Enhancing Public Health Employee Communication with Text Messaging

1. BACKGROUND
- Public Health – Seattle & King County (PHSKC) is one of the largest public health departments in the country
- PHSKC employs nearly 1500 employees at 40 sites
- PHSKC serves 1.9 million residents
- Public Health employees are essential to the health and safety of the public during an emergency

2. WHY TEXT IN AN EMERGENCY?
- Cell phones can be used during power outages
- Network overloads make texting more reliable than voice calls in an emergency
- People have their phones with them almost all the time
- Fast, simple messages can be sent to many people

3. WHAT MATTERS TO PEOPLE? PHSKC assessed the types of information that would be most relevant to employees. This feedback informed the pilot program.
- 50% of employees responded to a survey about texting (n=828)
- 54% of respondents wanted to receive texts for building closures
- 55% of respondents wanted to receive texts about emergencies
- Many expressed concerns about employer “spamming” with texts

4. TEXT MESSAGE SYSTEM
- Used vendor to develop online text messaging interface
- Employees signed up for text messages on their personal phones based on worksite location for greater customization
- Online system securely stored employee information
- Online system allowed administrators to send and track messages

5. PILOT & SURVEY
- In January 2012, a snowstorm hit King County causing power outages, closures and delayed start times over several days
- PHSKC sent 15 messages over 5 days to all enrolled employees
- Half of employees enrolled responded to post-storm survey
- 83% said the messages were fairly or very relevant and helpful
- 70% received a text message alert before they heard about the information another way
- 17% preferred a two-way text messaging system so that they respond back, while 73% thought texting back was not important or very unimportant

SAMPLE MESSAGE: Ice storm. Roads dangerous. PHSKC on late start at 10. If not critical staff check with supervisor before coming. Check web and hotline

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