



THE PARTNERSHIP
FOR INCLUSIVE DISASTER STRATEGIES

**Access Survey Report:
IPAWS National
Test 2023**

Summary

This report provides an analysis, based on personal experiences, of the nationwide test of the Emergency Alert System (EAS) and Wireless Emergency Alerts (WEA), conducted on October 4, 2023, by the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). The objective of the survey was threefold: to assess how people access national alerts, identify barriers faced by disabled individuals in receiving these alerts, and educate FEMA and the FCC about accessibility barriers. With a total of 421 respondents, the survey captured a range of experiences and identified critical areas for improvement in the national alert system.

The demographic data from the survey revealed that 44% of respondents identified as disabled, with varying types of disabilities represented. Most notably, physical disabilities, chronic health conditions, and neurodivergence were more common, while blindness, low vision, and cognitive impairments were under-represented. Geographically, the highest response rates were from California and Montana, but there was a notable absence of responses from U.S. territories, indicating a potential gap in the survey's reach in these areas.

The survey highlighted significant accessibility issues in both cell phone and TV/radio alerts. For cell phone alerts, which were received by the vast majority of respondents, common barriers included overly loud alerts, alerts disappearing after being silenced, small font size, and lack of spoken components. TV and radio alerts, received by a much smaller percentage, faced challenges like low-contrast text. These findings underscore the necessity for more inclusive and adaptable alert systems to ensure effective communication during emergencies, particularly for people with disabilities.



Introduction

On October 4, 2023, around 2:20 pm Eastern Time, the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) and the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) carried out the [IPAWS National Test 2023](#) via the [Emergency Alert System](#) (EAS) and [Wireless Emergency Alerts](#) (WEA). The IPAWS Modernization Act of 2015 (Public Law 114-143) requires FEMA to carry out nationwide tests of the public alert and warning system at least every three years.

Across the country, people received an alert on their cell phone, TV, and/or radio “to ensure that the [alert] systems continue to be effective means of warning the public about emergencies, particularly those on the national level.” ([FEMA](#))

The Partnership for Inclusive Disaster Strategies circulated a survey asking about people’s experiences with the nationwide test.

The survey had three (3) goals:

1. To learn about ways people access national alerts;
2. To learn about the barriers disabled people encounter when receiving these alerts; and
3. To educate FEMA and the FCC about the accessibility barriers.

Thank you to everyone who submitted responses and helped us circulate the survey.

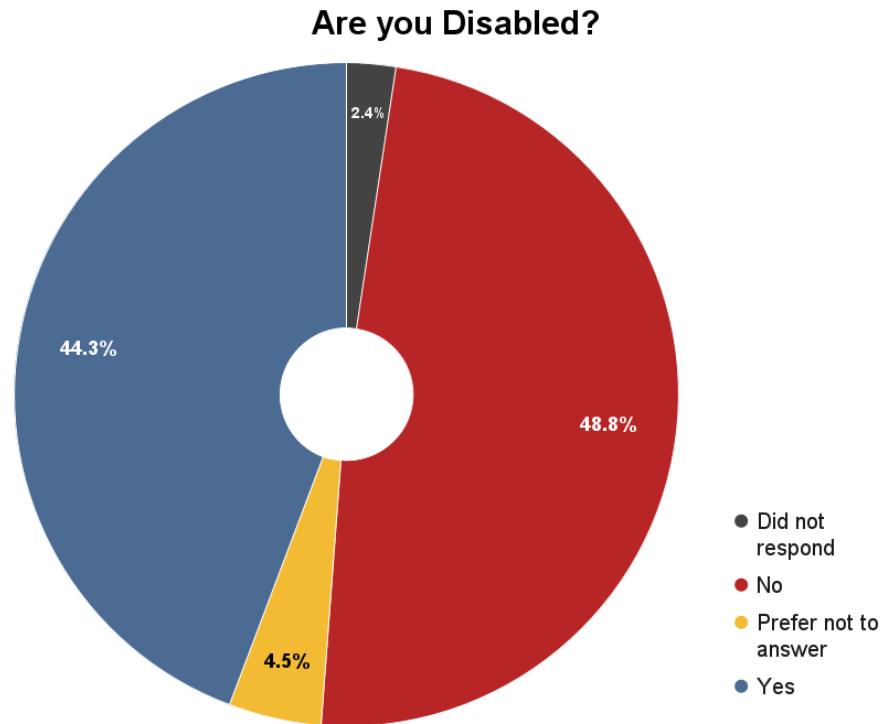
Your experiences, both personal and professional, are valuable in understanding how people with disabilities receive the EAS and WEA alerts during a disaster or emergency.



Demographics of the Responses

421 people responded to our survey.

44% of respondents self-identified as disabled.



Some respondents identified with the following disabilities:

- Physical: 48% of respondents
- Chronic health conditions: 32% of respondents
- Neurodivergence: 28% of respondents
- Mental health: 28% of respondents
- Deaf or Hard of Hearing: 22% of respondents

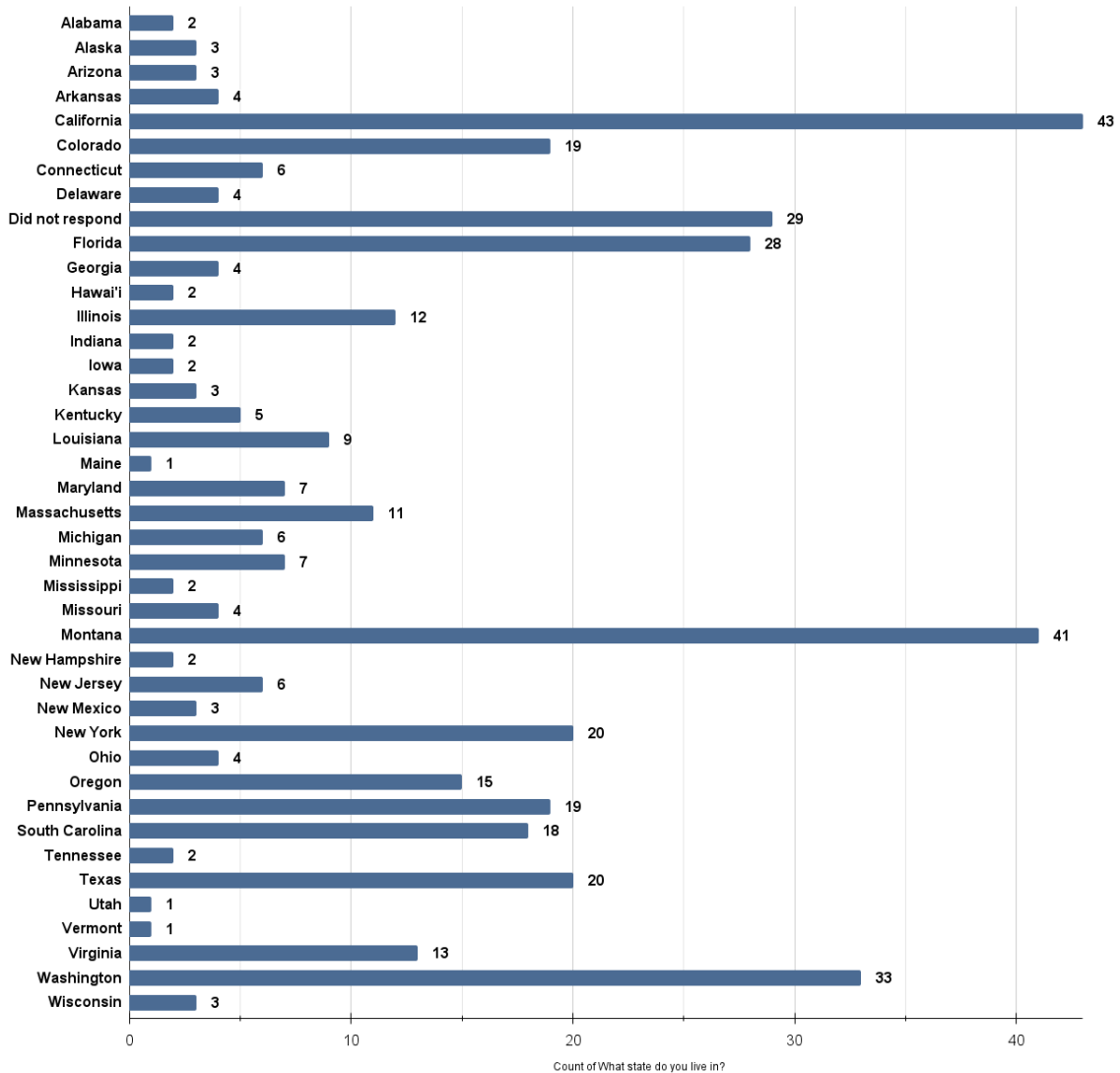
The following disabilities were under-represented:

- Blind or low vision: 9% of respondents
- Learning: 6% of respondents
- Cognitive: 5% of respondents
- Intellectual/Developmental: 4% of respondents
- DeafBlind: .5% of respondent



The majority of respondents were from California and Montana.

What state do you live in?



These 3 states had the most responses:

- California: 10% of respondents
- Montana: 10% of respondents
- Washington: 8% of respondents

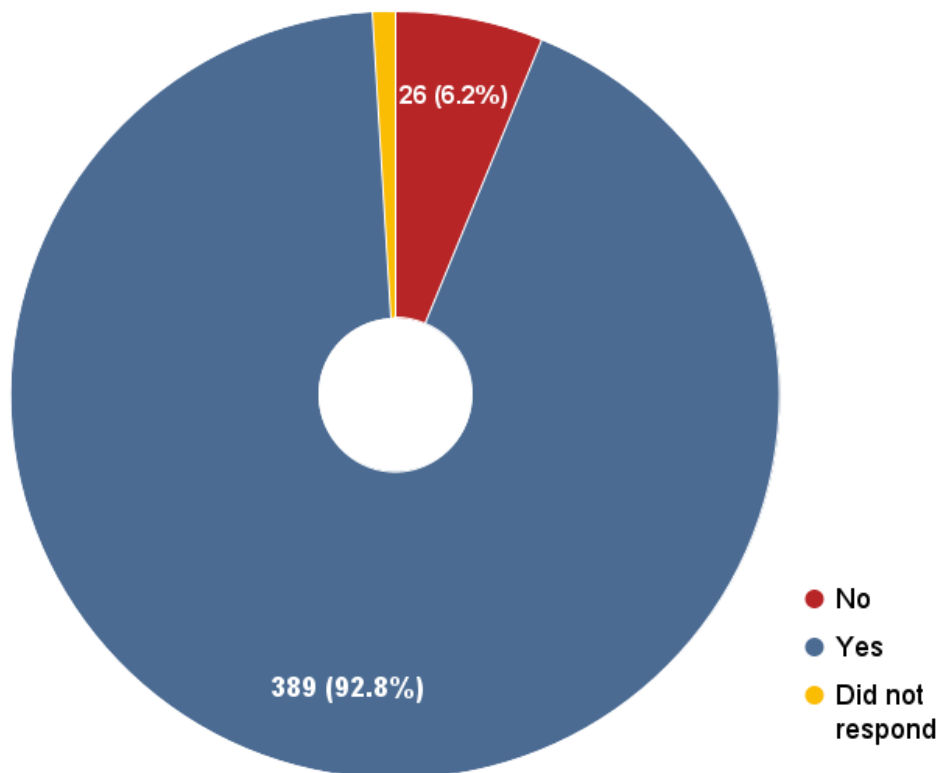
There were no respondents from the United States territories.



Responses for Alerts Received on a Cell Phone

The vast majority of respondents (92.8%) received the alert via cell phone.

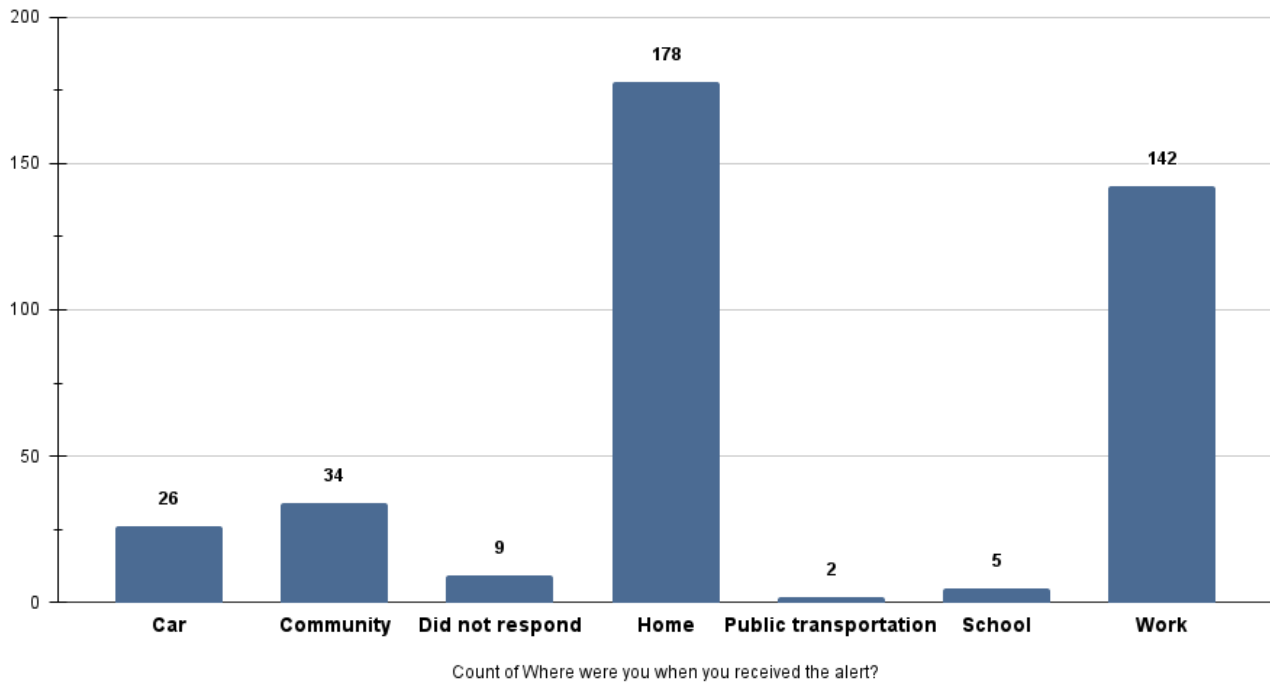
Did you get the alert on your cell phone?



The following statistics are for people who received the phone alert.

Most respondents were at home (44.9%) or at work (35.9%).

Where were you when you received the alert?



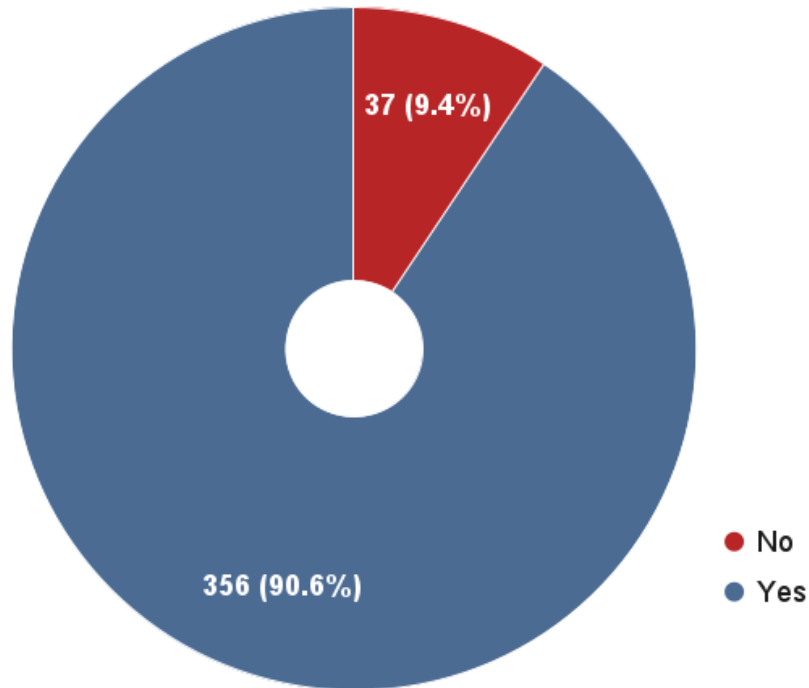
Other locations where people received the alert include:

- In the community: 8.6%
- Car: 6.6%
- School: 1.3%



Most respondents (90.6%) found the phone alert easy to understand.

Was the message easy to understand?

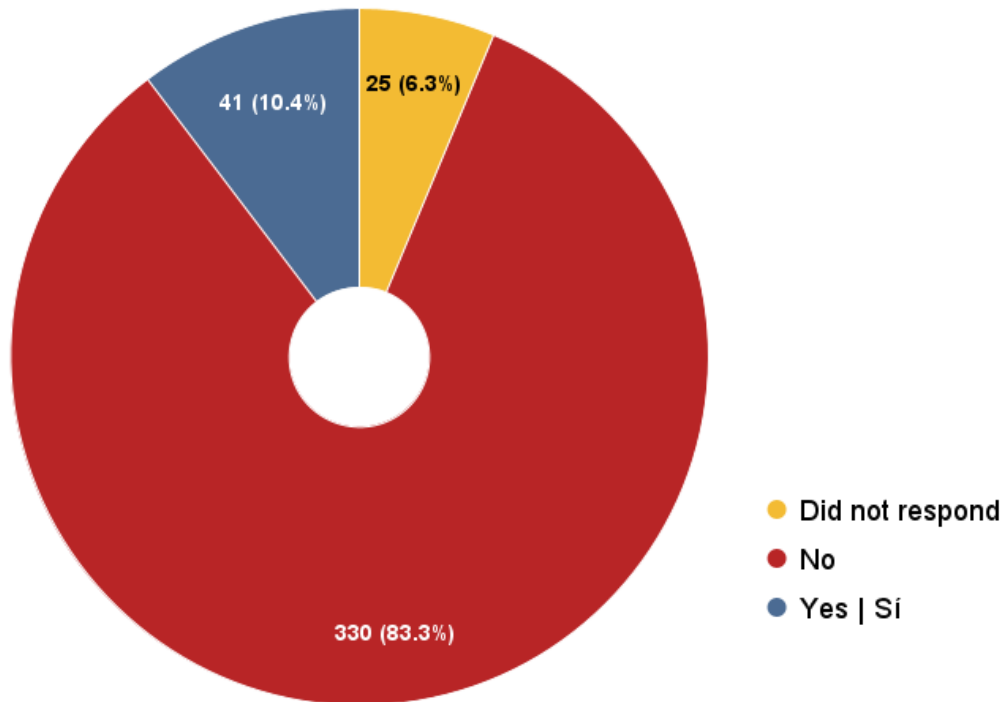


Some people reported:

- The alert was too long to follow.
- The instructions that were at the bottom should have been at the top.
- The alert could have also been provided in American Sign Language (ASL).
- It would have been easier to understand the alert if the message had been read out loud.

The majority of respondents (83.3%) did not experience barriers when accessing the alert.

Did you experience any barriers when accessing the alert?



Some of the barriers respondents reported include:

- The alert was too loud, sometimes overriding the phone's silent mode, startling people or making it difficult to focus on the content of the alert.
- The alert disappeared entirely after people silenced it. This created barriers for people who needed to access the alert multiple times, access it via assistive technology, or were more focused on stopping the sound rather than processing the content.
- The alert noise was too low or didn't make any noise at all, sometimes not overriding the phone's silent mode, ensuring people didn't notice the alert.
- The alert on Samsung models did not override the phone's silent mode, while it did on iPhone models.
- The font size of the alert was too small/did not enlarge.

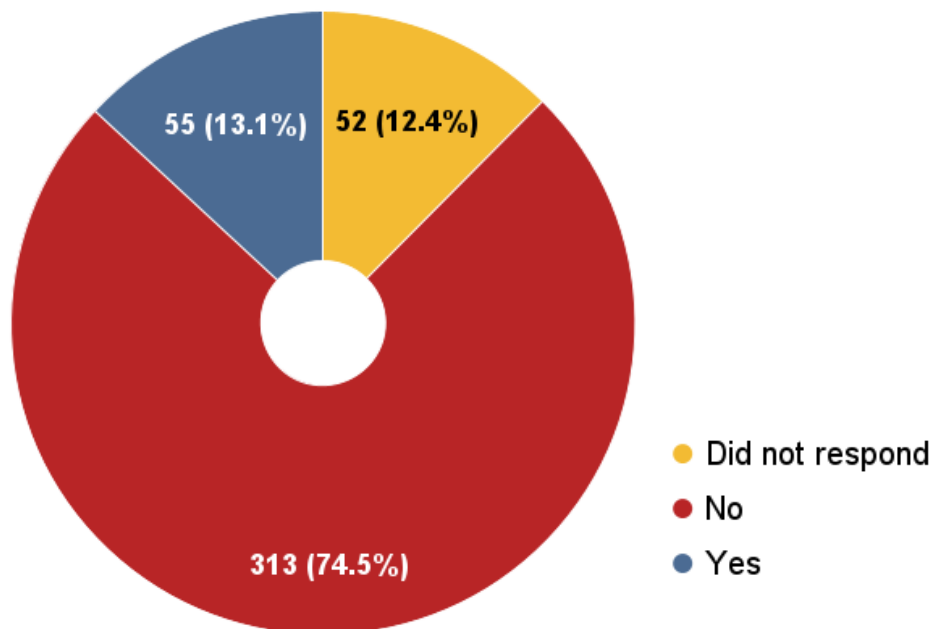


- The alert was in a language that was not the respondent's primary phone setting language, or the respondent received the alert twice in both English and Spanish.
- The phone alert's message was too lengthy and/or difficult to understand.
- Not being able to access and/or close the alert with VoiceOver technology.
- The alert did not have a spoken component.

Responses for Alerts Received on a TV or Radio

Less than a quarter of respondents (13.1%) received the alert via TV or radio.

Did you see/hear the alert on the TV or radio?

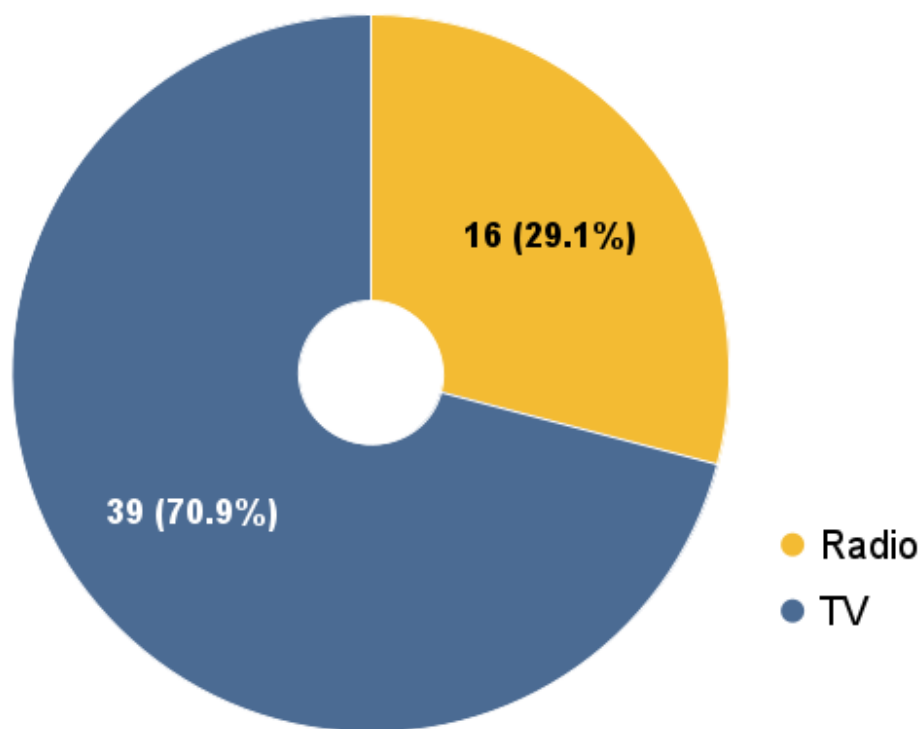


The following statistics are for people who received the alert via TV or radio.



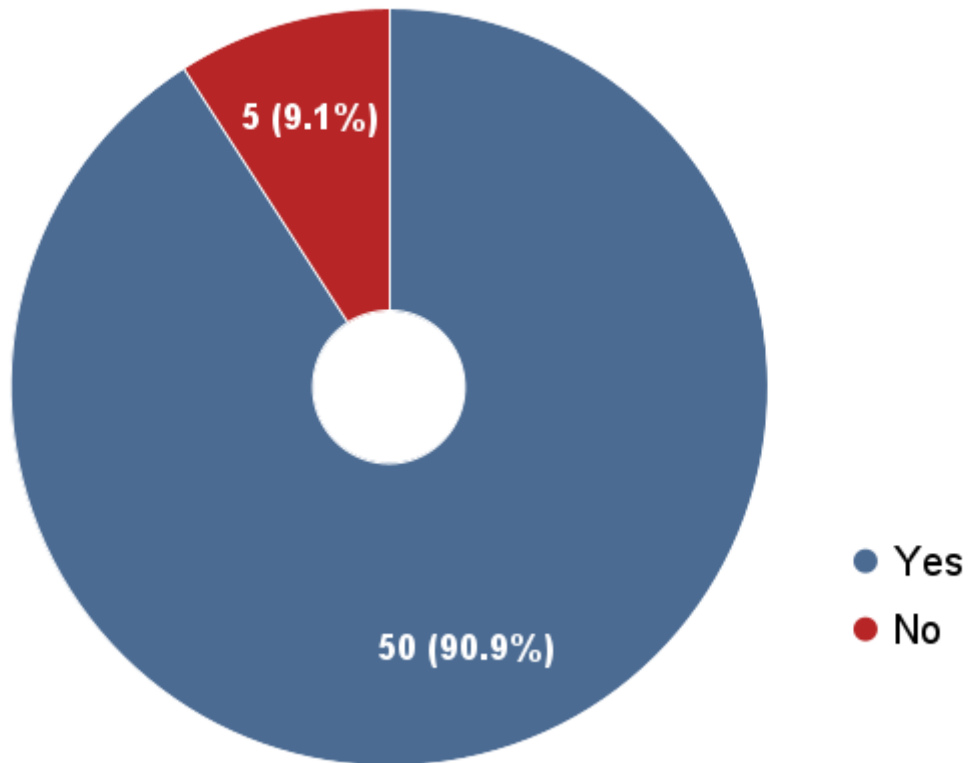
The majority of people (70.9%) reported that they received the alert via TV, and 29.1% received the alert via radio.

How did you receive the message?



The overwhelming majority of respondents reported that the TV/radio alert was easy to understand.

Was the message easy to understand?

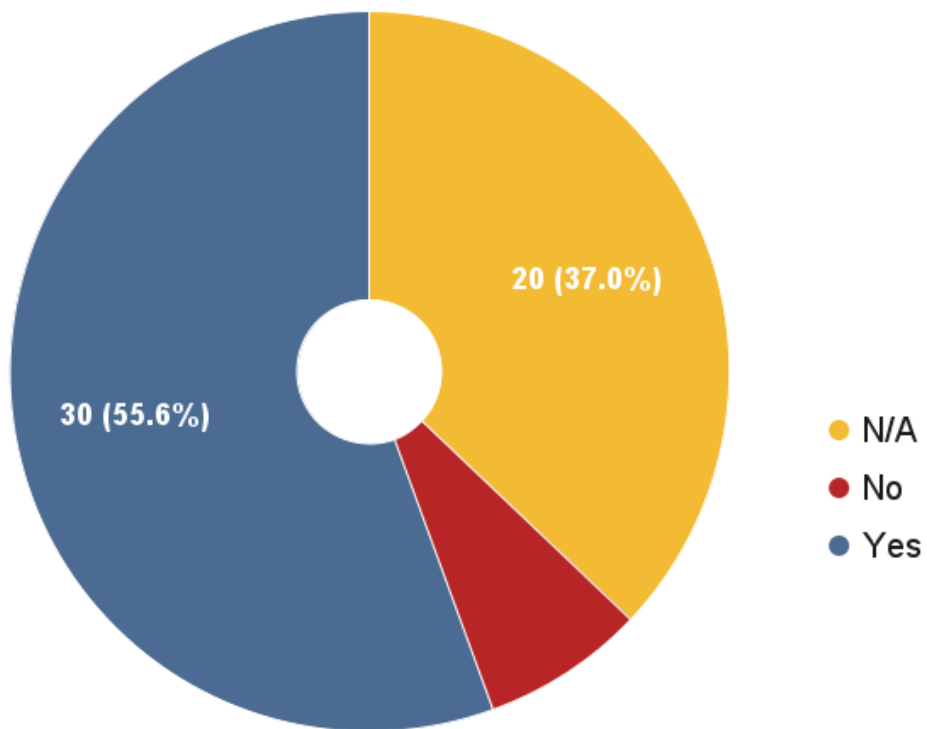


Some people reported:

- The TV alert was difficult to read because it was white text on a green background.
- The TV alert's message was unclear.

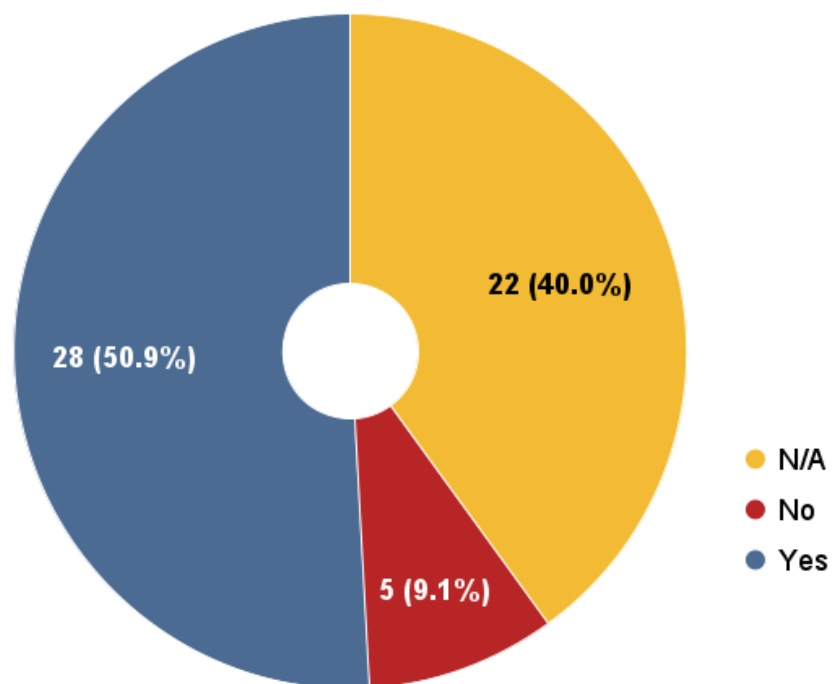
Over half of respondents (55.6%) reported that the TV captions were accurate when compared to audio.

Were the captions accurate?



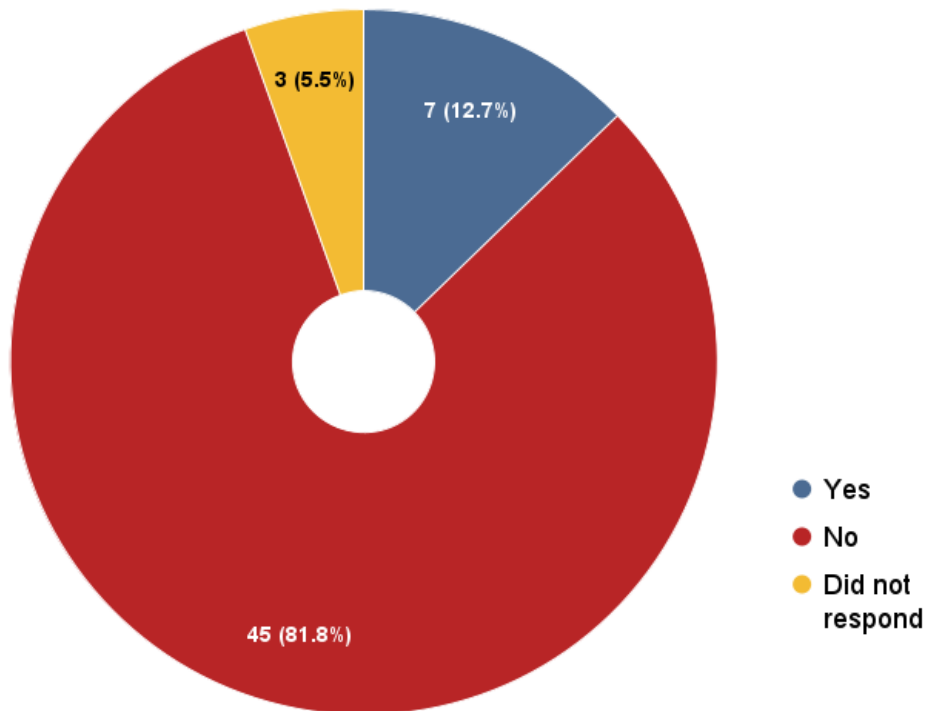
Around half of the respondents reported the TV audio was in sync with the captions.

Was the audio in sync with the captions?



The majority of the respondents (81.1%) reported they did not experience any barriers when accessing the alert via TV or radio.

Did you experience any barriers when accessing the alert?



Some of the barriers respondents reported include:

- Depending on the TV station, the alert text was low contrast against the background on the TV.
- The captions continued based on the inaudible TV audio, while the captions for the alert occurred at the top of the screen.



Barriers to Disability Access to the IPAWS National Test

Most-Reported Barriers to the Alerts:

- The phone alert was too loud, sometimes overriding the phone's silent mode, startling people or making it difficult to focus on the content of the alert.
- The phone alert disappeared entirely after people silenced it, making it impossible to access the message if someone reflexively closed the alert.
- The phone alert's text was small and could not be enlarged.
- The phone alert's message was too lengthy and/or difficult to understand.
- The TV alert text had too low of contrast against the background.

Some disabled respondents wrote about the barriers they personally faced:

- "I was not aware of the alert until I picked up phone - did not show up on [smart]watch."
- "Did not come across Hulu or streaming services. I do not use tv. This would be a major barrier."
- "Yes, wasn't in English (phone set to English) & called "Presidential Alert" confusing, could've been hacking or something."
- "I am autistic and hate loud noises. You sent it two minutes early when I wasn't ready and scared the shit out of me. I'm very angry and upset. It does make a difference and I hate that you don't care."

