Arlington
Public Schools

Location: Arlington County, VA
Enrollment: 27,000+
Teachers & Staff: 8000+
Campus Size: 240-280,000 Acres

Arlington Public Schools (APS) is a public school system in Arlington County, Virginia, serving over 27,000 students and employing over 8,000 teachers and staff across elementary, middle, and high schools, alternative programs, and special facilities. APS ensures that all students learn and thrive in safe and supportive learning environments.

James Miller, Assistant Director of Safety, Security, and Emergency Management at APS, believes in preparedness, mitigation, response, and recovery to safeguard the APS community.

Challenges

When Miller joined APS about a year ago, the infrastructure for mass notification was already established through physical and technological systems, such as a 911 call center, Everbridge text, phone, and email system, and PA systems, however, he wanted to focus on integrating and connecting all of these separate mass notification systems (MNS) into one, unified solution.

"I wanted to connect all of these critical components to make everything complementary and redundant," said Miller. "This systems-based approach included forming a team to build a consistent and immediate way to build the APIs and integrate Alertus Alert Beacons® with Everbridge, our Bosch Access Control Relays, Rauland Telecenter U, and PA communication systems."

"Think of it as a big puzzle with many pieces," he said. "I looked at the big picture of what we had and needed to accomplish, and with a lot of time and effort, the picture began to take shape, and we've got a really strong and robust system now."

"APS needed the ability to aid in the response and recovery of emergencies, and Alertus stepped in and helped offload that responsibility," said Miller. "We've seen an increase in violence and swatting incidents, so any time we can leverage technology to broadly communicate is welcomed to reduce risks that K-12 faces."

Solutions

Unified Mass Notification

They have installed Alert Beacons® accompanied by wall-mounted activation buttons in main offices across their school system. When the activation button is pressed, it triggers the Alert Beacon, which signals alerts to be sent to all intended endpoints. The Alert Beacon tells the school where the incident occurs, communicates with first responders and staff, and distributes text, email, and phone calls through the Everbridge integration. "So now, the system is redundant and aids the school in quick response for first responders and notifies safety and security personnel."

The wall-mounted Alertus Alert Beacon® sounds, flashes, and displays an alert message in the event of an emergency

Along with APS's MNS technology, they also have School Safety Coordinators (SSCs) who ensure safety and security on school grounds and a positive and productive campus climate.

Activation Buttons enable immediate, easy, single-point activation for emergency notification

System Testing & Emergencies

While they schedule regular system testing, APS has also faced several incidents in which the system has been used for emergencies such as threats, vandalism, theft, weapons, harassment, and more.

"One incident, for example, was a shooting reported in a neighborhood near one of our schools, so we were contacted to place that school in lockdown. Pressing the activation button triggered the Alert Beacon to sound and notify neighboring schools," said Miller. "Thankfully, the police responded quickly and the threat was cleared. The benefit of having the Alert Beacon was that other schools could be notified, and that didn't exist before the Alertus integration," he continued. "Another advantage of the Alertus System is that we can program alerts to notify all staff members before it is announced over PA systems."

Continuous Improvement

Emergency management is an evolving area for improvement. Miller is continuously building out rapid alerting strategies, adding additional PA systems, and improving how everything flows together. Threats to K-12 can rapidly change, so they are always thinking about how to utilize technology to lower risks.

"I enjoy working with the Alertus team members – from sales to implementations, they've been excellent to work with and are readily available," said Miller. "With the Alertus System, I love the rapid activation, consistency, and interoperability it provides, so we feel that we've successfully achieved our goals with Alertus and look forward to potentially adding more capabilities, such as Alertus Desktop™ Notification, in the future."