

Plain Language Emergency Notifications Frequently Asked Questions

Our codes have been in place for many years. Why are we changing them?

Organizations on national, state and local levels have studied how to improve communication in an emergency. Groups including The Joint Commission, the Department of Homeland Security, numerous state hospital associations and others have recommended using plain language in an emergency as a best practice. By moving from color-coded notifications to plain language we can promote transparency and increase patient, associate and visitor safety.

SCL Health care sites have nearly 40 different overhead emergency announcements, and some codes mean different things for different care sites. Clearly and concisely identifying the emergency or issue allows all associates and providers – particularly those who work at multiple care sites or healthcare organizations – to act more swiftly in any emergency situation. Clear communication also allows patients and the public to more swiftly follow instructions when appropriate, saving time and lives.

What does “plain language” mean?

Plain language (instead of color-coded language) uses a phrase to identify the type of emergency, the code itself and the location of the emergency and/or actions to take. There are five categories defining the type of alert to follow: facility, security, medical, technology and weather alerts. Examples of plain language emergency alerts include:

- **Facility Alert:** Fire Alarm, 5th Floor
- **Security Alert:** Security Assist, Main Lobby
- **Medical Alert:** Resuscitation: Room 100
- **Technology Alert:** eSummit Downtime
- **Weather Alert:** Tornado Watch, Move to Interior of the Building

How will the change in emergency notifications help in an emergency?

Using plain language helps law enforcement officers and emergency responders better understand what is happening, improves timeliness of response to an emergency and assures that the right people respond to the emergency.

Does using plain language really save time?

While color codes are common across healthcare, they are not standardized between hospitals, and the high number of codes in use has led to the need for healthcare professionals to carry or wear reference cards. Plain language eliminates the need for these reference cards, and helps save time and reduce confusion in an emergency.

Won't it alarm patients and visitors to announce this type of information?

Public safety studies have shown that the typical person will respond faster and remain calmer when given clear and concise information in an emergency situation. In fact, it is more common for people to become afraid or panic when they believe information is being withheld or they do not understand what is occurring or how to respond. Our goal is to eliminate the unknown in the

unlikely event of a serious public safety event. Numerous health systems have implemented plain language notifications and no public backlash or fear has been reported.

Did we consider patient privacy when deciding to implement plain language for medical alert codes?

Yes. The same principles of privacy and HIPAA compliance apply to overhead codes, and the use of plain language will not adversely affect patient privacy. Only the category of the alert, the alert itself, and the location will be announced overhead.

Where can I find additional information?

You can find tools and resources regarding plain language emergency notifications on [The Landing](#). For questions, please contact your site's Emergency Management team or reach out to:

Christopher Powell, CHEP

Manager, System Emergency Management

500 Eldorado Blvd, Ste. 4300

Broomfield, CO 80021

P: 303-813-5162

M: 720-899-2592

Christopher.Powell@sclhs.net