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No emergency despite text

Verizon wireless customers receive warning by mistake

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FREEHOLD TOWNSHIP — A text message warning of a civil emergency and advising recipients to take shelter was sent by Verizon in error Monday, a spokesman for the company said.

“Around noon this afternoon a test emergency notification text message was sent to customers in Middlesex, Monmouth and Ocean Counties in New Jersey,” according to a statement issued by Verizon.

“This test message was not clearly identified as a test. We apologize for any inconvenience or concern this message may have caused,” according to the statement.

David Sanberg, a spokesman for Verizon, said he did not have any information about the number of customers who actually received the message within the three-county area.

Sanberg said Monday night that no text message response would be given to subscribers to explain the earlier text message alert. He said it would be impossible to be certain all subscribers who got the original

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This is the text message inadvertently sent out to Verizon Android users on Monday in central New Jersey.

CHARLES WEBSTER/STAFF PHOTO

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message would get the follow up message, too.

"The text message was sent to a very specific geographic area and you had to be there at the time to get it," Sanberg said. "Someone could have gotten the original text because they were driving through that area. But they wouldn't be in that area to get the follow up text."

He said Verizon had sent its customer apology to twitter accounts and may post it on their website.

Calls flooded into the Monmouth County 911 center after a series of texts hit Verizon cell phones stating there was a civil emergency and advising people to take cover.

The texts arrived on the phones of Verizon customers who use Android system phones and appeared to have been concentrated in the central New Jersey region, Monmouth County Sheriff Shaun Golden said.

Police departments across the area were fielding calls from residents asking what type of emergency. The text

message forced State Police to send a statement saying they were investigating the origin of the message and say there is no emergency. About two hours later, Verizon released the statement saying the text was sent by the utility in error.

The Monmouth County 911 call center field 172 calls, mostly about the text message, between noon and 1 p.m., according to Golden. Last week there were 80 calls to the 911 center during the same period, he added.

Eatontown resident Vanessa Hoercher said she was home with her 11-month-old daughter when she got the emergency text on her cell phone.

"I received one of the text messages, and it was not a fun experience," Hoercher said.

She said the message came across at 12:26 p.m. while she was home, telling her to "take shelter" and that there was "an extraordinary threat to life."

She said the text message told her the threat would continue until 6:24 p.m.

Hoercher called the preschool her 4-year-old son attended and told the teacher she would be

there to pick him up. She said the teacher had a Verizon phone, too, and was aware of the message.

"So I went and picked him up because I didn't know if it was a hoax. I still don't," she said.

Hoercher said her husband who works in Staten Island did not receive a text about the civil alert on his phone.

Hoercher said she worked in Manhattan but did not go to work on Sept. 11, 2001.

"This is a horrible, horrible prank to play and it brings people back to a place they don't want to be in," she said.

In Freehold, borough resident Heather Blau, 30, was sitting at her desk when the text arrived.

"I didn't know if it was a joke or if it was serious. I didn't know if I was supposed to get under my desk," Blau said.

"As a Verizon customer I'm very disappointed in them for not following up and sending out a text to say it wasn't real," Blau continued after learning the company admitted the text message was sent out in error.