

Fire Season is Coming - is Your Cell Phone Ready?

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This is one of a series of articles provided by the Oakmont Technology Learning Center on the use of technology by seniors.

In the recent past we used cellular “flip” phones to make phone calls. With the advent of smartphones, we now use them for so much more: taking photos and movies, shopping, games, Internet surfing, e-mail, social media, and much more, including preparing for and responding to emergencies.

There are now numerous free tools (“apps”) that are available on both Apple and Android smartphones, iPads, and Android tablets that can be invaluable both in our daily life and during an emergency. Following is a brief list of apps that the author relies on and recommends. This list is far from complete, and we recommend that you research what is available and choose the apps that are right for you.

Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA): You don’t need to do anything to get this alert. It’s similar to Amber Alerts – if you are in the affected area you will get the notification. Read the OTLC April 10, 2021 tech article at www.oakmont-learning.org for more information about WEA and your smartphone.

Nixle and SoCoAlert: With all of the press surrounding our fire seasons, you’ve likely heard of these. Nixle sends alerts primarily from the Sheriff’s Department; SoCoAlerts are initiated by Sonoma County, Napa County, SRPD and SRFD. You DO have to sign up for these alerts; go to: www.nixle.com and www.socoemergency.org.

PulsePoint: This is a free 911-connected app that sends alerts on events that are being responded to by fire departments and emergency medical services. They are sent at the same time that dispatchers are sending the calls so the information is in real-time. To get this app, go to the Apple online store or Android Play Store.

Watch Duty: This app provides real-time information about nearby fires, fire movement, and firefighting efforts. It even includes photos of the fires when available.

Red Cross: The Red Cross provides numerous apps both for everyday use (first aid, guided CPR, etc.) and for emergency use (preparation response actions.) These free apps are available for download on the Red Cross web site or do a Google search on “Red Cross apps” to get to the right place on their site.

Windy: This is a professional weather app that provides real-time, detailed weather forecasts and local weather reports. A major benefit for fire season is its display of current and forecasted wind speed and direction. www.windy.com

Messaging: Both Apple and Android devices have messaging apps. – what we used to call “texting”. When a disaster hits, phone voice service can be overloaded and inaccessible. But text messages require fewer resources and often have a better chance of getting through. If you can’t through trying to call, use text messaging.

If you have a favorite app that you use to prepare for or respond to emergencies, please OTLC know by using the Contact Us form at www.oakmont-learning.org.