

What If Hawaii's False Missile Alert Happened to You?

February 27, 2018 [Narratives](#)

At 8:07 a.m. on Saturday, January 13, 2018, many people in Hawaii believed they were going to die. All because a Hawaii Emergency Management Agency employee pressed the wrong button and sent out a false missile alert.

Although the missile threat wasn't genuine, it incited a real panic. Parents tossed their children into storm drains to protect them. Cars clogged the highways out of town. And this [Business Insider article](#) proves that at least one person in Hawaii frantically googled how to survive a nuclear bomb. Despite knowing that the missile alert was false within the first few minutes, it took the Hawaii Emergency Management Agency a full 38 minutes to send out a second message confirming that fact, as reported by USA Today in their [minute-by-minute timeline of events](#).

We have learned some valuable safety lessons from Hawaii's 38 minutes of terror:

- We need better safeguards against sending out false emergency alerts to the public.
- We need the ability to send out corrections within seconds, not minutes, when there's been an error or sudden change in status.

We also experienced firsthand a major shortcoming in our mass emergency alert system. The message identified a problem without presenting a solution. It failed to answer the question on the minds of many people in Hawaii that day: *What happens next?*

The Last Thing We Need in an Emergency Is a Failure to Communicate

Hawaii state officials [told the New York Times](#) that residents could have as little as 12 minutes to find shelter after being warned of an approaching missile.

But the false alert didn't offer any clear next steps. There was no practical advice for protecting your family from the blast or fallout, no list of top shelters near your current location, and no way to keep up-to-date with what was really going on. People in Hawaii were left completely unprepared, struggling against the clock to seek out information that — had this threat been real — could have saved their lives.

Your choices in the first few minutes after learning of a crisis are critical. They determine whether you and your loved ones survive.

This real-life case study in Hawaii highlights an urgency for us to improve the way we communicate in an emergency. It's not enough to be warned that a threat is coming (e.g., hurricane, earthquake, nuclear missile, etc.). You need to know how to respond in clear, easy-to-digest steps as soon as possible.

Making Life-Saving Information Easy to Access in a Disaster

Some states have already taken the lessons from Hawaii to heart. Russell J. Strickland, executive director of the Maryland Emergency Management Agency, [told the Baltimore Sun](#): “I don’t know that we’ll go back to the extreme of the 1960s, but we will be starting to emphasize public messages about basic steps you need to do.”

Strickland’s response hits on a major weakness in today’s mass emergency warning systems: human unpredictability. What can we expect when several hundred people receive an alert that a missile will strike nearby in the next 20 minutes? Where will they go? How will they react? What happens next?

The incident in Hawaii serves as a reminder that we could all use better tools that take the guesswork out of emergency planning. We have a rare opportunity to learn and better prepare before we face a real missile threat. Let’s not waste this chance.

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And stay safe!

Sources:

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