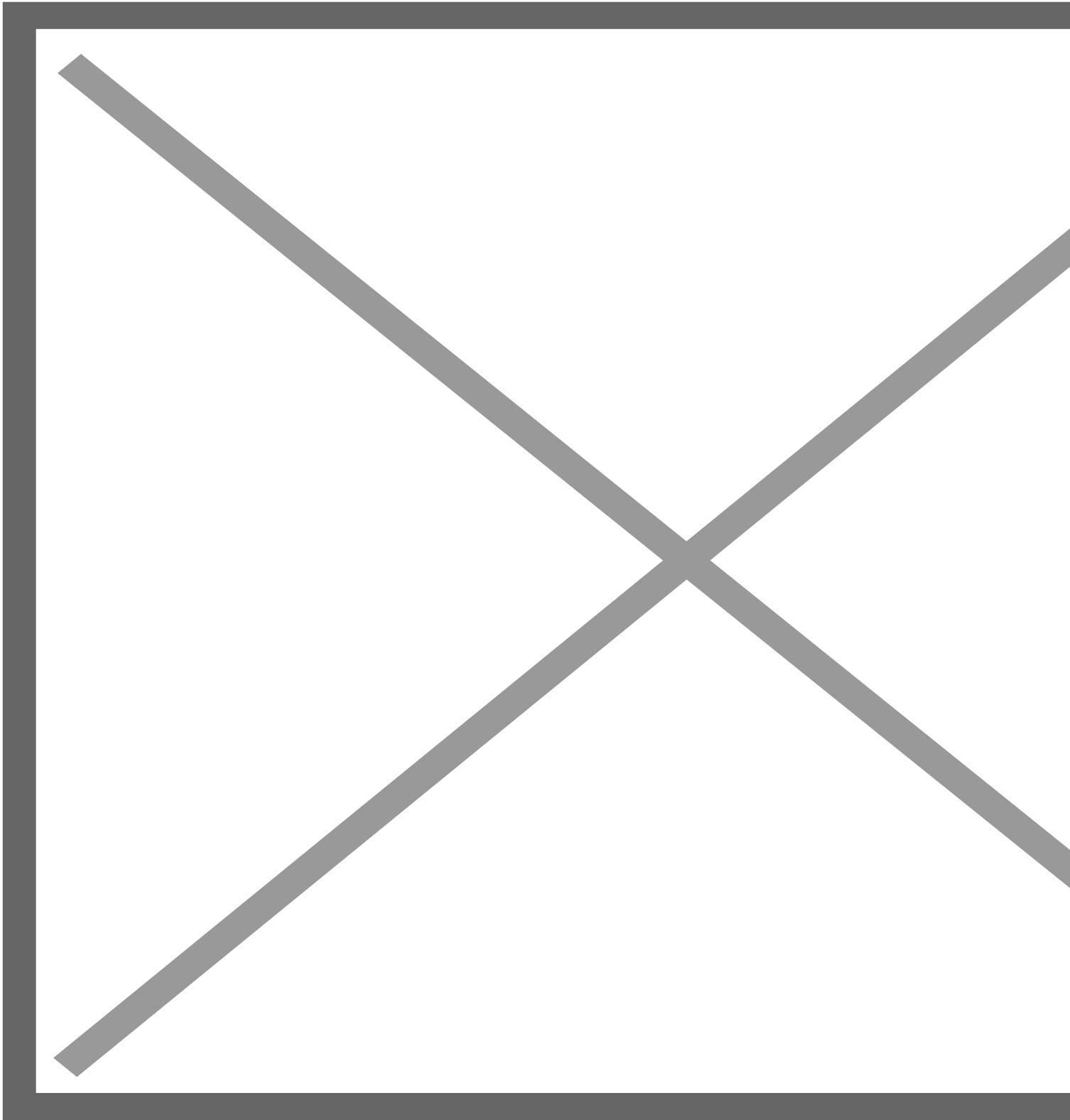


Verizon awards \$100K to expand emergency alert network for NYC houses of worship

by [Fiona Murphy](#)
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Volunteers with HUB NYC, a partnership between New York Disaster Interfaith Services and Islamic Relief USA, deliver towels, sweaters, and socks to Trinity Church's neighborhood support ministry in January. (Facebook)

New York Disaster Interfaith Services, a faith-based emergency services nonprofit, has received a \$100,000 grant from telecommunications company Verizon to expand its automated emergency messaging system for houses of worship across New York City.

The funding will bolster NYDIS's House of Worship Alert ([HOWalert](#)) system, which sends notifications to congregations about emergencies that could impact their communities, including apartment fires, virus outbreaks, extreme temperatures, and severe storms. The grant, announced Monday, will also support translation technology to deliver alerts in multiple languages and provide additional training for faith leaders in crisis and emergency risk communication.

"Without exaggeration, these systems save lives," said Peter Gudaitis, executive director and CEO of NYDIS. "When you can tell congregations to invite the homeless inside during freezing weather, or let elderly parishioners know they can come cool off during a heat wave, it saves lives—not just one or two, but potentially hundreds."

Verizon representatives first connected with NYDIS after attending one of its events and expressed interest in strengthening community resilience efforts, Gudaitis said. This marks their first partnership.

"At Verizon, we believe every community deserves access to timely and accurate information in moments that matter," Horton said in a statement. "We are proud to support NYDIS in strengthening the communication infrastructure of New York City's diverse faith communities, ensuring that lifesaving information reaches those who need it most."

According to Gudaitis, on average nearly 500 New Yorkers die each year from causes related to heat exposure, and cold winter temperatures have contributed to the deaths of dozens in recent months, underscoring how hyperlocal communication networks can help vulnerable people.

"These institutions are often the first place people turn in times of crisis," Christina Farrell, New York City emergency management commissioner, said in an email. "By strengthening communication capacity within these networks, we help ensure critical information reaches neighborhoods quickly, clearly and through voices people know and trust."

The HOWalert network currently includes about 3,000 houses of worship. With the new funding, NYDIS aims to expand enrollment, with a long-term goal of reaching the more than 5,000 houses of worship and 26,000 faith-based organizations operating citywide. Ultimately, Gudaitis said NYDIS' goal is to include all houses of worship and faith-based organizations in the city.

The alert system uses reverse 911 technology to distribute alerts and was deployed during recent snowstorms and freezing temperatures. After a reported Ebola case in Midtown last year, NYDIS used the network to relay public health information to clergy across congregations, churches, mosques, and synagogues.

"We're trying to draw upon that hyperlocal expertise and capability to make sure that messaging gets out in a way that all New Yorkers can hear it and understand it and take action if action is what they need to take," Gudaitis said.

In addition to expanding the alert system, the Verizon grant will fund crisis and emergency risk communication training. NYDIS currently hosts monthly sessions for faith leaders and city residents in Continuity of Operations Planning, Crisis and Emergency Risk Communication training, and mental health first aid training. The new funding will allow the organization to host more training sessions.

Gudaitis said congregations have also requested guidance on responding to active shootings in places of worship.

NYDIS maintains a database of houses of worship through its House of Worship Communitywide Asset and Logistics Management system, known as [HOWCALM](#), which supports the broader alert platform.

“A study done here in New York City after 9/11 basically said that if faith leaders were more engaged in risk communication, that there would be more compliance,” Gudaitis said. “And so, more than 10 years ago, we set up the HOWalert (system).”

NYDIS has also partnered with the energy company Con Edison for its [Climate Resilience Program](#).

“Because public utilities are connected to emergency communication and emergency preparedness, they are great partners for mitigation, education and preparedness training as much as they are for response and recovery,” Gudaitis said. —Religion News Service