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Canada still two years away from cellphone alert system: telecom group

By COLIN FREEZE

Industry group says regulators and telecommunications companies are debating what kind of system to use, even though no one questions the need for one

Millions of New Yorkers were alarmed by what popped up unbidden on their touchscreens Monday morning: "WANTED: Ahmad Khan Rahami, 28-yr-old male," the text message said. "See media for pic. Call 9-1-1 if seen."

But Canadians won't soon be waking up to similar unprompted cellphone warnings about nearby suspected terrorists, severe weather or missing children because there is no roll-out date for Ottawa's projected "wireless public alerting" system.

"I think we are looking at two years," said Kurt Eby, a spokesman for the Canadian Wireless Telecommunications Association, an industry group. He said that federal government regulators and telecommunications companies are currently debating what kind of system to use, even though no one fundamentally questions the need for one.

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"The mobile handset is the way to get alerts to people," he said.

In 2012, the United States rolled out its version of a text-message-based cellphone-alert system. Though novel for many New Yorkers, such terse warnings – mostly about weather events – have been sent thousands of times in the United States over the past four years.

The U.S. online news site Motherboard recently reported that more than 500 government-approved "alert originators" have circulated more than 21,000 alerts to cellphones. But there are problems with that system.

Given that their current text-messaging standards max out at about 90 characters and have no capacity to carry pictures, including mugshots, U.S. government officials are now saying they want their warnings to carry more content. The carriers corporations, however, are reluctant to spend more money to overhaul systems they only recently created.

The Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission, which has been mulling a Canadian mobile-phone warning system for years, faces a dilemma. Does it order Canadian carriers to sign onto a U.S.-style text-messaging system? Or wait a bit longer to work out the bugs of a system based on more modern mobile networks?

The issue came into sharp relief last year when the nuclear generator, Bruce Power, launched a legal bid to force the CRTC to immediately mandate a cross-Canada cellphone-based warning network.

application. The regulatory body, taking a go-slower approach, is currently working with Ontario officials to run a pilot program in Durham Region, east of Toronto. This spring, it announced it was still soliciting industry views on what technological standards would work best.

Mr. Eby said a warning system that could leverage more modern wireless networks would be worth the wait – because they would be capable of sending much more informative alerts, including longer messages and pictures, to more precise groups of people.

There could be other advantages. While U.S. warning systems now send messages to all phones within a geographic radius defined by cellphone towers, that may prove a relatively imprecise method compared with more cutting-edge dissemination systems being developed.

"This will be down the road, but with LTE [long-term evolution, or 4G networks] you could actually use the phone's GPS," Mr. Eby said, referring to its global-positioning system chip.

That alone could open up a world of possibilities, he suggested. "So if you have a very specific situation, a shooter situation, where you wanted people to stay inside a building instead of going out, or not be going into another building – you could send this one message saying 'seek shelter.'"