Interoperability & Emergency Communications News Clips
June 26, 2009- July 10, 2009

Emergency communications options explored

July 10, 2009
Montgomery Herald
By Linda Beaulieu
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http://www.montgomeryherald.com/articles/2009/07/01/news/top_stories/doc4a4b69ed9823c234584209.txt

A good communication system is the core of emergency response services, allowing various agencies to quickly respond to incidents and communicate with each other on scene. Changes in federal regulations, brought about by communication problems during the terrorist attacks at New York's Twin Towers on 9-11 and Gulf Coast hurricanes, mean that Montgomery County emergency agencies will have to either upgrade their current communication systems or switch to another system.

New federal regulations, commonly referred to as "narrow banding" and meant to increase the number of UHF and VHF channels, go into effect in 2013 and would require substantial cost to upgrade current equipment.

Montgomery County agencies currently use two different systems, with law enforcement using UHF (ultra high frequency) systems while fire, EMS and rescue use VHF (very high frequency). While this system has worked fairly well for many years, it does have problems, most serious being dead spots across the county where responders can't get radio signals.

Shortly after coming to work in 2007, Alan Griffin, the county's emergency management director, raised the issues of the new federal regulations and signal problems. In January, a seven-person committee led by Griffin with representation from different county emergency agencies began a communication study, which Griffin expects to present to county commissioners this month.

According to Griffin, the study compared two options. One is upgrading the current UHF/VHF dual system and additions that will allow interoperability among agencies. Griffin estimates a cost of $2.8 million for this option.

"It will be tough to get large scale grant funding for this," Griffin explained, since this option will not support the system the state is using to meet federal interoperability standards. The state system, called VIPER (Voice Interoperability Plan for Emergency Responders) is a digital 800 MHz system, and the state is bearing the cost of installing VIPER towers, including some in Montgomery County.

Estimated cost for full VIPER compliant equipment for the county is close to $1.5 million, with numerous grant opportunities available for local equipment, according to Griffin. Grants have already been received or approved for part of this cost, with funding in place for the first phase of VIPER, which makes the 911 communication center VIPER compatible. FirstHealth EMS has also been approved for a grant for VIPER capability

and the Sheriff's Office has been approved for partial grant funding covering 14 VIPER-capable hand held radios.

The biggest costs will be for the county's 10 fire departments, since they have the largest number of radios, and Griffin has applied for two grants, one which will require an $80,000 county match and another, a BRAC grant that would cover the full remaining cost.

There are conflicting opinions among some members of the study group about which option is best. Troy Fire Chief Joe Huntley has said from what he's learned so far, the VIPER system doesn't allow for signal penetration into structures as well as the VHF system; the county would have to keep part of the current system in place since VIPER doesn't work for firefighters' paging systems. "I realize digital is more modern but I still feel like the fire departments will be better off with the old system," Huntley said, adding that he hadn't yet taken advantage of the opportunity some other local agencies have had to try out the VIPER radios the county already has.

Tracy Parsons, outgoing captain of the Montgomery County Rescue Squad, however, is a VIPER fan. Parsons said rescue personnel have used the VIPER radios several times, including the recent search operation for the Raleigh youth group on the Uwharrie River.

"We cover the whole county and have lots of areas where we can't get a communication signal," Parsons said. "We've used VIPER on the Uwharrie Trail and other places and I'm tickled to death with it; it's got great service anywhere I've been and I really like it."

Star Police Chief Dempsey Owens, who was also on the study committee, said he believes the county will go to VIPER sooner or later. "We've got the interstate, and the Highway Patrol is pushing it," he said. Although Griffin is applying for grants that could eventually phase in local law enforcement, "There's a lot of what ifs," Owens said. Just in case the countywide grants don't come through, Owens is applying for a grant that will get the Star P.D. enough VIPER compliant equipment to use as a secondary communication system.

Other counties' experience

Currently, 67 N.C. counties or municipalities are part of the state's VIPER partnership. According to Capt. Everett Clendenin, with N.C. Crime Control and Public Safety, VIPER is not mandatory and agencies moving to VIPER must find their own funding.

"It's up to counties to decide but it is the way North Carolina is moving," he said. "The towers are going up and it's advantageous for local responders. It gets emergency responders all on the same channel and they can talk instantly among different agencies."

From the list of 67 VIPER partners, the Herald picked four at random and spoke with emergency management directors about how they're using the system.

Stanly County used Homeland Security grants to purchase VIPER equipment being used as a secondary system, giving one radio each to different agencies, including outlying fire departments, police departments, sheriff's department, the hospital and public health department, that allow them to communicate with each other and outside agencies in disasters or mutual aid situations.

"It's there for back up and it works well," said Brian Simpson, Emergency Management director. "We can talk from all over, even in poor signal areas." Stanly has no current plans to expand its VIPER capability, citing the expense to completely transition their current UHF/VHF system.

Hoke County is moving to full VIPER according to EM Director Freddy Johnson. "It will be our primary system for fire, rescue and EMS and we're in the process of implementing it now," he said. Law enforcement will be phased in as funding becomes available. Based on testing and current use, he said the system works very well and they've found no problems of communication among individuals on scene and have found only a handful of large structures where signal penetration is an issue. Hoke County is installing a $12,000 repeater that will handle that problem.

Johnson is also president of the Cumberland County Fire Chief's Association and said Cumberland's VIPER system is up and running and everyone is pleased with it. "It's a good thing; it's the future," he added.

In Bladen County, rescue, fire, ambulance and sheriff's departments are fully VIPER compatible. Fire departments have VIPER radios in their trucks and handhelds for line officers. "We're still working out the bugs in paging and using both systems at the same time right now," said EM Director Mitchell Byrd, who noted they've had to install more repeaters and that the system is expensive. Byrd's FEMA grant applications were not successful and the county commissioners opted to finance the cost, estimated at $1.8 million. Noting that Bladen is in "hurricane alley," Byrd said he feels the ability to easily communicate among different local and outside agencies will be helpful, "so the right hand knows what the left hand's doing."

Steve Hale, EM director in Rockingham County, said VIPER will be their primary communication system and the county's base site is operational.

In 2004, Rockingham County officials did a communication study that showed poor interoperability among agencies using different UHF/VHF bands. "Narrow banding was an issue we knew was coming," he said, and the county included communications upgrades in its five-year capital improvement plan for county-funded agencies, including sheriff, EMS and emergency management.

He's working with the 21 volunteer fire departments on grant applications to help with their costs.

“There was a lot of skepticism at first and people had concerns, but we handed out the cache of state VIPER radios to fire chiefs and police departments and other agencies to try them,” Hale said. “They were concerned about the cost and said they couldn’t afford to have these radios, but now they want more. Communication is the most important part of the situation and the only thing that hasn’t moved forward in firefighting is communication technology.”

Griffin, responding to questions about signal penetration in buildings, said he’s tested the VIPER equipment with a few of the committee members in several local structures, including a Troy industrial building, the hospital and the Wadeville Fire Department. “The coverage was fine and we could talk mobile to mobile and back to the 911 center,” Griffin said. “There may be some spots with signal issues, but less than what we have now.”

He also noted that if full grant funding doesn’t come through, the VIPER system, which is his recommended option, can be phased in gradually as funds become available.

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DHS: DHS Announces Sites for Multi-Band Radio Pilot

July 7, 2009
TMCnet.com
URL: http://www.tmcnet.com/usubmit/2009/07/07/4261591.htm

The U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate today announced the 14 lead organizations for the upcoming pilot phase of testing and evaluation (T&E) for the Multi-Band Radio project. The pilots comprise the final phase of a three-part T&E process that includes laboratory testing, short-term demonstrations, and pilot projects.

In 2008, the DHS Science and Technology Directorate awarded a contract to demonstrate a multi-band radio that enables emergency responders-police, firefighters, emergency medical personnel and others-to communicate with partner agencies, regardless of the radio band on which they operate. Currently, radios only operate within a specific frequency band; subsequently, responders are often unable to communicate with other agencies and support units that operate in different radio frequencies. Comparable in size and weight to existing portable radios with similar features, multi-band radio would provide users with much-improved incident communications capabilities.

The pilot phase provides a unique opportunity for agencies to access the latest technology and implement it in their daily operations. Feedback from local, state, and federal participants during the first two phases was incorporated into a production-ready multi-band radio to be used for this pilot.

The 14 lead organizations in the pilot are: * 2010 Olympic Security Committee (Blaine, Wash., and Vancouver, B.C. Canada) * Amtrak (Northeast Corridor) * Boise Fire

Department (Boise, Idaho) * Canadian Interoperability Technology Interest Group (Ottawa, ON Canada) * Customs and Border Patrol (Detroit) * Federal Emergency Management Agency (Multiple Locations) * Hawaii State Civil Defense (Honolulu) * Interagency Communication Interoperability System (Los Angeles County, Calif.) * Michigan Emergency Medical Services (Lower Peninsula Areas) * Murray State University (Southwest Kentucky) * Phoenix Police Department and Arizona Department of Emergency Management Greater Phoenix and Yuma County) * Texas National Guard (Austin, Texas) * U.S. Marshals Service (Northeast Region) * Washington Metro Area Transit Authority Transit Police (District of Columbia) Each agency will conduct a minimum 30-day pilot in fall 2009. The pilots are designed to focus on the capabilities and effectiveness of the technology, with users primarily in a command-and-control role or involved in special operations with multiple entities. The agencies and sites were chosen to represent a broad range of communication environments. Factors such as operating bands, partner agencies and disciplines, interoperable conditions, and geographic landscapes were considered when selecting pilot sites.

Results will be documented at the conclusion of the test, and all findings and lessons learned will be published in a comprehensive report that is expected to be posted on the SAFECOM program Web site, www.safecomprogram.gov, in early 2010. The report will provide details to manufacturers about the needs of the response community and assist officials in making informed radio purchasing decisions in the future.

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Pilot Organizations Announced for DHS' Multi-Band Radio Project

July 7, 2009
Government Technology
By Elaine Rundle
URL: http://www.govtech.com/gt/articles/699470

On July 2, the U.S. Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Science and Technology Directorate announced the organizations that will participate in the pilot phase of the Multi-Band Radio Project. The project's goal is to address the challenges of interoperability and produce a radio that enables emergency responders to communicate regardless of the radio band they operate on. In 2008, the directorate awarded Thales Communication Inc. a $6.2 million contract to demonstrate a portable multiband radio.

"The fundamental issue in interoperability is the inability of agencies from different jurisdictions arriving on scene at a major emergency to communicate with each other," said David Boyd, director of the DHS' Science and Technology Directorate's Command, Control and Interoperability Division. "Most of the resources that arrive in any emergency, especially initially, are local and then the next level at state and then typically the federal government comes in after that. Our challenge is to allow all of them to communicate with each other seamlessly."

Boyd said at least several hundred organizations were interested in participating in the project's pilot phase. Criteria for participating agencies included a willingness to play, according to Boyd. "We're not just handing out a radio," he said. "We're looking at collecting data back, lessons learned, experiences in the field. So we're after something that's larger than just 'We'll give you a radio and walk away,' because we're trying to prove out what this equipment is and find out what else we may need to do with it."

The Science and Technology Directorate also was looking for a variety of agencies to participate. Boyd said the project needed small organizations to pilot the radios to ensure that the technology works for rural first responders, but the radios also need to work with urban and multijurisdictional environments to address their needs. Finally the department wanted to test the technology in geographically different areas.

The 14 organizations participating in the pilot are:

- 2010 Olympic Security Committee (Blaine, Wash., and Vancouver);
- Amtrak (Northeast Corridor);
- Boise, Idaho, Fire Department;
- Canadian Interoperability Technology Interest Group (Ottawa);
- Customs and Border Protection (Detroit);
- Federal Emergency Management Agency (multiple locations);
- Hawaii State Civil Defense (Honolulu);
- Interagency Communication Interoperability System (Los Angeles County, Calif.);
- Michigan Emergency Medical Services (Lower Peninsula areas);
- Murray State University (Southwest Kentucky);
- Phoenix Police Department and Arizona Department of Emergency Management (Greater Phoenix and Yuma County);
- Texas National Guard (Austin, Texas);
- U.S. Marshals Service (Northeast Region); and
- Washington Metro Area Transit Authority Transit Police (District of Columbia).

The organizations will each conduct at least a 30-day pilot beginning in fall 2009, and the results are expected to be published in early 2010.

Responder Feedback

The pilot testing represents the final phase in the testing and evaluation portion of the Multi-Band Radio Project. During the first two phases -- which included laboratory testing and short-term demonstrations -- the directorate received feedback from local, state and federal participants that was incorporated into the multiband radio that will be used in the pilot.

Boyd said some of the feedback included making the radio's knobs larger -- firefighters found it difficult to handle the knobs when they were wearing protective gloves. "The second one is that initially the panic button was located right next to the antenna, which

meant that they couldn't get to the thing," he said. "So they wanted it relocated; it's been done."

The directorate also is working with the vendor to improve the radio's volume level. Boyd said audio level is an issue for all radios because of the loud environments emergency responders work in.

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A need for discourse

July 6, 2009
The Wapakoneta Daily News
By Karen Campbell
URL: http://www.wapakdailynews.com/content/view/114426/1/

Communication seemed to be the biggest problem when emergency responders teamed up for a full-scale exercise this month. “Like with most exercises, we knew before it started that communication would break down,” said Wapakoneta Fire Chief Kendall Krites. “It happens every time we have an exercise,” he said.

Part of the problem this time was that for a practice exercise, not all resources can be put in place exactly as they would be if it were a real emergency, said Auglaize County Emergency Management Agency Director Troy Anderson. The Local Emergency Planning Committee recently reviewed the joint exercise with Logan County held June 20. “It went extremely well,” Anderson said. The state has approved a rough draft of the exercise which was submitted by the county and cost approximately $775 to perform. “There were problems there, but we worked well together,” Anderson said. “It was a real test of the system.”

He said some of the communication trials included cell phone service with hit and miss signals and interference in the area with communications at the scene. The MARCS (Multiagency Radio Communication System), which should improve interoperability between agencies at the scene, had its first real test and Anderson said it worked without any problems.

Members of the LEPC and the community assisted with establishing a shelter, providing food and other resources. Other LEPC members worked in communication and transportation, with hazardous materials, public information and law enforcement. Michael Wurst, who heads the Medical Reserves Corps, said it was the first exercise for the group to participate in and it was a real eye opener, showing them ways they can improve.

“It gives us a chance to work with the departments that we don’t get to work with on a day-to-day basis,” Anderson said.

He said they aim to do a full-scale exercise every four years, as required by the state. This time they did a mock bus crash in Auglaize County and responded to a bomb explosion in the stadium at Indian Lake High School. The exercises are used to update the county emergency plan every year. Every four years, a total of 13 objects need to be met. The fourth year, the Emergency Management Agency tries to plan a full-scale exercise to encompass several of those objectives.

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SPECIAL REPORT: Tech Solutions energize the good to be even better

July 6, 2009
FederalNewsRadio
By Jason Miller
URL: http://www.federalnewsradio.com/index.php?nid=215&sid=1711374

The Homeland Security Department's Tech Solutions office leaves the perfect solution to someone else.

As one of the Science and Technology Directorate's technology incubators, Tech Solutions funds potential answers to problems that would pay off in less than 15 months.

"We are talking about modifying technologies that are already out there and making it useful for first responders," says Jose Vazquez, director for first responder technologies in the Tech Solutions office. "For example, the military developed a digital multi band radio. We've worked with Thales Communications and are working to get radios out there with instead of military frequencies but public safety frequencies that would allow for interoperability."

DHS July 1 announced 14 organizations will test and evaluate these multi-band radios for at least 30 days.

"The pilots are designed to focus on the capabilities and effectiveness of the technology, with users primarily in a command-and-control role or involved in special operations with multiple entities," DHS states in a release. "The agencies and sites were chosen to represent a broad range of communication environments. Factors such as operating bands, partner agencies and disciplines, interoperable conditions, and geographic landscapes were considered when selecting pilot sites."

Vazquez says this project is one of several examples of technology adaptation that Tech Solutions is funding. The office allocates about $10 million a year to 10-to-12 projects.

"Ours are quick hits," he says. "We look for something where by putting small amount of money we can move that technology along faster and close a gap. The technology may not fill the gap completely, but our other divisions are working on long term solutions,

which will solve that. If we can close the gap by applying a small amount of money and get an interim solution that is our goal."

First responders guide the office's investments. Vazquez says a team of fire, police and emergency medical experts validate a need before DHS goes out with a Broad Agency Announcement or to another contract vehicle.

"First responders can input his/her request into our Web site, www.firstresponder.gov, and that will get validated by subject matter experts," he says. "If that group says it is a high priority requirement, we will then go look to see what project could be mounted in a 12-to-15 month period to get a solution."

Vazquez adds that if there aren't technologies that can be modified in less than 15 months, the requirement is given to other DHS divisions that work on long-term projects.

Along with the multi-band radio project, Tech Solutions will test later this year a lighter weight breathing device for firefighters.

"All fire personnel have a scuba tank like device on their back and it weighs 45 pounds or so," Vazquez says. "We have been looking to make the tanks out of composites. We are talking about a cylinder 10.5 inches thick right now that is going to be reduced to about two inches thick, and 45 pounds would be brought down to under 20 pounds. It would reduce heat stress and make their life easier. This is the biggest project we have right now."

He adds when DHS went to the first responder community with this idea, it was widely lauded as something that needs to be done immediately.

"One of our strategies as far as commercialization is to work with companies already working in that arena," Vazquez says. "We are working with the International association of Firefighters, the Mine safety Appliances and Scott Health and Safety. Our hope is whatever is developed can go to out to marketplace even faster to be available to first responders."

Vazquez also points to a concrete buster and fire ground compass as two other examples of taking existing technologies and modifying them to solve existing first responder challenges.

The concrete buster, for instance, uses a shotgun-like shell to break open walls during an emergency. Vazquez says it cuts the time it used to take with a jackhammer by at least half.

For the fire ground compass, DHS funded the development of a relatively simple, but effective idea to help firefighters orient themselves in a building.

"Our contribution was doing some testing and evaluations under real life conditions with real firefighters utilizing it and seeing it when does it work and when doesn't it work," Vazquez says. "The bottom line is when you hold a compass three feet away from large metal object or floor you get a reading within 20 degrees. It's not perfect, but if that tells you that is door you want to go through, that is helpful."

The compass is available now for less than $100. Vazquez says it's hardened to withstand heat and smoke, includes a light and is big enough for firefighters with gloves on to use it.

Not every project is a guaranteed success. Vazquez says Tech Solutions just is beginning a program to develop a single hand-held device to detect multiple chemical gases and another single device to detect multiple biological agents through eye scans. Currently, first responders must carry an assortment of detection gadgets for the different chemicals or biological agents.

The office also has funded a device-in the spirit of Star Trek's Dr. McCoy-where emergency medical professionals could use a wand, called a Standoff Patient Triage device, to measure the health of patients during mass casualty event.

"The technology exists today to be able to monitor some of those vital signs remotely without having to touch the person. From 20-to-30 feet away, you can sense what a person's heart rate is or breathing rate and make a determination who needs to be triaged first," Vazquez says. "If you are at a mass causality scene and you have 30-to-40 people, rather than having to put hands on every single person to establish who you need to treat first, you can take this device, point it to them and get an assessment of who needs to be treated first."

The prototype still is more than a year away, and it could be two or more years until the triage device is available commercially.

With the rate of development fairly quickly, Vazquez says he meets regularly with other agencies working on similar technologies.

The Defense, Energy and Justice departments have similar programs to fund technology innovation.

"There is a policy that say anything available to DoD that has first responder application they are suppose to tell us about it," Vazquez says. "We meet monthly with them on that issue."

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DHS takes step forward on interoperability

July 6, 2009
HS Today

By Phil Leggiere
URL: http://www.hstoday.us/content/view/9221/149/

The first pilot demonstrations of the Department of Homeland Security's (DHS) Unified Incident Command and Decision Support (UICDS) system have been completed, Science Applications International Corporation, San Diego, Calif., an engineering and systems integration firm serving as prime contractor on the project, reported late last week.

The first test demo was held April 29 in coordination with Virginia Emergency Operations Center (VEOC) in Richmond, Va. A follow-up testing event took place in late May.

UICDS, an information architecture blueprint for managing and sharing incident information across state and local jurisdictional lines and with DHS and other federal agencies, is sponsored by the Science and Technology Directorate of the US Department of Homeland Security.

The project is designed to enable police, fire, emergency medical and other response organizations to use incident management technologies to share information and provide decision support to help prevent, protect, respond, and recover from natural, technological, and terrorist events.

"This demonstration illustrated how information can be shared through a diverse set of interfaces, data formats and networks using non-proprietary, open standards," said Chip Mahoney, SAIC UICDS project manager. "From long-standing applications like computer-aided dispatch and asset management, to more recent video surveillance, detection technologies, and situational awareness tools - the UICDS architecture enables the information exchanges that emergency responders need to help save lives, protect property, and minimize economic loss."

The prototype implementation, Steve Panzer, vice-president of the government division at ObjectFX, Minneapolis, Minn., a developer of geospatial mapping applications and participant in the demo, told HSToday.us, integrated information from 23 commercial, government and academic technology provider applications, demonstrating how this information is shared among applications and the jurisdictions they serve. The demonstration included six incident vignettes occurring in a simulated East Coast storm, with each vignette showing information sharing among five to seven applications currently in use by police, fire, emergency medical, emergency management, and other response organizations.

"The whole idea of UICDS is to provide emergency responders with information to aid situational awareness more quickly. There's been a lot of discussion and work done on overcoming silos that exist in interoperably public safety communications. There's an incredible amount of situational awareness data that's siloed, and far less useful that it could be."

One aspect of the UICDS demo, according to Panzer, was to link videocam information collected at 800 traffic cams throughout the Washington DC metro area.

James W. Morentz, Ph.D., director of UICDS Outreach for SAIC, said, "Despite all the efforts devoted to data interoperability in recent years, the 23 technology providers represented in the demonstration came to the UICDS program with virtually no instances of sharing data with each other. Using the software development kit for the UICDS middleware and the National Information Exchange Model data exchange formats, these "first adopter" technology providers successfully demonstrated nearly one hundred real-time information exchanges. This demonstration points the way to a successful continuation of this government-sponsored, technology provider-driven information sharing across the full range of prevention, protection, response, and recovery."

In March, testifying before the House Committee on Appropriations, Subcommittee on Homeland Security, Acting Under Secretary Bradley I. Buswell, Science and Technology Directorate, had discussed UICDS, listing it as a priority item for testing deployment in 2009.

"This national architecture, a response to issues identified in the 9/11 Commission Report," Buswell said, "is aimed at establishing a set of standards to which solution developers for incident management tools will adhere in order to ensure that recipients of DHS funds at the state/local level will procure incident information management systems that comply with uniform standards in order to solve the information interoperability problems."

This fall, according to Panzer, UICDS testing will further ramp-up with a wider testing event to involve nine Northeastern states.

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Law enforcement agencies struggle to communicate despite technological advances

July 3, 2009
The Dallas Morning News
By Ed Timmsand Tanya Eiserer
URL: http://www.dallasnews.com/sharedcontent/dws/news/localnews/crime/stories/DN-radio_03met.ART.State.Edition2.4bf08b8.html

Despite unprecedented advances in technology, law enforcement agencies still struggle to communicate with each other during high-speed chases that streak through several different cities or counties.

That was the case earlier this week, when a 29-year-old man led Dallas County Precinct 2 deputy constables and other law enforcement officers on a wild chase through four cities.

Precinct 2 Constable Michael Gothard said Thursday that his deputies were unable to communicate directly with Department of Public Safety troopers who also were in pursuit. Deputy constables tried to call it off as rush hour approached, but since they couldn't communicate with DPS cars, they rejoined the chase.

About 90 minutes after the chase started, the suspect, Shane W. Michel, collided with a pickup. Michel, who was critically injured, was hospitalized for several days before being transferred to the county jail. The driver of the pickup was not seriously injured.

The Dallas Police Department's helicopter was able to transmit information on traffic conditions to the deputies during the chase, Gothard said, but deputies could not communicate directly with a DPS helicopter that also tracked Michel's speeding car for part of the chase.

He said his office could communicate with the DPS only via telephone.

"Not everybody is on the same frequency," Gothard said.

Key concern

Communications between first responders, such as police, firefighters and emergency personnel, has been a pressing issue for many years, especially since the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on the World Trade Center and the Pentagon.

A warning from a New York City police helicopter that the second World Trade Center tower was about to collapse did not reach many rescue personnel because the police and fire departments operated on different radio systems – which, critics say, increased the death toll from the nation's deadliest terrorist attack.

Many of the fire and police departments that responded to the attack on the Pentagon also could not communicate directly with each other.

Considerable time and expense has been devoted to improving communications among first responders since 911. That is still a work in progress, and the recession may make it harder.

Jonathan Holt, a North Central Texas Council of Governments official, said first responders in the Dallas area are well-positioned to deal with a major incident at a specific location, where they can talk on hand-held radios using designated channels, within a limited radius.

Mobile command vehicles that are now available, he said, also can help with longer-distance communications between agencies.

"The problem with big chases and things like that is ... you migrate from different location to different location," said Holt, the council of governments' public safety radio communications coordinator. "They are so fluid and they're so fast-moving."

As a result, law enforcement personnel from different agencies, driving vehicles equipped with radios using proprietary technology and different frequency bands, may not be able to talk with each other directly.

Even if they have hand-held radios that use common frequencies, their limited range – and simply trying to use them during a high-speed chase – might be problematic. Some dispatch centers can "patch" officers using different frequency bands together, but that is difficult when events are moving quickly.

"When you are in a fast-paced, moving environment, sometimes seconds count," said Mike Simpson, the state's communications interoperability coordinator. "Officers are out there in a dangerous environment." And it's a problem, he said, if they can see each other "but can't talk to each other."

The ability to communicate also is critical when first responders from different parts of the state or different states are called upon to help in a major disaster such as a hurricane or tornado.

Instead of relying on a hodgepodge of proprietary equipment that uses different frequency bands, Simpson said, state officials are encouraging law enforcement agencies to refit a digital system known as Project 25 (P25) by 2015 that makes interoperability – or talking to each other on the radio – easier.

P25 system

The Austin area had the state's first major P25 digital system, which was completed about five years ago.

"We have all the jurisdictions from multiple counties all on the same radio system," Simpson said. "The highway patrol can talk to the DEA ... the Secret Service... to a garbage truck." In a high-speed chase, he said, communications between law enforcement personnel from different agencies can be instantaneous.

But that ability comes at a cost. Simpson, who also is Austin's wireless communication services manager, said that creating the P25 system in the Austin area cost about $100 million. For Dallas, Tarrant, Collin and Denton counties, he said, the price tag might be $300 million.

Simpson said that some cities in North Texas already are switching to the P25 system.

But for other government entities, including Dallas County, coming up with the money may be difficult, especially with the economic downturn.

Dallas County Judge Jim Foster said that until the county upgrades its radio system, it will be years behind. "But in order to move forward, we're talking in the millions of dollars just to improve the existing communications," he said.

Foster said that is virtually impossible without some kind of help from the state or federal government, and efforts to obtain grant money have been disappointing. "We've looked and looked at it and just have not be able to find any," he said.

Last year, Dallas County commissioners voted to create a central dispatch center that would consolidate the dispatchers and equipment for the sheriff and the county's five constables, in part as a cost-saving measure, but also to improve communications capability. For now, at least, even those plans are on hold because of a financial shortfall – the kind confronting many communities because of the recession.

"Although we eventually want to get there ... the finances just won't allow us to build it right now," said Dallas County Administrator Darryl Martin.

Statewide, the cost for a P25 network could cost hundreds of millions. Simpson said that regional governments in the state have been asked to produce plans by Dec. 15 detailing their strategies for migrating toward P25. How to fund that, he said, will be part of the planning process.

Communities, he said, will need to draw on local, county, state and federal funding. No one source is sufficient, he said, "to make this happen."

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New York State Hosts First Public Safety Interoperability Symposium with Focus on Governance

July 3, 2009
The New York State Office for Technology
By Angela Liotta
URL: http://readme.readmedia.com/news/show/New-York-State-Hosts-First-Public-Safety-Interoperability-Symposium-with-Focus-on-Governance/865505

ALBANY, NY (07/03/2009)(readMedia)-- On July 1 and 2, 2009, Governor David A. Paterson, and the New York State Chief Information Officer/Office for Technology (CIO/OFT) Statewide Interoperability Program Office (SIPO) hosted the first New York State Public Safety Interoperability Symposium in Albany, New York. With a focus on governance, the goal of the Symposium was to help state and local policymakers improve state interoperability governance structures that oversee public safety communications interoperability planning and implementation.

The two-day event brought together nearly 250 attendees including government executives; county, state, and federal first responders; tribal associations; neighboring contiguous Border States and Canada; and the Statewide Interoperability Program Advisory Council to discuss statewide interoperability and recommendations for policy.

"Effective governance requires participation from the whole community, not just a single group or agency. The New York State Public Safety Interoperability Symposium is a valuable resource to assist in developing new strategies to strengthen our governance structure and sustain our statewide interoperable communications plan. I am confident a refined governance policy regarding interoperability will result in improved public safety throughout New York," said Governor David A. Paterson.

The conference used a combination of panels and presentations from government executives, national subject matter experts and neighboring states. Sessions focused on creating a comprehensive understanding of the importance of interoperability among public safety wireless networks and share best practices to advance governance.

During her opening remarks, Dr. Melodie Mayberry-Stewart, New York State Chief Information Officer and Director of the Office for Technology, emphasized the priority of achieving an interoperable public safety communications solution for New York State and the importance of engaging our first responders in the planning process.

"Coordination among local and state agencies will be essential as we work to improve interoperability among public safety networks," said Dr. Melodie Mayberry-Stewart. "We were pleased to provide an open forum for lively discussion on public safety interoperability for New York. I hope attendees have a better understanding of the importance of creating an inclusive governance structure that adheres to state and national standards."

"Coordinating public safety interoperability initiatives in New York State requires a thorough practical knowledge and understanding of the various existing communications systems and how they are used; proven experience in operating and maintaining a public safety grade communications system; and a true understanding of the day to day business of and interactions between public safety first responders," said New York State Police Superintendent Harry J. Corbitt. "The ability of first responders to effectively communicate is paramount to the safety the residents of New York State and beyond. Bringing the stakeholders together at this symposium is a crucial step toward the goal of communications interoperability."

On behalf of Governor David A. Paterson, Brendan Fitzgerald, Assistant Secretary for Technology, Gaming and Operations, gave greetings and emphasized Governor Paterson's commitment to improving emergency communications throughout New York State and the need for collaboration among state agencies and across local and state jurisdictions.

"As New York moves forward with a regionalized approach to emergency communications, fostering partnerships with local governments will remain a priority. Deploying systems that can meet unique community needs, while at the same time providing seamless interoperable communications, is the state's goal," said Brendan Fitzgerald.

Robert LeGrande, former Chief Technology Officer for the District of Columbia and President and CEO of LeGrande Technical and Social Services, LLC., shared success stories describing how the District of Columbia developed the nation's first city-wide PS 700 MHz wireless broadband network. During his remarks, he stressed the importance of establishing a partnership between user groups to develop governance and data sharing policies.

"I believe that standards, along with locally determined build and buy flexibility and control are critical to achieving nation-wide interoperability. New York State and other states who adopted this approach, I believe will be successful," said Robert LeGrande.

Attendees also heard from keynote speakers Taylor Heard, Deputy Director of Emergency Communications for the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, and Thomas G. Donlon, Director of the NYS Office of Homeland Security.

During his presentation, Taylor Heard emphasized the importance of collaboration in working to achieve interoperability. The Office of Emergency Communications created the National Emergency Communications Plan (NECP), in concert with first responder and public safety agencies across the country, to establish an integrated, national vision for aligning the emergency response community on the issue of communications. The NECP continues to drive progress in these efforts.

"It is no secret that achieving effective emergency communications can be challenging. It requires a willingness to recognize the needs of others at the table and to work towards a common goal. This type of coordination is the foundation for how we enhance emergency communications capabilities across our great nation," said Taylor Heard.

Thomas Donlon further discussed the evolving threat of terrorism and the need for a coordinated and effective response to terrorism or natural disaster incidents. He also explained the NYS Office of Homeland Security's role as the state administrative authority for federal homeland security grant funding, which provides both the tools and training for interoperable communications.

"Through the years, the top priority of New York State has been to give first responders - among them police and firefighters - the tools and wherewithal they need to do their jobs as they form our front line of defense," said Thomas Donlon. "I have found that effective communications among our valiant men and women leads to an effective and coordinated response to any incident and, most importantly, a successful conclusion."

This first NYS Public Safety Interoperability Symposium was supported by a $50,000 grant awarded in 2008 by the National Governor's Association (NGA) Center for Best Practices. New York State's selection was a result of Governor David A. Paterson's application to NGA to establish a formalized governance structure to guide New York State's interoperable communications efforts.

The mission of the Statewide Interoperability Program Office is to plan for and foster interoperability among local, state, federal, and tribal public safety networks.

For additional information on SIPO visit
http://www.cio.ny.gov/SIPO/Aboutsipo/aboutsipo.htm.

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US States Make Strides in Advancing Interoperable Communication

July 1, 2009
National Governors Association
URL: http://www.egovmonitor.com/node/26011

States have made significant progress toward achieving interoperable communications, but more work is needed before information can be freely exchanged among jurisdictions during an emergency, according to a new Issue Brief by the NGA Center for Best Practices (NGA Center).

The Issue Brief, Advancing Public Safety Interoperable Communications: Recent State Actions, highlights states' progress to date in advancing interoperability and reviews the obstacles they face to efficiently sharing information across all levels of government. Interoperable communications allow first responders, public safety agencies and leadership to communicate and operate effectively during an emergency situation. The NGA Center's 2008 Homeland Security Directors' Survey identified public safety interoperability as one of the top priorities of state and territorial homeland security advisors.

"Emergency response officials consistently cite the ability to communicate with other first responders as critical to being able to better protect the public in the face of any emergency," said John Thomasian, director of the NGA Center. "Over the last several years, governors' leadership has bolstered statewide and regional communication interoperability capacity."

According to the report, states continue to face challenges to interoperability in five key areas, including informal oversight and governance; uncoordinated Standard Operating Procedures; incompatible and obsolete technology; infrequent and inconsistent trainings and exercises; and difficulty integrating interoperability into routine, daily use.

The brief recommends several strategies governors can follow to overcome these challenges, including:

* Strengthen governance by gaining commitments from all disciplines in the state through a statewide interoperability coordinator;
* Foster development of Standard Operating Procedures through collaboration across disciplines;

* Fund technology for the long-term by planning and budgeting for ongoing updates to systems, procedures, and documentation;
* Develop routine trainings and exercises for interoperable communications; and
* Encourage the use of interoperable communications on a routine basis.

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D.C. Train Crash Shows Major Cities Better Prepared for Emergency Response

June 28, 2009
ABC News
By Dave Cook
URL: http://www.abcnews.go.com/Politics/Story?id=7939640&page=1

First responders' effective handling of Monday's rail accident in Washington, coupled with the smooth rescue after a Hudson River plane crash in January, may indicate that the post-9/11 demand for better, faster emergency response is being met -- at least in some of the nation's big cities.

"The regional response that is required during extraordinary incidents (Hudson and Metro being two good recent examples) has, in my opinion, significantly improved since 9/11," Daniel Kaniewski, deputy director of George Washington University's Homeland Security Policy Institute, wrote Wednesday in an e-mail interview. He served in the Bush White House as special assistant to the president for homeland security and senior director for response policy.

Triggering an Effective Response

On Monday afternoon, one Metrorail train slammed into a second train stopped outside the Fort Totten Station in Northeast Washington. The impact pushed part of the moving train onto the top of the stationary train. Two-thirds of the moving train's lead car was crushed, killing nine and injuring more than 70 people.

The Metrorail accident, which disrupted the daily commute for thousands in the Washington area, tested how the nation's capital would cope with a major incident. What happened was "an effective regional response," Mr. Kaniewski said in an online commentary.

In the wake of the accident, emergency vehicles converged on the scene. "As I monitored the radio traffic of the local agencies involved, I expected to hear chaos; but instead I heard the calm and ordered dispatch of emergency units and informative reports from arriving personnel," Kaniewski wrote.

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HAM radio operators practice emergency response skills

June 28, 2009
The Daily Times
By Elizabeth Piazza
URL: http://www.daily-times.com/ci_12706786

FARMINGTON — Three years ago, Floyd Bowman, an amateur or "HAM" radio operator from Cedar Hill, received a message via HAM radio from a man in Durango, Colo.The Colorado man was trying to find his father in Kentucky after a big ice storm knocked out phone service there.

Bowman, an operator since 1966, got on the radio and spread the word across the country.

Within hours, the man from Durango received the message that his father was OK.

The use of HAM radio is instrumental for communicating during disasters. San Juan County Emergency Management, along with licensed HAM radio operators, participated Saturday in Field Day, a nationwide 24-hour preparedness exercise.

"HAMS are another vehicle for us to communicate when all else fails," said San Juan County Emergency Manager Don Cooper.

Operators practiced setting up and testing emergency equipment and communicating with operators across the country, simulating what might happen during an emergency.

The operators set up and establish emergency communication using only auxiliary power.

HAM radio has existed for a century and became a global community of licensed operators who use the airways to communicate.

The volunteer group of 20 HAM radio operators are members of RACES, or Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Services, and participate in extra training and drills, said RACES coordinator Paull Holmes.

San Juan County Emergency Management supplies the volunteers with specialized equipment so they can be on the air and communicating in a matter of minutes, Holmes said.

Most of the funding for the HAM operators comes from Homeland Security money, Cooper said.

For emergency management nationwide, HAM radio operators are the shining stars in communications, Cooper said.

HAM radio was on the back burner and seen only as a hobby until disasters such as Sept. 11, 2001, and Katrina.

Prior to Katrina, FCC rules forbid operators to use HAM radios for commercial purposes. Following the disaster, HAM radios can be used in the course of emergency services, Cooper said.

"One of the big advantages of HAM radio operators is that there are so many of them and they're all over the world," Cooper said.

The wide spectrum of communication allows people to quickly link up across the globe.

"In the 11 years that I've lived eight miles north of Aztec, I've received QSL cards from 304 different countries, including the most wanted country in the world, North Korea," Bowman said.

QSL cards are written verification that two people communicated via HAM radio. Bowman hoped to contact a HAM operator who is stationed on the International Space Station during the Field Day.

"I don't know why they call it amateur radio because they're truly professionals," Cooper said.

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Disaster responders train on new system

June 27, 2009
The Gainesville Sun
By Cindy Swirko
URL:
http://www.gainesville.com/article/20090627/ARTICLES/906279928/1008/WEATHER?Title=Disaster-responders-train-on-new-system

Regional disaster response communications specialists got first-hand training Saturday on a mobile system that will allow various agencies to talk with one another in an emergency despite having different equipment systems, power outages and other obstacles.

The system is called Emergency Deployable Interoperable Communications Equipment — EDICS for short — and it consists of two trucks full of communications equipment, computers, satellite dishes, fuel cells, generators and other hardware that can be driven to a scene for seamless communications.

"This is hardware that could bring a disaster back to normal by bringing infrastructure. Outside agencies will be able to come in and talk to each other over their radios," said Phil Royce, lead radio technician with the Alachua County Sheriff's Office. "We have a

satellite network system. We have voice-over (Internet protocol) phones. We have conferencing capability. We have GIS mapping servers on board for the state."

The two trucks are based at the Alachua County Sheriff's Office and are worth an estimated $250,000. They are part of a state EDICS network to serve North Central Florida and were funded primarily through federal and state money.

Various agencies that respond to major emergencies often use different communications systems that are not compatible with each other. During wildfires, for instance, local law enforcement and state firefighters may not be able to communicate because they have different systems.

The equipment on the trucks enables the agencies to be able to communicate with each other despite having different equipment.

Among those getting trained Saturday was Chrissy Nolte, a master communications dispatcher with Marion County.

"It's been really good training for all of us," Nolte said. "It makes more sense now, doing it hands-on."

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