

Written Statement of Randall C. Wright

**Executive Director, Division of Media Properties at the University of Florida College of
Journalism and Communications**

**Hearing on Public Safety Communications in the United States
Subcommittee on Communications and Technology
Committee on Energy and Commerce
United States House of Representatives
September 9, 2025**

Summary Page

- The University of Florida’s WUFT-TV and WUFT-FM have worked in partnership with the Florida Division of Emergency Management and local county and community-level emergency management and public safety agencies in the development and deployment of innovative and impactful public alerting initiatives that have been proven to be highly effective and efficient.
- WUFT’s “FPREN”, the Florida Public Radio Emergency Network, was launched in 2013 and provides award-winning live and ongoing coverage of local and regional public safety crisis situations.
- WUFT, the University of Florida and the Florida Division of Emergency Management developed and are launching BEACON, the Broadcast Emergency Alerts and Communications Operations Network, an “always-on” broadcast alerting channel.
- The public broadcasting technical infrastructure stands as the nation’s “last mile” for ensuring local, state and federal alerts can reach the American population, on the most resilient medium, over the air radio. We urge Congress to invest in supporting this critical public safety alerting infrastructure to further enhance initiatives like FPREN and BEACON.

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Good morning, Chairman Hudson, Ranking Member Matsui, and distinguished Members of the Subcommittee. It is my privilege to address you today on a matter of profound importance to every American community. I am Randy Wright, Executive Director of Media Properties at the University of Florida and General Manager of WUFT, a locally owned, noncommercial public radio and television station. While our broadcasts reach the Gainesville-Ocala region through WUFT-TV and FM, our mission extends far beyond—across the entire states of Florida and South Carolina through transformative public safety initiatives: the Florida Public Radio Emergency Network and Beacon, the Broadcast Emergency Alerts and Communications Operations Network. This groundbreaking AI-driven alerting system, launched this year in partnership with the Florida Division of Emergency Management and local emergency leaders, exemplifies the innovation possible when public media embraces its highest calling. Our collaboration with Executive Director Kevin Guthrie and FDEM sets a standard of what can be achieved when we harness public media's power to protect lives.

WUFT stands proudly among more than 1,300 public radio and 360 public television stations that form the backbone of America's news and public safety communications infrastructure. These stations create a network reaching 99% of all Americans with reliable emergency alerting services, delivered with integrity in a non-commercial environment free from sensationalism.

The Public Radio Satellite System weaves these stations together, enabling national emergency alerts throughout the public radio system. When the President needs to reach every American simultaneously, the PRSS receives direct feeds from the Federal Emergency Management Agency, delivering critical messages through a communication pathway that remains steadfast even when internet systems falter. This represents more than technology—it embodies our commitment to national resilience.

Our work at WUFT and FPREN, a collective of 14 public media stations in Florida and the statewide public broadcasting network in South Carolina, reveals the power of public media in a crisis. Consider this: last year, well before Hurricane Milton arrived on our coast, WUFT's FPREN was already mobilizing, delivering critical updates in English and Spanish to public broadcasting stations across these two disaster-prone coastal states.

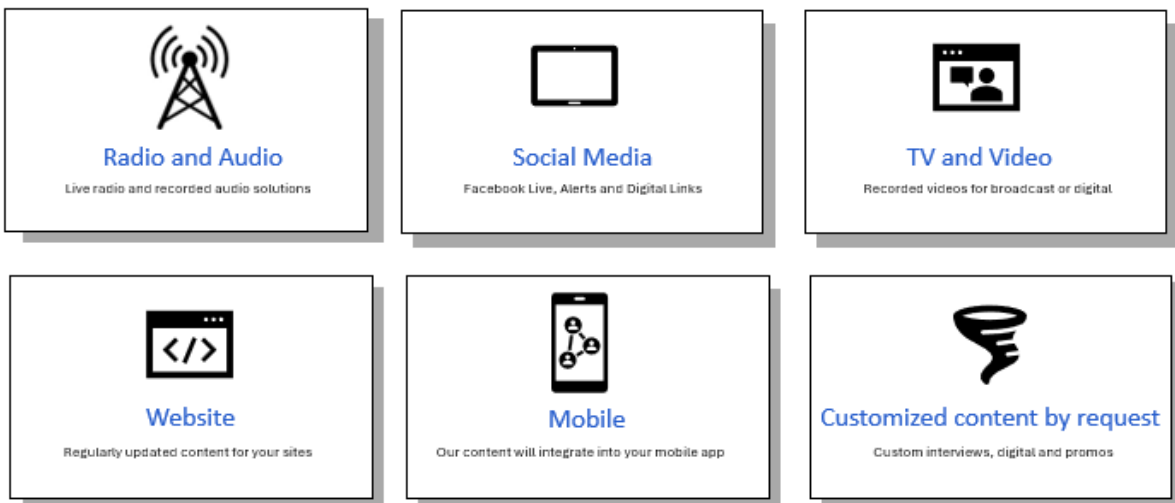
The FPREN Timeline

- The Florida Public Radio Emergency Network (FPREN) began in 2013 when WUFT-FM at the University of Florida spearheaded a statewide emergency broadcast system via public radio stations.
- FPREN has always provided full coverage of the state of Florida through its network of 14 public radio stations.
- Coverage of Hurricane Irma in 2017 ran over several days including nearly a full day of live radio coverage from Miami to Jacksonville.
- 2018, South Carolina added with the formation of the South Carolina Emergency Information Network. Coverage of hurricane Florence happens days later.
- The service has provided coverage for Florida and South Carolina through multiple storms, snowstorms and hurricanes ever since.



This proactive approach captures the essence of the FPREN model—our team doesn't merely respond to disasters; we anticipate them, preparing communities before storm clouds gather. When catastrophic events like hurricanes Michael, Irma and Milton battered our coastlines, FPREN emerged as a reliable voice cutting through chaos, providing factual information when communities needed it most desperately. When Milton pounded the Tampa area, a region served by public media station WUSF, FPREN and the public media system provided support for 24-hour coverage and response to the storm, working in coordination to ensure the region had the public safety alerts and information that was so desperately needed.

FPREN Media Platforms



For more than a decade, the University of Florida has stood at the forefront of a quiet revolution—pioneering technologies and operational models that transform public broadcasting infrastructure into lifelines for communities in crisis. Through UF's nationally acclaimed College of Journalism and Communications, WUFT has embraced a dual mission: serving the public while nurturing the next generation of journalists and communicators, instilling in them a

commitment to service and responsibility to our fellow Americans. In addition to our commitment to public safety, we provide the only consistent source of local news to much of North Florida, including rural areas that have no other news sources at all. It is the depth of our journalism in those communities that powers our position as a lifeline for fact-based emergency information and alerts that saves property and lives.

UF's priority of public safety work extends to an ongoing partnership with AT&T, where another example of an effective public-private partnership is driving innovation using AI to develop Safer Places, which allows UF's research teams and law enforcement to use our corporate partners' technologies like AT&T FirstNet's advanced communications to target how to better prevent and protect against active assailant scenarios making our nation's communities safer. Public safety initiatives are at the core of the University of Florida's wide-ranging global impact and at the core of our institutional DNA as one of the largest and most impactful land grant institutions in America.

Our "FPREN" and "BEACON" initiatives represent more than technological achievements—they embody the potential for public media to serve as America's information first responder in times of crisis. The remarkable success of FPREN in Florida inspired us to extend our reach northward, forging a partnership with South Carolina's public media network in 2018. Today, through SCETV's broadcast systems, we deliver the same life-saving model to the Palmetto State. This extraordinary partnership has earned national recognition and a Florida TaxWatch award, testament to our stewardship of taxpayer resources.



I think the TV inclusion is awesome! Post-storm and during the calm, I'd be interested if the TV stations heard from their viewers about the new addition, and if you all saw an uptick in the number of downloads of the Florida Storms app. Very nice work, Randy.

Anne Brachman, Former CPB VP/Government Relations

Thanks to you and your team, Randy. We sounded just the way we wanted to; calm and focused on the right information for our audience. Ray is a great addition to your team and I appreciated that Cyndee is still available. Good luck as you continue your coverage up to SC.

JoAnn, WUSF Tampa-St. Petersburg

Thanks Randy! Such critical information and service. Corey and Amy – we're here for anything. Let us know. D



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Gotta tell you all! It's things like FPREN and FPM that make me love working in Florida.

I've worked at the national level here and there and been in public radio for an awful long time. Nowhere else does such a diverse group of people work together so collegially and in such good spirits! It's a joy to get things done without 20 page MOUs! Jeff and the FPREN team... I only wish we had you in Baltimore during Snowmageddon a several years ago. You all is is our sound, lighten our staff's load and enhance our sound. See you all soon.

Steve And the WMFE staff **Stephen Yasko** | Interim President and General Manager Director of Content and Audience Development | pyasko@wmfe.org

Hope you are all doing well. Know you are busy. Just wanted to take a minute and say thank you to you and the team for all the good work and help you are providing.

Thank you,

Anthony Padgett, Former CEO
South Carolina ETV and South Carolina Public Radio

Florida and South Carolina Partner Feedback & Testimonials

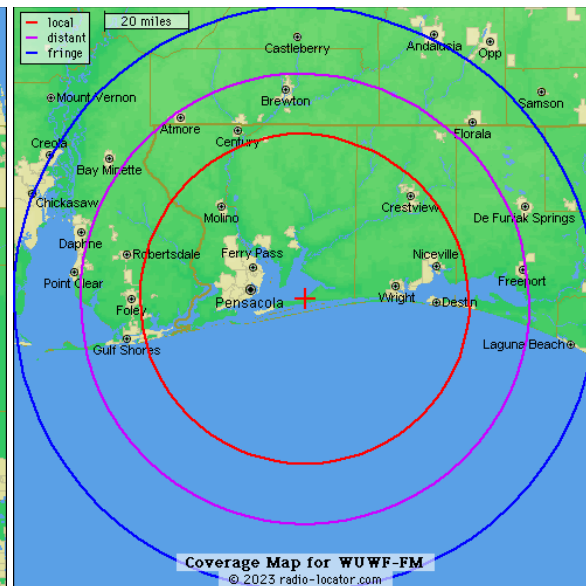
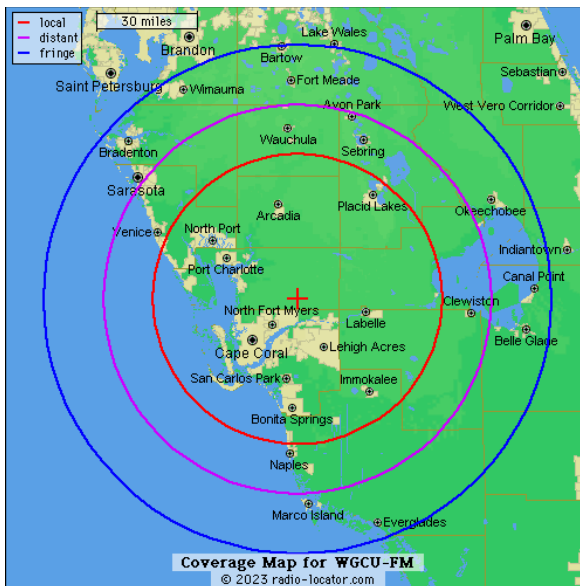
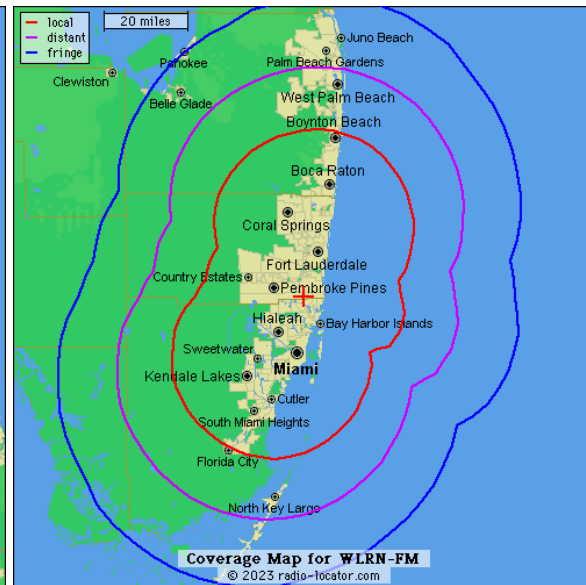
Now, we're writing the next chapter of emergency communications through Project BEACON—the Broadcast Emergency Alerts and Communications Operations Network, a revolutionary 24-hour instant alerting channel that harnesses artificial intelligence to continuously broadcast the latest official public safety alerts and advisories from every level of government. BEACON incorporates sophisticated non-generative AI to create an "always on" alerting channel that broadcasts on dedicated radio frequencies, streams online, and reaches mobile devices through an app easily found by searching "Beacon 24/7 Alerts." These dedicated radio frequencies are made possible through public broadcasting's transmission infrastructure.

BEACON

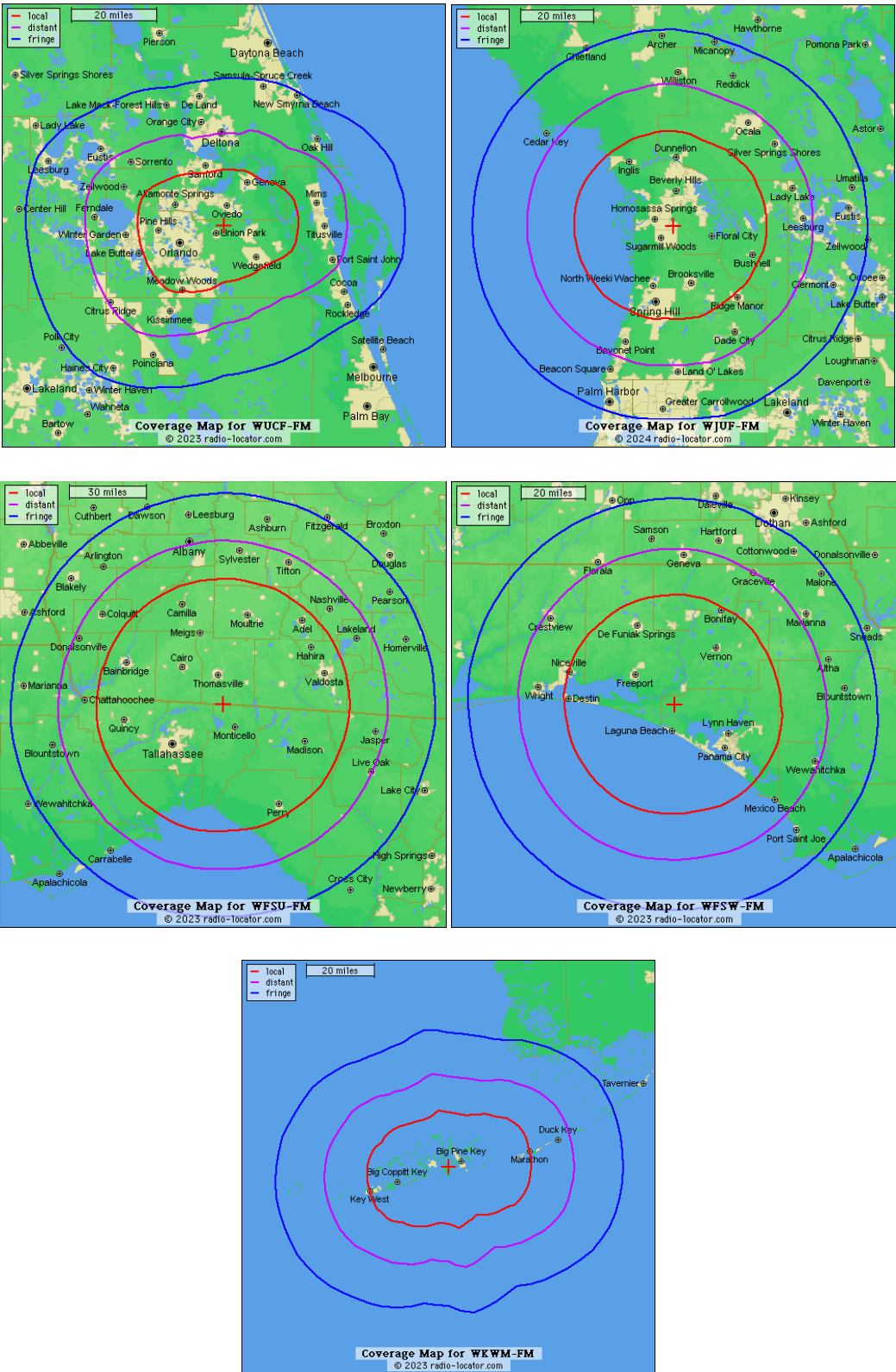
SAFETY FIRST. ALWAYS ON.

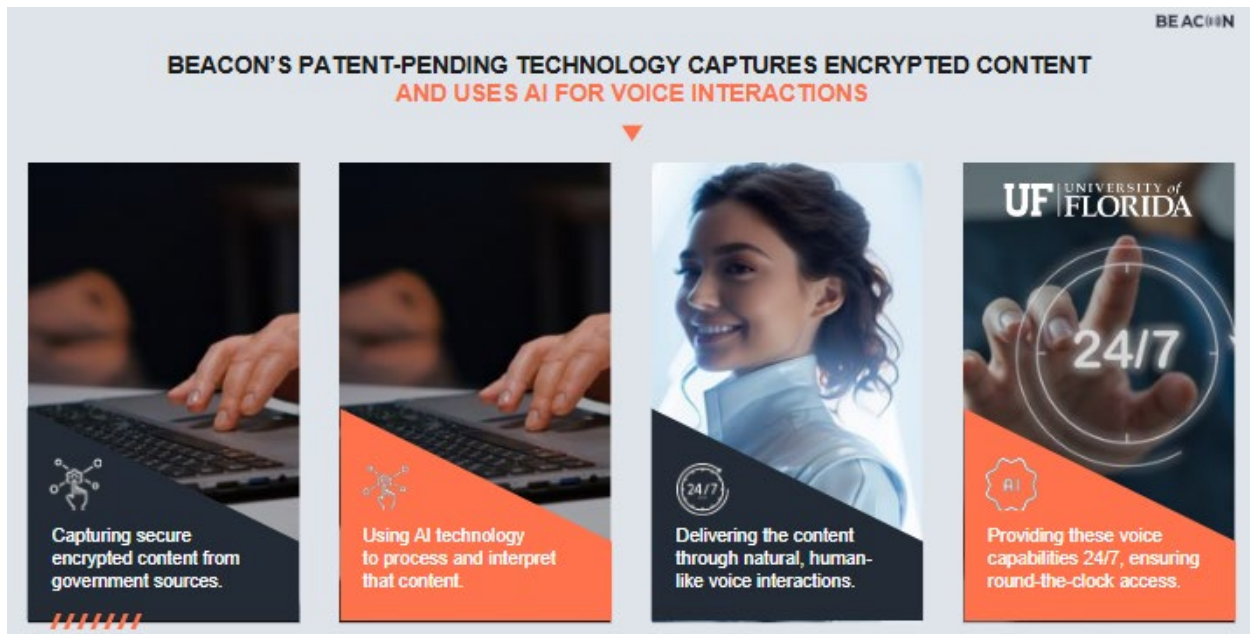
BEACON: Broadcast Emergency Alerts and Communications Operations Network

24/7/365 Broadcast Signals Utilizing Public Broadcasting Infrastructure



Beacon Broadcast Signals Extend from Pensacola to Panama City, Orlando and Miami to a
Dedicated Beacon Alerting Channel for the Highly Vulnerable Florida Keys





Rooted in the most dependable medium—over-the-air broadcast radio—BEACON serves communities around the clock in both English, Spanish and multiple other languages, providing a commercial-free sanctuary where official alerts and advisories reach citizens without distraction or interference and in their native languages. Developed hand-in-hand with the Florida Division of Emergency Management, we have established numerous BEACON sites across Florida, with additional installations launching imminently. This represents America's, and the world's, first comprehensive alerting channel, born from collaboration between the University of Florida's WUFT, FDEM and local emergency management leaders throughout the state.

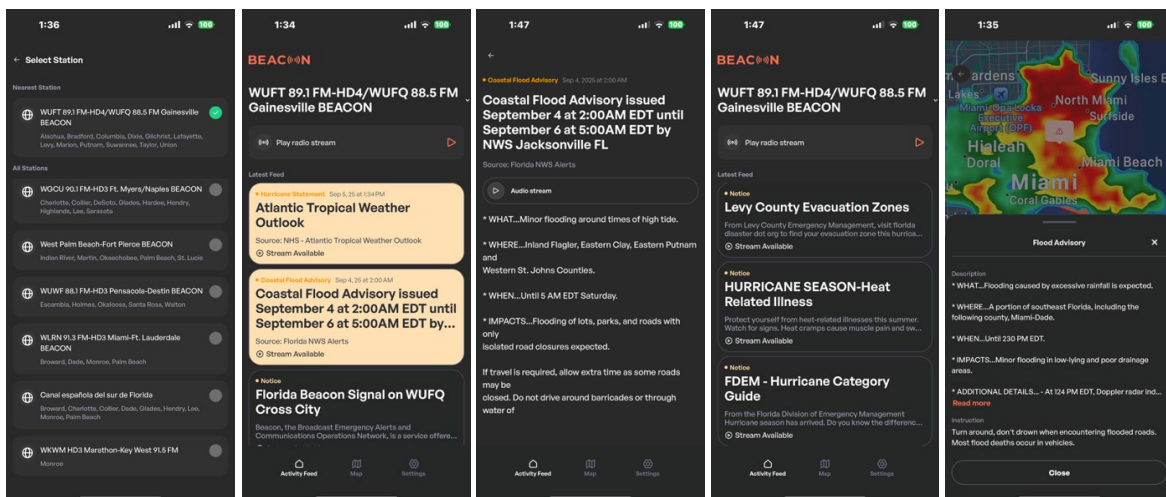
Visionary leaders like Jen Grice in Alachua County, recently honored as Florida's emergency management program of the year, and John Schultz in Lee County, guardian of southwest Florida's vulnerable coastline around Ft. Myers, have embraced BEACON technology and built it into their comprehensive safety strategies. WUFT's BEACON partnership with Alachua

County emergency management exemplifies this collaboration, while Fort Myers' public broadcaster WGCU provides a 24-hour dedicated radio channel for BEACON throughout southwest Florida, supporting Director Schultz, his team and other adjacent counties and communities in protecting the entire region. The University of Florida and WUFT are proud to have developed this unique new technology in direct collaboration with emergency management in Florida and see an incredible opportunity for sharing the highly effective alerting tool with other states across the nation.



The BEACON mobile app featuring Immediate Alerting from Official Government Agencies at the Local, County, State and Federal Level / Multilingual Text and Audio / User Controlled

Each BEACON Radio Station is Streamed LIVE and Available through the BEACON Alerting App / Designed to Seamlessly Share iPAWS Alerts and Agency Self-Generated Warnings, Advisories and Alerts



BEACON mobile app showing various live audio streams available, live radar, iPAWS delivered alerts and highly localized county-issued alerts

Public Television's Critical Role in National Emergency Communications

The public television system, through the PBS Warning Alert Response Network (PBS WARN), serves as critical distribution infrastructure for the nation's Wireless Emergency Alert (WEA) system. This unique public-private partnership between FEMA, the FCC, and industry was established by Congress in 2006 for sending locally targeted and nationwide emergency messages to mobile devices of participating cellular carriers. Between January 1, 2024, and January 1, 2025, over 11,000 WEAs—a 30% increase over the prior year—were issued by over 1,900 federal, state, local, tribal, and territorial authorities and transmitted over PBS WARN throughout the country.

The public television interconnection system's 99.9% operational reliability and local public television stations' broadcast signal covering nearly 97% of the U.S. population make PBS WARN the perfect partner for this vital role. Wireless Emergency Alerts travel through the public television interconnection system and local public television stations' broadcast spectrum to participating cellular carriers, providing a technologically diverse pathway that remains operational even if the internet is disrupted.

Recent examples of life-saving WEAs transmitted over PBS WARN include more than 100 missing child and AMBER alerts in at least 27 states, hundreds of severe weather alerts protecting communities across Iowa, Mississippi, and Texas, evacuation notices for California wildfires, and 44 tornado warnings in Florida alone.

Since 2016, public television has partnered with the Department of Homeland Security to conduct pilot projects demonstrating how stations' dedicated spectrum and infrastructure can

send encrypted data—video, files, images, and text—from local authorities to first responders.

This datacasting technology operates independently of broadband, serves rural and remote areas through public television's extensive reach, and provides a one-to-many communications system that never overloads.

The technology has proven invaluable across multiple scenarios:

- **Enhanced Emergency Response:** In North Carolina, PBS North Carolina works with the state's FirstTech program to deliver improved paging structures for first responders.
Tennessee's statewide datacasting system provides secure communication between first responders and management teams during disasters.
- **Improved Interoperability:** Datacasting allows all responding agencies to see the same data simultaneously, regardless of location, significantly improving response time and success rates.
- **Over-Water Communications:** DHS pilots have demonstrated datacasting's effectiveness in reaching offshore areas where traditional communications fail, extending coverage up to 60 miles or more.
- **Rural Search and Rescue:** Washington state pilots showed how datacasting assists remote mountainous search and rescue operations by sharing helicopter imagery with ground responders.
- **Enhanced School Safety:** A 2018 DHS pilot in Adams County, Indiana demonstrated datacasting's ability to share video feeds, building blueprints, and campus maps with first responders during school emergency situations.

- **Earthquake Early Warning:** California public television stations have reduced earthquake alert times from 30 seconds to less than 3 seconds for first responders.

Critical Infrastructure Funding Needs

FPREN, BEACON and all of these critical services depend on a reliable and resilient public broadcasting infrastructure. However, in many cases, station infrastructure is being used well past its expected useful life and is at serious risk of failure. WUFT-TV, the University of Florida's full-power public television station is currently operating at reduced power due to our primary transmitter being out of date with the station unable to obtain parts to remedy the situation. WUFT has applied for two NGWS (Next Generation Warning System) grants only to see that grant program, with more than \$100 million already appropriated by Congress, stalling and now in question at FEMA. WUFT's strategy was to replace the aging television transmitter with a new ATSC 3.0 capable system and immediately begin testing BEACON, UF's highly impactful partnership project with the Florida Division of Emergency Management, in the new television standard.

A study commissioned by the Corporation for Public Broadcasting found a backlog of \$300 million in unmet infrastructure needs at public media stations through 2020. In the most recent Next Generation Warning System grant cycle, CPB received grant applications from stations in 49 states totaling approximately \$110 million in funding for needed public safety projects—including WUFT's BEACON application---well outpacing the available financial resources.

This aging infrastructure—transmitters, antennas, encoders, receivers, power generators and related hardware, software, and electrical equipment—endangers the ability of public

broadcasting to continue providing life-saving public safety services. We urge Congress to provide continued level funding of \$40 million for the Next Generation Warning System in FY 2026, which will help address the overwhelming need for station infrastructure maintenance, upgrades and replacements to enhance the reliability and resiliency of public broadcasting's public safety and homeland security services.

As our nation confronts a relentless succession of natural disasters, WUFT, the University of Florida, and the Florida Division of Emergency Management continue crafting innovative solutions designed for seamless national deployment. We remain steadfast in ensuring that rural and underserved communities receive equal access to these life-protecting tools. The marriage of FPREN and BEACON creates a comprehensive solution that rides upon public broadcasting's nationwide infrastructure, delivering both trusted event coverage free from commercial influence and official alerts flowing directly from emergency management agencies to individual communities. This vision represents the future of public safety alerting—public media's resilient broadcast infrastructure serving as America's shield against disaster.

A story from “Current” following Hurricane Ian

In addition to reporting by its own staff from the studio and in the field, WGCU depended heavily on the statewide Florida Emergency Radio Emergency Network, based at the University of Florida in Gainesville, which was safely out of the storm's path.

“Those guys are phenomenal,” Trueblood said. “It is such an excellent resource to have. ... A team of meteorologists tells you the conditions, what to expect [and] what the storm is doing.” That coverage allowed WGCU's team to focus on reporting about “evacuations and shelters and where to get resources and what to do.” There was some overlap in the reporting, “but between the two of us it was just perfect coverage for what we were doing.”

Kevin Trueblood, WGCU, Ft. Myers-Naples

NEWS FOR PEOPLE IN PUBLIC MEDIA
Current



Throughout Florida and South Carolina, WUFT's FPREN has weathered nature's most ferocious assaults, standing firm against hurricanes, storms, and floods while maintaining seamless transmission of vital safety information from local, state, and federal agencies. Many public radio stations serve as Primary Entry Point stations for alerts and warnings, integrated into more than 35 states' emergency plans. Without this public radio infrastructure, governments would face staggering costs to replace these essential services, particularly in rural communities where vast distances and sparse populations make alternative solutions prohibitively expensive.

We know that the safety of all Americans is first and foremost on your mind, and the public media system is proud to fulfill its mission as noncommercial, nonprofit, locally owned community organizations bringing emergency alerting services to your constituents every day. Unfortunately, public media's universal service in emergency alerting, along with its vital role as a news source, increasingly ignored by other media, is at risk due to the recent rescission of federal funding for the Corporation for Public Broadcasting. This rescission affects every public media station right now, resulting in loss of grant funding and shared services the CPB funded, including technology that supports emergency alerting.

WUFT and all of my public media colleagues remain committed to fulfilling our public service mission, but the reality is that some stations, particularly those in rural areas, will not survive this funding loss, and we will see gaps emerge in emergency services availability to those communities. We urge Congress to find new pathways to support these critical services from public media stations and to support the further development and deployment of innovative solutions like FPREN and BEACON across America. The Next Generation Warning System

funding represents a crucial investment in our nation's public safety infrastructure and the civil defense capabilities that protect every American community.

I appreciate the opportunity to speak with you today and welcome you to visit FPREN and the University of Florida to learn more about public media's essential role in public safety communications.

The FPREN / SCEIN Team



Randy Wright
Executive Director



Tim Miller
Chief Meteorologist



Megan Borowski
Senior Meteorologist



Irene Sans
Bilingual Meteorologist



Tom Hudson
Host



Rob Harder
Host