

The Council of the City of New York
Committees on Fire and Criminal Justice Services and Technology in Government

Oversight Hearing on
The Implementation of Notify NYC
Testimony by Marc Ameruso, Assistant Secretary,
Community Board One, Manhattan

Thursday, October 15, 10 a.m.
City Hall, Committee Room, New York, NY

Thank you for convening this important public hearing on the Implementation of Notify NYC and for giving me the opportunity to testify on behalf of Manhattan Community Board One. I am Marc Ameruso, Assistant Secretary of Community Board One.

Community Board One is very grateful that Lower Manhattan was one of the areas in which the Notify NYC Pilot Program was initiated prior to the official citywide launch in September 2009. In recent years CB1 has experienced several emergencies that dramatized the need for an effective system of notification. The most prominent of these occurred on 9/11, when confusion existed among local residents and workers about how to react to the terrible events of that day. The other was the tragic fire at the 130 Liberty Street (also known as the Deutsche Bank) building in August of 2007, when people wondered whether it was safe to remain near a contaminated, burning building, inhaling smoke reminiscent of 9/11 with toxic health effects. But in this case the public had no way to get authoritative information from City agencies.

In the aftermath of these incidents, CB1 urged the City to develop effective ways to notify citizens about such emergency situations. We were very pleased when the City launched Notify NYC and made CB1 a pilot community for the project. Many of our members and constituents signed up for the program and felt more secure knowing that it was in place.

Given our satisfaction with the Notify NYC Pilot Program, we are encouraged that it has been launched citywide. We hope that as the number of users continues to increase, modifications will be made to it when events point to the need for the Program to be improved. In this way the Program can become as effective as possible.

At our meeting on February 24, 2009, CB1 unanimously passed a resolution (attached) expressing concern when no notice was given about two recent incidents in Lower

Manhattan. In the first case, a plane landed in the Hudson River. While everyone was grateful and commended the City and others involved for the extraordinary rescue of all passengers and crew, nearby residents wondered whether there was any danger from breathing the fumes that were noticeable throughout Battery Park City. In the second incident, the Wall Street Journal building at the Winter Financial Center was cordoned off and hazmat trucks converged on the area after white powder was received there.

More recently, there was a well-publicized incident in which a U.S. Air Force jet flew so low over Lower Manhattan that its image could be captured in photographs. Many people told us that they would have remained calm if there had been advance notice via Notify NYC and, in fact, said that they had signed up with the program for exactly such incidents.

Even if incidents such as these do not in fact pose a risk of harm to residents and workers, they cause reasonable people to be concerned for their safety and to desire information in order to assess risks and determine the proper course of action. CB1 believes that notice should have been given in these events, and that proper notice should be given whenever events occur that are likely to cause significant anxiety and panic among residents or workers in an area, even if primary responsibility for the emergency is held by a state or federal agency.

Additionally, we have had reports of certain alerts being received by some people but not others in the same area. We would like to know if the City maintains different lists and sends some alerts to some people but not others. To this end, we would welcome a presentation at CB1 about Notify NYC so that guidelines for alerts that go out can be clarified.

We would also like to learn more about the chain of command for alerts from initiating to finalizing how the alert is issued, education of the public and how is the public supposed to respond to different types of threats.

Especially with the recent FDNY budget cuts, we are concerned about communication within buildings. Lastly, has any thought been given to using the new bus shelter electronic message boards to broadcast emergency notifications?

Edward Skyler, the Deputy Mayor who has overseen the Notify NYC, said of the program, "It can be useful sometimes because it can help people make decisions, and other times because it can lower their anxieties." (The New York Times, December 5, 2007, by Fernanda Santos) We completely agree with this assessment.

Again, I thank you for this opportunity to comment. Notify NYC is a much needed program when data in real time makes all the difference, and CB1 looks forward to continuing to work with the City to refine it so that it best meets the needs of the City.