USC's Great Shakeout: Conducting A Successful Campus-Wide Earthquake Drill

Overview

The Need

A platform that could manage large scale EOC activations, and daily incidents for a campus of over 75,000 people

The Solution

A platform that consolidates information, cuts down on extra work, and can launch plans quickly and easily during an emergency.

The Benefit

An Emergency Operations Program that can handle whatever incident comes its way, and can grow from past events to create the most effective response possible.

Every third Thursday of October, millions of people participate in the largest earthquake drill: the Great ShakeOut. This worldwide drill is an opportunity to make sure that you, your community, or your organization know how to "drop, cover, and hold on," and to ensure that emergency plans and supplies are reviewed and updated accordingly.

The University of Southern California (USC) is a long-time participant of the Great ShakeOut. This year, however, USC decided to execute their exercise differently, completely running the drill from start to finish utilizing their new emergency management software: Veoci.

Background

Steve Goldfarb, Director of Fire Safety, Emergency Management and Business Continuity, and Andrew Theisen, Senior Emergency Management Coordinator, are tasked with keeping USC's emergency management program resilient.

With over 75,000 students, faculty, and staff to consider, Steve and Andrew understood the importance of USC's emergency management program being equipped with the best tools available.

The team wanted a platform to handle off-hand large scale EOC activations, easily integrate into day-to-day operations, and manage small scale incidents, such as lab spills and power outages.

Specifically, USC identified needs for the following:

- Dashboards with custom tiles from which each department could launch established plans.
- Digital forms and workflows that could activate notifications and trigger next steps.
- Mass alerts and notifications sent to the designated parties at the appropriate times.

The USC team started the Veoci integration in March 2021. Steve and Andrew worked alongside the Veoci team and were able to use the platform by May for commencement and game days. The team eyed a full deployment by October, aiming for the annual Great ShakeOut as a testing ground.

A Two Pronged Approach

Campus-Wide Awareness

The Great ShakeOut is an opportunity for everyone to practice earthquake safety. The team spread the word on-campus through a campaign complete with fliers, posters, social media posts, and even USC Ambassadors.

On October 21st at 10:21AM, a Trojans Alert was sent out to all students, faculty, and staff notifying them to "drop, cover, and hold on." Individuals across USC campuses took cover in their classrooms and offices, as evidenced by the many photos that were shared on social media and sent to the EOC using Veoci. The public drill was a success.

Steve and Andrew explained that the 2021 drill was segmented into two components. Before going campus wide with world-wide exercise, the EOC would hold their own emergency response at 9:00am, completing a full-fledged earthquake drill.

A Coordinated Response

The Preparation

Steve explained how USC chooses specific objectives to test in each year's drill. This year's focus: field teams. With the pandemic preventing personnel from being on campus for so long, the team wanted to make sure that their response teams were properly equipped and prepared.

The team launched their emergency response plan a day early to prepare for the drill. Pre-populated damage assessments, defined maps, built forms, and more helped participants get a visual sense of what was happening when the drill began.

Self-guided simulated drill activities were also set up and readied to be run within the platform during the drill. This set-up allowed members of the Utilities and HazMat teams to practice their respective responses and get a feel for what it would look like within Veoci.

Dashboards tailored for each department operation center (DOC), zone, and the facilities team were critical to the success of the earthquake drill.

The dashboard for the DOCs held a status board along with a map of each DOC location. This dashboard included a check-in form along with a link to USC's emergency information and a technical FAQ tile.

Each zone also had their own dashboard for participants to work from. These dashboards contained every document participant needed, from the check-in form and deactivation forms to damage reports. One tile listed every building within each zone that needed assessment along with an identified priority, while another tile listed the completed damage reports.

A damage assessment dashboard, built for the facilities team, provided every required resource, complete with a link to the damage report workflow. Originally, Andrew explained, the damage report workflow was simply a pen-and-paper form that pinpointed follow-up items for appropriate teams.

As this process began to take shape within Veoci, the team at USC decided they wanted to capture all of the nuances of this documentation and notification process, ultimately choosing to turn this form into a workflow. The streamlined process allows teams to capture information within one location and trigger notifications as needed. The damage assessment dashboard also displays the assessments awaiting approval and the different status of each assessment.

Andrew, Steve, and the Veoci team also created threads within the cockpit for participants to use during the drill to communicate, as well as a side room dedicated to getting help if any platform-related questions arose during the exercise.

The Execution

Keeping their objective in mind, USC's emergency response operations plan was activated at 9:00am. As soon as the event was triggered within Veoci, school and critical response departments mobilized DOCs, which served as the drill's incident command centers.

In the past, "runners" with paper forms got information it's destination. This year, however, every department and school was able to communicate with one another and the EOC in real time, sharing data, pictures, and even videos using Veoci.

In a matter of minutes, all 14 critical response departments and 20 school departments were able to check in using the Veoci form. Over 30 threads with different topics were created and utilized to communicate within and between different teams and departments, over 55 photos and videos were uploaded and shared, and a successful 18 unique damage reports were entered into the platform.

Some participants, Andrew mentioned, successfully utilized other aspects of Veoci that they weren't yet trained on, like tasks and resource requesting, during the drill. The team saw 134 constant users within the platform during the drill, the first time that many USC stakeholder used software at once.

What's Next?

As the team at USC reviews their latest Great ShakeOut drill, and prepares for 2022 exercise, they look forward to learning from this year's performance, "You know you're doing something right when it comes to drills when you have after action lists of what to do to be better," Steve shared.

Fit with a software that is capable of adapting and becoming a part of every aspect of a response, USC will be ready and better than ever for next year's drill.