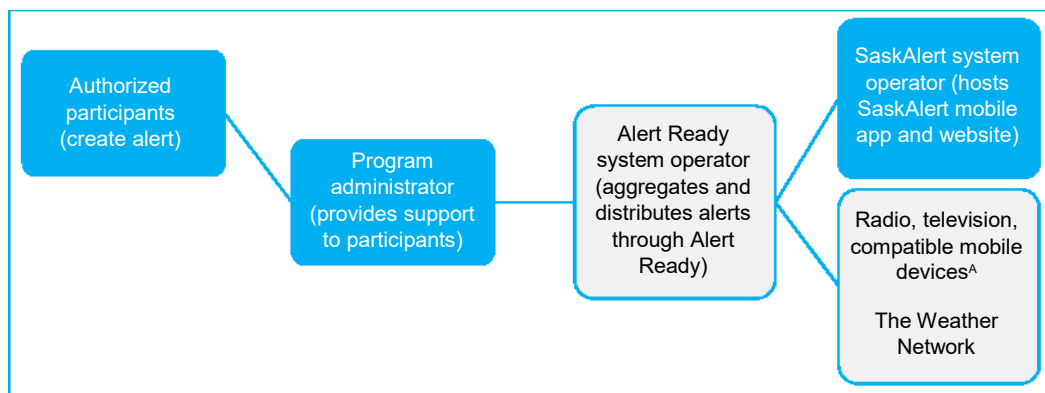


mobile application (i.e., app). It leverages the Federal National Alert Aggregation and Dissemination System to issue public alerts, commonly called Alert Ready.⁴

As shown in **Figure 1**, a number of key parties assist the Agency in delivering the Program. They include authorized participants (approximately 100 active participants at January 2023), a program administrator, the Alert Ready system operator, and the SaskAlert system operator.

Authorized participants include individuals from participating local governing jurisdictions (e.g., cities, rural municipalities, First Nation communities), provincial government agencies, and Environment Canada that voluntarily agree to participate in the program.⁵ Authorized participants are responsible for creating alerts issued to the public.

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



Source: Adapted from information provided by the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency.
^A Compatible devices at September 2023 include Android devices, version 4.2 and higher, and iPhones, version 8 and higher.
Blue boxes indicate provincial responsibility (SaskAlert program).
Grey boxes indicate federal responsibility (Alert Ready system).

2.2 Focus of Follow-Up Audit

This chapter describes our second follow-up audit of management’s actions on the three remaining recommendations we first made in our *2019 Report – Volume 1*, Chapter 6, and subsequently in our *2021 Report – Volume 2*, Chapter 35, 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.^{6,7}

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

⁴ In 2008, the federal government engaged the operator of The Weather Network to develop and implement the National Alert Aggregation and Dissemination System.
⁵ In Saskatchewan, municipalities are responsible for safe communities under *The Municipalities Act* (section 4) www.publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/11455; *The Northern Municipalities Act, 2010* (section 4) www.publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/31500; and *The Cities Act* (section 4) www.publications.saskatchewan.ca/#/products/408 (25 July 2023).
⁶ *2019 Report – Volume 1, Chapter 6*, pp. 77–93 and *2021 Report – Volume 2, Chapter 35*, pp. 253–260.
⁷ The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency assumed responsibility for the SaskAlert program from the Ministry of Government Relations in July 2019.

To carry out our follow-up audit, we interviewed Agency staff and management responsible for administration of the SaskAlert program. We examined management records and reports related to monitoring its program administrator, examined practice alerts, and assessed 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 January 31, 2023, and the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency's actions up to that date.

3.1 Monitoring SaskAlert Program Administrator and Participants

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—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—Implemented

The Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency monitored its SaskAlert program administrator through quarterly meetings and by reviewing regular reports on practice and live alerts issued. The Agency regularly confirmed authorized participants completed practice alerts each quarter or removed those participants when they did not complete required quarterly practice alerts.

We found the Agency met with the SaskAlert program administrator on a quarterly basis to discuss practice alerts, training, issues or concerns.

Throughout the year, the Agency received listings of authorized participants who completed live alerts and quarterly practice alerts. Practice alerts help to confirm authorized participants know how to issue accurate alerts and when to issue them.

We found the Agency assessed whether the program administrator performed quality reviews of all the live alerts issued and followed up with the program administrator where this did not appear to be the case.

Based on the practice alert listings from the program administrator, the Agency updates its master user listing of participant access in the Alert Ready system and follows up on



participants who did not complete quarterly practice alerts (e.g., suspend access of participants who did not meet quarterly practice alert requirements).⁸

We tested eight participants from the listing and confirmed they completed practice alerts as required, and that the Agency documented the practice alert details in the master user listing.

We found the Agency sent reminders to participants who had not completed their practice alerts, notifying them to complete their alerts within a certain timeframe or have their access to the Alert Ready system deactivated. The Agency maintained a list of authorized participants who had their access deactivated and on what date.

Regularly monitoring the SaskAlert program administrator and whether participants complete required practice alerts reduces the risk of participants issuing inappropriate or inaccurate alerts.

3.2 Completing Periodic Review of Alert Ready User Access

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 2; Public Accounts Committee agreement February 26, 2020)

Status—Implemented

At January 2023, the Saskatchewan Public Safety Agency maintained a listing of users who could access the Alert Ready system and periodically updated this listing based on participants' completion of practice alerts, user changes sought and provided by participating jurisdictions/agencies, and changes requested directly to the Agency.

The Agency updates user access and details about authorized participants in the Alert Ready system and its master user listing based on the following:

- The results of its follow-up emails to authorized participant agencies to determine whether participants continue to require user access
- Periodic reporting from the program administrator on authorized participants who do not complete quarterly practice alerts, and the results of its follow up with those participants
- Identified changes received directly from authorized participants (e.g., change to email address, user returned from parental leave)

⁸ SaskAlert program master user listing is a spreadsheet the Agency uses to maintain current participant information. This includes, but is not limited to, alert issuer name, 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 dates, and Alert Ready system access activation date.

We saw evidence of the Agency asking participating jurisdictions/agencies (e.g., municipalities) with authorized participants to review the appropriateness of user access to the Alert Ready system during 2022.

We assessed the list of authorized participants in Alert Ready at January 2023 and found the Agency appropriately documented all participants on its master user listing. Overall, the listing included about 100 active participants who could issue alerts.

We also tested eight participants from the listing and confirmed they completed practice alerts as required, and that the Agency documented the practice alert details in the master user listing. The Agency sent reminders to participants who had not completed their practice alerts, notifying them to complete their alerts within a certain timeframe or have their access to the system deactivated.

Periodically reviewing user access ensures only authorized participants have appropriate access and reduces the risk of participants issuing inaccurate or inappropriate alerts.

