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Wolf Administration to Use Wireless Emergency Alert System for COVID-19 Messaging

Harrisburg, PA – Today, the Wolf Administration will begin using the national Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) system to provide important public messages about the COVID-19 pandemic.

WEA is a national public safety system that allows customers who own compatible mobile devices to receive geographically targeted, text-like messages alerting them of imminent threats to safety in their area. The WEA system is commonly used to issue time-sensitive and life-saving alerts, such as Amber Alerts or severe weather warnings.

The Federal Communication Commission's Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau allows the state, as an authorized alert originator of messages, to use the WEA system as a COVID-19 communications tool.

Pennsylvania's first message will be sent statewide today, with the option to target specific regions of the state for future messages. For example, if one region of the state is experiencing an exceptionally high surge in COVID-19 cases, cellphone users may in that region may receive an alert with information about staying at home or where to find an available COVID-19 testing site in their area.

"WEA is one more way to reach as many Pennsylvanians as we can to provide timely information on COVID-19," Governor Tom Wolf said. "This tool is another tool in our toolkit to fight the pandemic and unite against COVID."

Message content, in both English and Spanish, is a combined effort of the Department of Health and the Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency. PEMA will send alerts through FEMA's Integrated Public Alert and Warning System (IPAWS) to participating wireless carriers, which then push the alerts to compatible mobile devices in the area. Wireless companies volunteer to participate in WEA.

According to the Federal Communications Commission, since its launch in 2012, the WEA system has been used nearly 56,000 times to warn the public about dangerous weather, missing children, and other critical situations – all through alerts on compatible cell phones and other mobile devices.

MEDIA CONTACT: Lyndsay Kensinger, RA-GVGOVPRESS@pa.gov

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