

# Editorial: Learn from tsunami alert

It's learning time for residents and emergency managers on the West Coast after Tuesday's tsunami warning that had people running for high ground. From local officials to provincial co-ordinators, those who are charged with managing our response to disasters suddenly have a trove of information they can use to refine their plans for the big earthquake they know is coming. The rest of us can also learn from what happened.

At 1:32 a.m., a quake with a magnitude of 7.9 struck 278 kilometres southeast of Kodiak in the Gulf of Alaska at a depth of about 10 kilometres.

## ***article continues below***

Six minutes later, the U.S. National Tsunami Warning Center issued a tsunami warning for the outer coast of B.C. and Alaska. Staff mobilized at Emergency Management B.C., the provincial agency that co-ordinates the response to emergencies and natural disasters.

Although the detailed analysis is still being done, initial reports suggest things worked smoothly in Tofino and other areas most exposed to potential giant waves, but there was confusion in parts of Greater Victoria.

Effective communication and accurate information are key. Some people got inaccurate information from relatives or social media.

In parts of Esquimalt, Colwood, Saanich and View Royal, people were told to leave. Others heard about those evacuations, assumed the worst and headed for high ground when they didn't need to.

It suggests that education is lacking. Some people assumed that if there was a warning, it included everyone near the water. Both emergency managers and the rest of us bear responsibility for making sure we are all informed about how the system works.

When residents heard about the warning, but saw no notice to evacuate, they didn't know whether that meant they were safe or the system had failed them. It's not enough to notify those at risk. To avoid confusion, those who are not at risk also need to know their status.

Frequent updates on the web, radio, TV and smartphones are important. When a warning goes out, we all have to stay informed and not leap to conclusions.

The provincial emergency-notification system broadcasts public warnings through TV and radio, and sends warnings to local emergency coordinators, mayors and Indigenous communities. The municipalities decide whether they issue an emergency alert, and not all of them use text-message warning systems.

Staying informed would be a lot easier if the region had a single warning system. A person who lives in Saanich might be working in Victoria when the tsunami warning goes out — or shopping in Langford or hiking in Sooke. In reality, we live in one community, not on 13 islands.

Signing up for warnings on your cellphone will ensure you are notified as soon as possible, if you're in a municipality that offers that service. More than 28,000 people took the hint on Tuesday and signed up for the City of Victoria's alerts.

That's fine, but doesn't solve the fundamental problem of the disjointed, multi-jurisdictional approach to notifying residents of Greater Victoria about what's going on. We need an authoritative common source of information to which everyone in the community can turn.

Some help is on the way, as the Canadian Radio-television and Telecommunications Commission has ordered that by April 6, everyone on an LTE cellphone network must be able to receive the same public alerts now broadcast on radio and TV in the event of natural disasters or Amber

Alerts about abducted children.

Greater Victoria has to learn from this incident. For all of us on the coast, Tuesday's warning was not a false alarm, it was a rehearsal.

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