# The Case for Site-wide Notification in Hospitals

## The challenges:

Hospitals face unique challenges that impact their ability to communicate effectively with patients and staff. Since they operate 24/7, these facilities are inherently vulnerable to security risks including violence against patients or staff, infant abductions, patient wanderings, and theft of drugs and major assets (Sullivan 2013). Furthermore, a 2014 survey by the International Healthcare Security and Safety Foundation reported that violent crime in U.S. hospitals rose 25 percent in 2013. In the event of an onsite crime, hospital staff must be able to communicate quickly throughout the facility to warn or update colleagues.

In addition, the focus on emergency management has grown considerably since the 9/11 attacks and Hurricane Katrina, when affected hospitals were unable to handle the surge of patients and/or the loss of power. Prior to these events, many hospitals lacked adequate disaster plans and redundant communications systems, which severely hampered staff's efforts to manage the crisis and subsequently put some patients at risk (Gray and Herbert, 2006). Pandemics such as the H1N1 flu or avian influenza pose even greater challenges to hospital preparedness. Unlike natural disasters or terrorism that are restricted to location, infectious diseases can spread anywhere quickly, and they could cause hospitals and/or equipment to be abandoned if staff were to become sick or refuse to go to work (Levin, Gebbie and Qureshi, 2007). The need for timely, effective communication becomes imperative in dealing with infectious outbreaks.

In normal operating conditions, hospital staff are interrupted up to 11 times an hour by pagers, telephones, intercom, and face-to-face encounters. These distract healthcare workers from effectively completing tasks or care, and could result in errors (Coiera 2006). Additionally, the still-popular use of pagers results in time wasted going to a phone, dialing the callback number and sometimes playing phone tag. One study estimated that 65 percent of the time spent in admitting a patient was due to inefficient communications, i.e. paging (Ponemon, 2014).

## The opportunity for improving site-wide communication:

Using technology to communicate in a hospital is just one component of an effective healthcare communication strategy. In an emergency situation such as a lockdown due to onsite crime, simply using pagers or phones may contribute to lag time or confusion when speed of message delivery is of the essence. A site-wide notification system is seen to be a more effective method of conveying alerts quickly and effectively in an emergency situation. During the April 2013 bombing at the Boston Marathon, both Massachusetts General Hospital and Boston Medical Center relied primarily on emails to update staff but realized that not everyone was reading their emails. Site-wide notification via multiple communication methods would have ensured that more staff would be reached (Gray 2013). In day-to-day operations, site-wide notification could serve to minimize and prioritize the many disruptions presented by competing communication devices, enabling staff to be more productive. Hospitals also should implement alternative methods of communication such as ham radio and satellite radio in case their phone and/or Internet systems fail.

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