

EIGHTEENTH CONGRESS OF THE
REPUBLIC OF THE PHILIPPINES)
First Regular Session)



SENATE
Office of the Secretary

SENATE

S. No. 1507

20 MAY -4 P4 58

Introduced by Senator Manuel "Lito" M. Lapid

RECEIVED

**AN ACT
INSTITUTIONALIZING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF ONLINE INFORMATION
CENTERS DURING NATIONAL CALAMITIES AND OTHER EMERGENCIES,
AND APPROPRIATING FUNDS THEREFOR**

EXPLANATORY NOTE

Section 7, Article III (Bill of Rights) of the 1987 Constitution provides that:

"The right of the people to information on matters of public concern shall be recognized. Access to official records, and to documents, and papers pertaining to official acts, transactions, or decisions, as well as to government research data used as basis for policy development, shall be afforded the citizen, subject to such limitations as may be provided by law."

This right to information is all the more made significant and crucial in times when the country faces disruptions to the social fabric, such as during national calamities or emergencies. Access of the public to true and accurate information is essential in preventing disorder, chaos and confusion. The COVID-19 pandemic has provided us practical lessons and insights on the vital role of information in managing disaster or emergency. The lockdown has become fertile ground for individuals and groups with ulterior or sinister motives to victimize the public to all sorts of scams and fraudulent activities like online scams, malware/ransomware

attacks and fake emails requesting personal information¹, purveyors of fake news², predatory get-rich-quick schemes³ and even scams in the distribution of government aid⁴ and bogus claims on COVID-19 drugs or vaccines⁵.

As the saying goes, sunlight is the best disinfectant. To combat the chaos and confusion borne by the circumstances and the wildfire-like spread of misinformation, the government must endeavor to disseminate true and accurate information on matters of public concern to the widest possible reach. As a response specifically to the COVID-19 situation, it is a laudable effort on the part of the government through the Presidential Communications Operations Office that a "Laging Handa" COVID-19 website was set-up (<http://www.covid19.gov.ph/>). This best practice must now be institutionalized and replicated to other kinds of calamities and emergencies that may plague the country in the future (typhoons, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, etc.)

This bill proposes the institutionalization of the establishment of an Online Information Center during national disasters or calamities. This Online Information Center will be in the form of a publicly-accessible website created and managed by the implementing agency, the Philippine Information Agency (PIA). It shall contain relevant content and information in connection with the disaster or emergency such as the websites, social media accounts/pages and other online locations of official news and information sources; official data, statistics and other information on the disaster or emergency; information on all government assistance programs, subsidies, grants and other social protection measures available to affected families; among others. This shall apply to disasters or other kinds of emergencies which are national in scope, as declared through a State of Calamity or State of National Emergency by the President of the Philippines. For disasters or emergencies not national in scope, but affecting two or more provinces or an entire region, this may

¹<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1256762/nbi-to-public-beware-of-online-scams-using-covid-19-crisis>

²<https://www.cnnphilippines.com/news/2020/4/6/arrests-over-coronavirus-fake-news.html>

³<https://www.philstar.com/business/2020/04/27/2009968/sec-get-rich-quick-schemes-rise-amid-covid-19>

⁴<https://www.philstar.com/headlines/2020/04/26/2009889/dswd-urges-public-report-scams-aid-distribution>

⁵<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/1260989/no-cure-for-covid-19-yet-fda-stresses>

apply at the discretion of the implementing agency in consideration of the gravity of the prevailing conditions and circumstances. For localized disasters or emergencies, provincial, city or municipal governments may also adopt the standards and guidelines set forth under the proposed measure and its implementing rules and regulations.

In view of this, early passage of this bill is sought.



MANUEL "LITO" M. LAPID
Senator



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AND APPROPRIATING FUNDS THEREFOR

Be it enacted by the Senate and the House of Representatives of the Philippines in Congress assembled:

1 SECTION 1. *Short Title.* – This Act shall be known as "Online Information
2 Center during Disasters or Emergencies Act."

3
4 Section 2. *Declaration of Policy.* – The State recognizes the vital role of
5 communication and information in nation-building. In the Bill of Rights, the right of
6 the people to information on matters of public concern is likewise protected and
7 ensured. The importance of this right to information is further magnified in times of
8 disasters and other emergencies, given the fact that the members of the public can
9 be easily led into chaos, panic and unrest by the difficulty of the attending conditions
10 and circumstances and the unfortunate proliferation of misinformation and fake
11 news. In response to this, the government shall endeavor to foster transparency and
12 the effective and widespread dissemination of true and accurate information on
13 matters of public concern to the people.

14

1 Section 3. *Definition of Terms.* – For purposes of this Act, these terms are
2 defined as follows:

- 3
- 4 a. *"Disaster"* - a serious disruption of the functioning of a community or a
5 society involving widespread human, material, economic or environmental
6 losses and impacts, which exceeds the ability of the affected community or
7 society to cope using its own resources. Disasters are often described as a
8 result of the combination of: the exposure to a hazard; the conditions of
9 vulnerability that are present; and insufficient capacity or measures to reduce
10 or cope with the potential negative consequences, Disaster impacts may
11 include loss of life, injury, disease and other negative effects on human,
12 physical, mental and social well-being, together with damage to property,
13 destruction of assets, loss of services, Social and economic disruption and
14 environmental degradation;
- 15 b. *"Emergency"* - unforeseen or sudden occurrence, especially danger,
16 demanding immediate action;
- 17 c. *"State of Calamity"* - a condition involving mass casualty and/or major
18 damages to property, disruption of means of livelihoods, roads and normal
19 way of life of people in the affected areas as a result of the occurrence of
20 natural or human-induced hazard.
- 21

22 Section 4. *Scope of Application.* – This Act shall cover disasters or other kinds
23 of emergencies which are national in scope, as declared through a State of Calamity
24 or State of National Emergency by the President of the Philippines. For disasters or
25 emergencies not national in scope, but affecting two or more provinces or an entire
26 region, this Act may apply at the discretion of the implementing agency in
27 consideration of the gravity of the prevailing conditions and circumstances.

28

29 Section 5. *Creation of Online Information Center during Disasters and Other*
30 *National Emergencies Act.* – Within seven (7) days from a declaration of a calamity
31 or national emergency covered by Section 4 of this Act, the Philippine Information

1 Agency (PIA) shall set-up and made available for public access an Online
2 Information Center for that specific disaster or national emergency. This Online
3 Information Center shall be in the form of a website with a “.gov.ph” domain. The
4 contents of the Online Information Center created under this Act shall be the
5 following:

- 6 a. Websites, social media accounts/pages and other online locations of
7 official news and information sources;
- 8 b. Official government directory and emergency hotlines;
- 9 c. Official data, statistics and other information on the disaster or
10 emergency;
- 11 d. Information and education campaign materials and explainers on the
12 disaster or emergency concerned;
- 13 e. Database of all relevant laws, government issuances and ordinances
14 pertaining to the disaster or emergency concerned;
- 15 f. Information on all government assistance programs, subsidies, grants
16 and other social protection measures available to affected families;
- 17 g. Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) page;
- 18 h. Procedures, hotlines and forms for reporting grievances, complaints,
19 misinformation and other violations of laws and regulations; and
- 20 i. Other content and information that the PIA deems appropriate to
21 include.

22
23 *Section 6. Adoption by Local Government Units.* – For disasters or
24 emergencies which are only provincial, city or municipal in scope, the local
25 government unit concerned may, at its discretion, adopt the standards and
26 guidelines set forth under this Act and its implementing rules and regulations. The
27 PIA shall assist and provide technical expertise, training, personnel and/or resources
28 to the local government unit concerned.

29
30 *Section 7. Appropriations.* - The amount necessary for the implementation of
31 this Act shall be included in the annual General Appropriations of the PIA for the

1 year following its enactment into law and thereafter.

2
3 Section 8. *Implementing Rules and Regulations.* – Within sixty (60) days from
4 the effectivity of this Act, the PIA, in consultation with the Department of
5 Information and Communications Technology (DICT), National Disaster Risk
6 Reduction and Management Council (NDRRMC), Department of Interior and Local
7 Government (DILG) and other relevant government agencies, shall issue the
8 necessary rules and regulations to implement the provisions of this Act.

9
10 Section 9. *Repealing Clause.* — All laws, presidential decrees, executive orders,
11 proclamations, rules and regulations, or any part thereof, which are inconsistent with
12 the provisions of this Act are hereby repealed or modified accordingly.

13
14 Section 10. *Separability Clause.* – If any provision or part of this Act, or the
15 application thereof to any person or circumstance, is held unconstitutional or invalid,
16 the remainder of this Act shall not be affected thereby.

17
18 Section 11. *Effectivity Clause.* — This Act shall take effect fifteen (15) days
19 from its publication in the Official Gazette or in at least two (2) newspapers of
20 general circulation.

21
22 *Approved,*