Hawaii has been preparing for a missile attack; now its credibility is under fire

**By**[**Madison Park**](http://www.cnn.com/profiles/madison-park)**, CNN**

Updated 1:40 AM ET, Tue January 16, 2018

**(CNN)**Hawaii takes emergency preparedness very seriously. So seriously that in December, [the state started testing its nuclear warning siren system](http://www.cnn.com/2017/11/28/us/hawaii-nuclear-warning-trnd/index.html) that would alert residents to an impending nuclear missile strike. This was the first of such tests in Hawaii since the end of the Cold War, and came after several threats from North Korean leader Kim Jong Un that his country's missiles are extending their range. Officials said the purpose of the nuclear warning siren tests is not to scare the public, but to keep people aware. But on Saturday,[an emergency missile alert](http://www.cnn.com/2018/01/13/politics/hawaii-missile-threat-false-alarm/index.html)accidentally went out to everyone in the state, causing mass panic as people thought[they were about to die](http://www.cnn.com/2018/01/13/us/hawaii-false-alarm-react/index.html).

The false alarm has come under criticism [from officials, the FCC,](http://www.cnn.com/2018/01/14/politics/fcc-ajit-pai-hawaii/index.html) residents and others in Hawaii. Hawaii's Emergency Management Agency and Gov. David Ige apologized for the error, which was blamed on an emergency worker [hitting the wrong template during a routine drill.](http://www.cnn.com/2018/01/14/us/hawaii-false-alarm-explanation/index.html) On Monday, the leaders of the Emergency Management Agency announced they're suspending those siren tests while they investigate. But the mistake, along with the monthly sirens, have raised questions about whether the preparations in case of a North Korean missile attack are having unintended effects.

"The State of Hawaii is war mongering and scaring its citizens with its monthly nuclear attack warning siren which began in December 2017," read an online petition to stop the sirens, signed by nearly 450 people. "The sirens heighten the anxiety and stress of impending conflict and devastation, [and] make citizens afraid," [it stated.](https://diy.rootsaction.org/petitions/stop-hawaii-s-monthly-nuclear-attack-warning-siren) A small group protested Saturday in front of a federal building in Honolulu, [reported the Star Advertiser.](http://www.staradvertiser.com/2018/01/14/hawaii-news/questions-raised-on-effectiveness-of-planning-for-extremely-unlikely-event/?HSA=ae2c6abaf7e114e70354d7a12f901daaaf8cc221)

**Lost credibility?**

Another concern after the false alarm is how people could react to the next emergency alert. "How seriously are people going to take this system?" Hawaii State Rep. Matt LoPresti said on CNN. "I'm going to suggest that if there is ever ... another alert that goes out, we'll have to send a confirmation notice -- that second notice this really is happening. Because people will be waiting for a second notice to see that it's another false alarm." LoPresti said he and his family took the alert seriously. They gathered in the bathroom and began praying.

"We all just got down, got in the tub, waiting for a flash and I was going to cover the kids with my body," LoPresti said. "My 8-year-old is praying, she stopped and looked at me and said, 'Daddy, are we at war?' And I had to say yes, and she just looked at me and said 'Why?' And all I could do was hug her." The sense of terror extended across the ocean to people like Lori Citro of Newark, Delaware, who heard about the alert through a group text. Citro's daughter, Kelsey, lives in Hawaii.

"I just melted down and cried and sobbed," Citro told CNN. "Couldn't even think straight. Seemed like an eternity but it was only about 10 minutes before realizing it may be a hoax, since Kelsey was sleeping when the message came through." Citro said she feared her daughter would die.

"Even after learning it was a mistake I felt maybe they were just saying that so we all wouldn't panic," she said. "I feel like if they are practicing this drill it's because it's a possibility. Maybe they were really expecting an attack and it was thwarted at the last minute. ... I am still afraid. I'm crying right now thinking about it." Fred Bothe of San Francisco was visiting Hawaii to take care of his father's estate and had a dramatic phone conversation with his husband, Donovan Jones, who was in California.

"I was stuck in traffic heading to the airport when I got the alert," Bothe said. " It said get to shelter, but I was in the middle of nowhere. So I called Donovan, told him what was going on, and quickly started telling him things he needed to know about my father's trust. ... I told him to tell friends and family that I loved them and that I had a wonderful life. He was crying on the other end of the line." Bothe said he felt strangely calm. "It was much harder on Donovan than me," he said. "I would have just been gone, but Donovan would have lost me. He's really shook up about it."

**Can Hawaii agency regain credibility?**

Hawaii's emergency management agency keeps its eyes on the many potential disasters other than North Korea -- such as hurricanes, tsunamis, earthquake activity in the region, volcanic activity or flooding.

Vern Miyagi, the agency's administrator, acknowledged on Sundaythat damage had been done to the agency. "I have to re-establish credibility because we lost quite a bit yesterday," he told[CNN affiliate KHON](http://khon2.com/2018/01/14/hi-ema-focused-on-regaining-trust-employee-reassigned-after-false-missile-alert/). Honolulu Mayor Kirk Caldwell expressed confidence that state authorities could regain credibility. "That issue of how do you build trust back?" he said. "The way you do it at the end of the day is performing correctly. I think it's incumbent that the next test go smoothly. I believe it will and build trust that way."

**How Hawaii has prepared for potential attack**

Hawaii has been testing its sirens since December. The nuclear warning siren system blares at 11:45 a.m. on the first business day of every month, sounding for 50 seconds, followed by a 10-second pause and then a wailing "attack warning" signal for another 50 seconds. The emergency sirens didn't go off on Saturday, officials said. Had it been a real threat, they would have sounded.

"Hawaii has just started a few months ago, these monthly nuclear attack sirens as a test," said [Democratic Rep. Tulsi Gabbard, of Hawaii on CNN.](http://www.cnn.com/2018/01/14/politics/tulsi-gabbard-hawaii-cnntv/index.html) "So when the people of Hawaii got this message yesterday, they're literally going through this feeling of 'I've got minutes to find my loved ones to say my last goodbyes.'" Hawaii became the first state in the United States to prepare for a North Korean attack. Ige had announced the tests about two months ago and said the "possibility of an attack is very remote."

In the summer, Hawaii [published its guidance](https://dod.hawaii.gov/hiema/files/2017/07/HI-EMA-guidance-analysis-nuclear-detonation-JUN-2017-1.pdf)on ways to survive a nuclear detonation, including directives that residents seek shelter, stay away from windows and don't look at the flash of light.

Hawaii sits less than 5,000 miles from North Korea. The state would only have about a 20-minute heads up if a missile is launched from there.

"It's something we can't take lightly, both what occurred [Saturday], but also that threat from North Korea," Caldwell said. "Hopefully that will go away at some point, but we need to protect our citizens from the worst, if the worst were to occur."

Miyagi apologized Saturday for the false alarm, saying, "This is my responsibility and my team."

But he reiterated the need to be prepared. "Please keep in mind again, the threat is there. If this comes out, you're only going to have 12-13 minutes for actual event."

**Impact on tourism**

It's unclear how the false alarm will affect Hawaii's major industry, tourism.

The state's tourism authority [issued a statement](http://www.hawaiitourismauthority.org/default/assets/File/news/18-06%20HTA%20Statement%20on%20False%20Missile%20Alert.pdf) calling the false alarm "regrettable and completely avoidable." "There is no cause for travelers with trips already booked to Hawaii or considering a vacation in the islands to change their plans," the statement said. "Hawaii continues to be the safest, cleanest and most welcoming travel destination in the world and the alarm created today by the false alert does not change that at all." Visitor arrivals to Hawaii totaled 8.5 million and visitor spending was $15.15 billion for the first 11 months of 2017, which show increases over the same period in the previous year, [according to a statement from the tourism authority.](http://www.hawaiitourismauthority.org/default/assets/File/research/monthly-visitors/November%202017/November%202017%20Visitor%20Stats%20Press%20Release%20(final)(1).pdf)