Case Study: Wildfire Evacuation

Background

On 1 May 2016, a wildfire started just south of the town of Fort McMurray, Canada. Fort McMurray is home to multiple natural resource companies who operate oil sands facilities. On 3 May, with the fire now completely out of control, Canadian authorities ordered the immediate and total evacuation of Fort McMurray's 80,000+ residents, the largest evacuation in Canadian history. Complicating the evacuation was the lack of time, the shutdown of the commercial airport, the intermittent closure of the only highway going south caused by the rapidly changing direction of the fire, and the people evacuating through burning areas.

Challenges

The government focused on getting resources to bring the fire under control. Kenyon's client, a prominent natural resource company, also immediately took action focusing on the safe shutdown of their facilities, building temporary landing strips and chartering aircrafts to get people out.

The residents had only hours to leave their homes, some with only the clothing they were wearing. Some drove, some went by bus and many others made their way to a landing strip and boarded special evacuation flights to various locations, including Edmonton and Calgary.

The challenge faced once people were safely out of the danger zone, was how to provide a single point of contact for the employees (including sub contractors), their family members who were with them and the general public who had taken shelter at the company's locations and evacuated with the others.

The evacuees needed critical information such as shelter locations and addresses in destination cities, locations of missing loved ones who were evacuated on different flights or to different cities, immediate assistance getting prescriptions filled, financial assistance guidance, updates on when and where they were due to report to work, and most importantly, what was next for them. When could they go home?

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Timeline

1 May
Wildfire Starts

2 May
Manadatory Evacuation

3 May
Call Center Activation

4 May
State of Emergency Declared

6 May
Massive Convoys Begin

10 May
Oil Sands Resume Production

13 May
90% of City Saved

16 May
Oil Sands Work Camps Repopulated

17 May
Kenyon Deactivated

Solutions

On 3 May at midnight, the natural resource company called Kenyon to present their challenges with establishing a single point of contact, centralizing data, answering employee questions and quickly getting accurate information out to all those affected, along with expected updates.

Drawing on experience in previous evacuation operations (e.g., evacuations following the terrorist attack on the In Amenas production facility in Algeria and evacuations in areas of civil unrest), Kenyon recommended activating our call center, which included data management teams and notification teams to provide follow up calls to the evacuees. Using Kenyon Response, our proprietary crisis management software, we activated a toll free number and a specific (text-message accessible) email address, which were then widely publicized. We created scripts so that consistent information could be collected from all callers. Over the next 14 days, Kenyon continued this operation. This was a key period; it was a period of transition from shock to recovery. Based on practical experience, the number of agents available and the scripts being used were adjusted to help guide callers through the transitional phase.

During this operation Kenyon was able to collect identification, welfare and location information from those affected, as well as provide to them information they needed: incident details, wildfire conditions, plane information, bus route changes, shelter locations, etc. It also allowed employees to check in and provide updates on their location and welfare. Because of our systems, the client had complete visibility on the status of the employees.

Where fear and frustration could have turned a precarious situation worse, Kenyon was able to provide guidance and clarity. With Kenyon's support, the client and those affected had access to critical information needed to face the crisis and, more importantly, to facilitate a more fluid transition to their new normal.

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