



Penn State announces transition to new emergency phone bank service

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UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. – Penn State has announced a partnership with a third-party vendor to manage phone calls from the public in the event of a large-scale emergency. The transition marks the end of an era for Penn State, which since 2008 has relied on a core of about 50-70 trained volunteers from the University community who would have answered incoming calls in the event of a major incident.

The change is being made to provide the Penn State community with a consistent service that could operate for a longer period of time if needed following an emergency, according to Brian Bitner, director of emergency management for the University.

Joe Puzycki, associate vice president for Student Affairs and head of the former volunteer emergency phone bank, thanked the volunteers for their contributions during the past six years.

“I want to thank our emergency phone bank volunteers for all of the time and effort they have given to this critical undertaking at Penn State,” he said. “Though we fortunately never had a need to activate our phone bank, knowing that we had a group of dedicated people waiting in the wings to perform a challenging, emotionally draining task at a moment’s notice gave peace of mind to everyone involved in emergency planning at the University. Penn State is in a better position now thanks to the efforts of these volunteers.”

Puzycki said the transition gives former phone bank volunteers, who themselves may be personally affected by an emergency on or near a Penn State campus, the freedom to tend to their own needs in the event of a critical incident. The new provider, FEI Behavioral Health (FEI), also has the capacity to operate a phone bank nonstop for a period of days, weeks or longer and to field thousands of calls an hour, something that simply could not have been expected of Penn State's dedicated but relatively limited pool of volunteers.

"We are very appreciative of our volunteers and the time they have given to us, many of them from the start, during the past six years. This was a critical responsibility that they took on without hesitation," said Bittner.

Bittner said the University now will be able to have a fully staffed phone bank up and running within 45 minutes, with trained professionals available to respond to callers with information about an emergency situation at any Penn State campus.

The individuals who field calls at FEI's hub of operations in Milwaukee all are mental health professionals who hold master's degrees or higher, and all have been specially trained to communicate effectively with people who have been affected by a disaster.

Vivian Marinelli, senior director of crisis management services for FEI, said the company also has a network of trained call-takers across the country that it can activate in the event of a large-scale disaster. Recently, FEI was involved in efforts to contact about 40,000 individuals in the immediate area of the 2013 bombings at the Boston Marathon.

"Our largest response to date was 9/11," Marinelli said. "Our call center was operational on a full scale for 45 days following the attacks. We constantly monitor the call volume during a response and scale back the operations as indicated. Even though it is more than 10 years since 9/11, we still have one line that continues to take calls from victims and their families."

Bittner said Penn State has made the transition after consultation with peers in higher education, many of whom have made similar transitions to help ensure that phones will be answered even if a

disaster affects an entire region of the country.

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