

August 7, 2024

To: Mayor and Members of City Council

From: Sheryl M.M. Long, City Manager

**202401774**

Subject: Council Report – Leveraging Text Messaging to Improve Resident Communication

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### **Reference Document #202401245**

The City Council at its session on April 24, 2024, adopted the following item:

**MOTION**, submitted by Councilmember Albi and Vice Mayor Kearney, **WE MOVE** that the City Administration prepare a report within 60 days to assess the feasibility of leveraging opt-intext messaging as a technology to better communicate with residents.

The purpose of this report is to provide pertinent information regarding the opt-intext messaging the City currently utilizes and communications enhancements underway.

### **BACKGROUND**

The Telephone Consumer Protection Act (TCPA), enacted in 1991, restricts telemarketing calls, faxes and text messages. It specifically prohibits the use of auto dialers, artificial or prerecorded voice messages and text messages without prior express written consent from the recipient.

Key TCPA requirements include:

1. Obtaining prior express written consent from recipients before sending SMS messages.
2. Providing a clear and conspicuous disclosure that the recipient will receive future text messages.
3. Including an easy-to-use opt-out mechanism in every text message.

### **CINCYALERT**

The City decided to partner with Hamilton County in 2018, using a common platform for Smart911, CincyAlert and Alert HC. This allows residents who work or live in one or both jurisdictions to maintain a single registration.

In the years following and due in part to capacity, the City primarily focused on promoting Smart911 as part of the ongoing work to improve the Emergency Communications Center (ECC). The ECC is responsible for sending CincyAlerts.

However, when City Manager Long was appointed in September 2022, she directed a renewed focus on promoting CincyAlert and revised internal operations to make better use of the system.

As stated in the background, the TCPA expressly prohibits the use of text messages without prior agreement by the recipient to opt-in. This opt-in mechanism is built into the CincyAlert system the City currently employs. More than 13,000 community members have created a file and opted in to emergency alerts through the system. Of those users, around 1,500 have also opted in to municipal alerts.

The City sends municipal alerts regarding topics such as City holidays, changes in trash pickup and road construction.

### **RECOMMENDATION**

The City, under the direction of City Manager Long, has been strategically focused on identifying areas to improve communications and implementing updated communications policies. As such, the City Manager's Office has identified three strategic priorities that the Communications Office is prioritizing, including:

1. A new Strategic Communications Plan
2. A website and brand redesign
3. Updating City Hall Room 115 for improved internal and external communications functions

The City Manager's Communications staff has successfully completed the Strategic Communications Plan for the City and is currently training communications staff City-wide. A vendor has been selected for the website and brand redesign project and work will begin this fall. Additionally, plans have been finalized for the upgrades to Room 115 with work on that space also taking place this fall.

Considering the current capacity of City staff and the overall strategy to address communications, the Administration recommends continuing the current promotion of CincyAlerts to ensure the public is utilizing this critical communications resource both for emergency and municipal alerts. The City has been actively doing outreach on social media and through press announcements to encourage more community members to sign up for this service. The City welcomes support from Council members to publicly share this messaging. The Administration strongly recommends the continued use of CincyAlerts for text messaging services to avoid disparate systems, streamline communications and ensure we are capturing everyone who is interested in receiving information for both municipal and emergency alerts.

cc: Mollie Lair, Director, Office of Communications