Interoperability & Emergency Communications News Clips
September 5, 2008 – September 19, 2008

New System has Few Hiccups

September 18, 2008
2The Advocate.com
By Michelle Millhollon
URL: http://www.2theadvocate.com/news/28591144.html?index=1&c=y

Richard Bezet's wife, Linda, was standing in the doorway of their Park Boulevard home when a large oak tree fell on it during Hurricane Gustav. The Bezets, of Baton Rouge, were told that the home they have spent eight years restoring will have to be torn down because of the extensive damage.

The communication system the state set up for hurricane responders after the debacle in Katrina had hiccups in Gustav and Ike.

Though not as widespread as in the 2005 storm, some local law enforcement authorities and other first responders still had difficulty talking to each other outside their immediate areas, particularly in the hardest hit parts of Plaquemines, St. Bernard, Cameron and Lafourche parishes. A small percentage could not talk at all.

Busy signals and offline towers complicated the storm response.

"We had problems. It didn't perform flawlessly," said Brant Mitchell, assistant deputy director of interoperability for the Governor's Office of Homeland Security and Emergency Preparedness.

State officials said the problems were isolated and were quickly resolved.

The problems included:

A busy signal on 3.6 percent of radio transmissions when first responders pushed the button on their radios to talk. The biggest problems were in Baton Rouge, Lafitte, Slidell and LaPlace, where towers were unable to accommodate the amount of radio traffic. Radio towers that went offline for several reasons, including storm surge and generator failures. First responders in some parts of Plaquemines, St. Bernard, Lafourche and Cameron parishes were able to talk to others within their area but not to the region or to the state. To resolve the problem, the state sent mobile towers.
"There were some issues, but they were minor ones," said Mark Cooper, director of GOHSEP.

Parish officials agree with that assessment, saying the communication system fared much better in Gustav and Ike than it did during Katrina three years ago.

Randy Metz, chief deputy for West Feliciana Parish, said state officials offered a swift solution when his parish lost radio, Internet and phone contact during Gustav.

He said the state set up an Internet and phone system that fed off satellites.

"It's a good system. … Overall, I think it held up pretty good," Metz said.

Gustav, which made landfall on Sept. 1 in Terrebonne Parish, was the first real test of the system the state put in place after Hurricane Katrina left many first responders disconnected from the rest of the world.

Katrina caused cellular phones and other critical communication devices to go dead. One parish lost contact with state officials for days.

After Katrina, officials tackled the problem of interoperability — government lingo for emergency workers being able talk to one another and to state officials**.**

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Panel Gets Static on How to Develop First Responder System

September 17, 2008
CongressDaily
By Otto Kreisher
URL: http://www.nextgov.com/nextgov/ng_20080917_1964.php

A House Homeland Security subcommittee Tuesday heard widespread agreement on the need for a nationwide communications system that will allow local, state and national first-responders to share information swiftly and seamlessly with each other in an emergency. But the panel heard considerable disagreement on how to achieve that.

Comment on this article in The Forum.The biggest gap appeared between the FCC and the Homeland Security Department, which are committed to developing a government-commercial partnership to build the system, and officials from well-resourced local jurisdictions and others who are concerned that the proposed network would interfere with their systems.

House Homeland Security Chairman Bennie Thompson, Emergency Preparedness Subcommittee Chairman Henry Cuellar, D-Texas, and ranking member Charles Dent, R-Pa., appeared skeptical that the national proposal would serve their more rural constituencies.

FCC had tried to auction off part of the 700 megahertz spectrum to a commercial entity to obtain the funds and the expertise to develop the public sector emergency communications network alongside the private system. But the sole bid came in at about half the $1.33 billion minimum the commission set.

Derek Poarch, chief of the FCC Homeland Security Bureau, said the commission was preparing a draft proposal for a second auction, which he believed would be more attractive to the commercial sector.

That proposal would lower the threshold bid to $750 million, allow firms to bid for regional coverage and would relax some of the technical requirements of the first offer, Poarch said. It also would extend the license for the spectrum from 10 to 15 years, he said.

The draft proposal is to be reviewed by the FCC Sept. 25.

Chris Essid, director of emergency communications at Homeland Security, supported the plan, calling it essential to the interoperability of first responders' communications.

Although Thompson expressed his support for the public-private partnership, he questioned Poarch and Essid on how the proposal would cover rural areas. Essid said the plan would require coverage for every county but acknowledged that coverage might come slower to thinly populated areas.

Cuellar questioned how the proposal would coordinate with existing local and regional emergency communications systems, and was assured the plan was not to replace current systems but to make them compatible with the national system.

Essid said it would be prohibitively expensive and too slow to replace all the existing radios, so the proposal was to create "a system of systems" integrating current and new equipment.

Poarch noted that current communications systems were designed mainly to handle voice but the new national technology would allow them to transmit video and data.

LeRoy Carlson, chairman of Cellular Communications, supported the proposal for bids for regional coverage, saying that was something his firm could handle.

But Charles Dowd, deputy chief of the New York City Police Department, and Robert LeGrande, the former chief technology officer for Washington, D.C., complained that the current FCC plan could disrupt their already well-established communications systems.

"The national model, in our view, will not work," Dowd said, adding that his view was shared by all the major cities he had talked to. He proposed allowing New York to use the 700 MHz spectrum to build its own broad band emergency communications system.

"What we're asking is, let's not rush into another auction to give away this best opportunity for a solution," Dowd said.

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DHS Will Test Multiband Radios

September 17, 2008
Federal Computer Week
By Alice Lipowicz
URL: http://www.fcw.com/online/news/153824-1.html

The Homeland Security Department will soon begin testing newly engineered multiband radios for first responders in New York City and other locations as part of its efforts to improve emergency communications, officials said.

Historically, firefighters, police and other first responders have used radios that operate on only one frequency or on different bands. The new radios, which will operate across different bands and in both digital and analog modes, will make it possible for them to communicate in cases where they need to work together.

DHS' Office for Interoperability and Compatibility, the Federal Emergency Management Agency and responder groups developed the requirements for the radios, which are being produced by several manufacturers.

The prototypes will be tested this year and in 2009, David Boyd, director of DHS' Command, Control and Interoperability Division, and Chris Essid, director of the DHS Office of Emergency Communications, told the House Communications, Preparedness and Response Subcommittee Sept. 16.

The pilot program testing will involve radio operation across multiple systems, such as analog, conventional, digital and Project 25 systems, as well as across multiple agencies that include federal, state, local, tribal and military.

In addition, the office of emergency communications is establishing an Emergency Communications Preparedness Center to improve coordination of programs related to its mission across the federal government. The center expects to have an operating charter later this year and to submit a strategic assessment to Congress on progress made and challenges ahead in interoperability.

The emergency communications office is creating Regional Emergency Communications Coordination Working Groups to coordinate multistate efforts to improve the survivability and interoperability of communication systems.

Starting in January, the emergency communications office intends to hire 10 regional coordinators who will work in FEMA's regional offices, Essid said.

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COML Training Schedule Available

September 16, 2008
Radio Resource Media Group
URL: http://www.rrmediagroup.com/newsArticle.cfm?news_id=3371

The Communications Unit Leader (COML) training will be offered in several locations in coming weeks. The training plays a critical support role within the incident command system (ICS).

The COML is responsible for integrating communications and ensuring that operations are supported by communications. The COML must understand ICS and local response systems to support the efforts of the command team.

In April, the COML course was certified as National Incident Management System (NIMS) compliant. Click here for a link to the COML schedule. For information on prerequisites required prior to taking the COML course, visit http://www.npstc.org/commUnitLeader.jsp.

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Deputy NYC Police Chief Weighs In on Spectrum Auction

September 16, 2008
CQ HOMELAND SECURITY
By Matt Korade

A top New York City police official told a Homeland Security subcommittee Tuesday that the federal government should take a step back from plans to auction off the public-safety portion of the 700 megahertz spectrum.

The spectrum, which currently suffers from high congestion, is being reclaimed and part of it reserved for public safety use in advance of the switch from analog to digital TV broadcasting this February.

The public-safety portion, also called "D-block," will be shared with commercial users, but the commercial segment failed to sell at a Federal Communications Commission auction earlier this year because buyers weren't interested in building an interoperable emergency communications network as required under the auction rules.

As a result, the highest bidder on the D-block made an offer of just under $500 million, far short of the $1.33 billion reserve price.

The new auction, expected by mid-2009, will attempt to address commercial bidders' concerns. Under the latest proposed rules, which the FCC will vote on Sept. 25, the D-

block will be offered as both a nationwide license and two sets of regional licenses totaling 58 in number. In addition, the term of the license would be extended from 10 to 15 years.

A public comment period will follow the adoption of the proposed rules, which FCC officials will use to adopt final rules for the auction before year's end.

Deputy Chief Charles Dowd, commanding officer of the New York Police Department's communications division, is responsible for emergency calls in New York City and the department's radio communications. Dowd told members of the House Homeland Subcommittee on Emergency Communications, Preparedness and Response that instead of maintaining separate networks for mission-critical voice communications and broadband data, the two realms should be merged into a single, robust public-safety network in the 700 megahertz spectrum. Doing so would drive equipment manufacturers to build feature-rich devices that take advantage of the economies of scale enjoyed by the commercial wireless industry, Dowd said.

But such a move would be best achieved by auctioning off the D-block not as national, but as regional, licenses, which would allow localities more control and flexibility to define the terms of the public-private partnership, the needs of which will differ from urban to rural areas, he said. New York City wasn't the only jurisdiction wanting such control. San Francisco, Philadelphia, and Washington, D.C., also filed comments with the FCC along the same lines, Dowd said.

Under the current rules, which could sell off the commercial side of the D-block to a single national bidder, local jurisdictions would have to wait years for a buyer to build out the communications system before they know how they can best use their portion of the spectrum, Dowd said.

Asked by Chairman Henry Cuellar, D-Texas, how long the commercial buyer will be given to provide national coverage, Derek Poarch, chief of the FCC's Public Safety and Homeland Security Bureau, said the buyer would be allowed four years to provide 40 percent coverage, 10 years to provide 75 percent coverage, and 15 years to provide 90 to 98 percent of coverage, depending on a jurisdiction's population level.

"You said 15 years?" Cuellar asked. ". . . What do we do between now and 15 years?"

"There's some areas that will be built out quickly," Poarch said, citing networks in major metropolitan areas as the most likely to be completed first.

"Just to emphasize the point, 15 years from now, what year will that be?" Cuellar asked.

"Fifteen years from now will be 2023," Poarch said.

The National Option

Richard Mirgon, president-elect of the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials International <http://www.apco911.org/> , supported the development of a national interoperable broadband network. Such a network would ensure that all public safety agencies, regardless of their size, location, expertise or financial resources would have the same opportunities to take advantage of the high-tech world of broadband communications, he argued.

"Absent a national network," he wrote in his submitted testimony, "only those few agencies with substantial resources and expertise will be able to provide their first responders with state-of-the-art broadband communications. The result would be islands of robust, and probably incompatible, public safety broadband networks, surrounded by vast un-served areas."

This means the network would have to be built to national standards. In addition, the FCC should maintain the public-private partnership model because that would be the only model likely to produce a national network.

It is unrealistic to expect a national broadband network will be able to provide sufficient coverage or reliability to replace "mission-critical" voice communications that are now provided over handheld radio systems, Mirgon wrote. While the voice component of a broadband network will probably reduce the need for some public safety personnel to carry both cell phones and mobile radios, the handheld radios will probably remain the primary mode of communication for the time being.

However, the concern was whether a national network would meet public safety concerns. Public safety agencies need priority access, comprehensive coverage, high-capacity lines to prevent transmission delays; the challenge, therefore, is to allow for these requirements while remaining economically viable on the commercial end.

With more than 19,000 cities, 16,000 towns, 3,000 counties, and 35,000 special districts, each with individual public safety needs, the task of building a national broadband network was not going to be easy, Mirgon said. Though public safety officials may at times appear to be divided on how best to build such a system, "we are united in the belief that there is an immediate and dire need to establish a public safety broadband network that meets the needs of first-responders during mission-critical incidents," he said.

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Lautenberg, Menendez Announce More Than $1.4 Million to Improve Emergency Communications in New Jersey

September 12, 2008
PolitickerNJ.com
URL: http://www.politickernj.com/paganm/23446/lautenberg-menendez-announce-more-14-million-improve-emergency-communications-new-jerse

NEWARK, N.J. – U.S. Sens. Frank R. Lautenberg (D-NJ) and Robert Menendez (D-NJ) today announced the U.S. Department of Homeland Security (DHS) has awarded New Jersey more than $1.4 million in federal funds to improve its emergency communications.

This funding is part of the Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant Program (IECGP), a new federal program to help states plan and train to respond to natural disasters and acts of terrorism. New Jersey will receive $1,443,315 for the first year of the IECGP, which was authorized after the implementation of the 9/11 Commission's recommendations.

"When our first responders ran into the World Trade Center on September 11, they expected their radios and communications equipment to work. But that equipment wasn't up to the job and it made it harder for our first responders to protect themselves and others," Sen. Lautenberg said. "This funding will help provide our first responders with efficient, effective communications during emergencies to better protect our communities."

Sen. Menendez said, "One of the many lessons we learned from the September 11th attacks is how vitally important it is for police, firefighters and medical responders to be able communicate with each other in emergencies. Even now, seven years after that deficiency was exposed, there is still more work to do. These funds are important to help make sure that the heroes who help save lives at the very least have functioning equipment."

The 9/11 Commission Report found that communications were so poor on September 11 that firefighters and police officers in different parts of the World Trade Center could not communicate with each other or with NYC's Emergency Management Headquarters in 7 World Trade Center. One problem was that their communications systems were not "interoperable." The IECGP was created to help fix these problems so public safety agencies will be able to talk and exchange data across jurisdictions using radio communications systems

The IECGP, which is funded by the FY 2008 DHS Appropriations Act, allocates funding based on risk. Both Sens. Lautenberg and Menendez have fought hard to compel the Bush Administration to provide New Jersey with more homeland security grants based on risk.

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GHS Honors Emergency Responders on 9/11

September 12, 2008
Banner Graphic
By Jamie Barrand
URL: http://www.bannergraphic.com/story/1460720.html

Greencastle Fire Department firefighter Pat Carrico remembers Sept. 11, 2001 vividly. "We went out on the lake that day, and there wasn't an airplane in the sky," he said.

On the anniversary of the most deadly attacks ever on American soil, Greencastle High School faculty and student ambassadors, along with Greencastle Mayor Sue Murray, hosted a breakfast for area emergency responders.

Greencastle Fire Chief Bill Newgent said life has changed greatly for emergency responders in the past seven years.

"From an appearance side, there is obviously a larger awareness of what we do," he said. "Three hundred and seventy-some firefighters were lost in the trade center when it collapsed. The awareness of what not only firefighters do, but of what EMS and law enforcement do, has been heightened."

Newgent said in his estimation, emergency response agencies communicate better now that they did before the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"What we've seen is more emphasis on interoperability," he said. "We realize now how important it is that fire departments, police departments and EMS workers talk to one another."

Training practices were also altered after the attacks.

"Still today we're taking terrorism training as a direct result (of the attacks)," Newgent said. "Pre-9/11, we knew what anthrax was, we knew what a dirty bomb was, but we weren't necessarily trained to deal with them. Now we are."

Newgent said the 9/11 attacks also precipitated an interest for schools, universities and business in getting emergency preparedness plans in place.

"We have gone in and helped people get prepared for emergencies and disasters in our community," he said.

Murray said Sept. 11, 2001 reminded the nation how important emergency responders were not only in times of crisis, but on a daily basis.

"You spend your days taking care of us not because of what happened seven years ago, but because of what happens every day," she said.

The breakfast took place in the lobby of the high school's McAnally Center. GHS principal Jim Church extended his thanks to all the volunteers and donors, lauding their "generosity and hard work to make this event a great success."

Church said about 30 emergency responders from the Greencastle police and fire departments, Putnam County 911 and Sheriff's Department, the Indiana State Police and Operation Life attended the event.

Food was donated, prepared and served by representatives of Final Approach Bistro, Mama Nunz, Fairway Restaurant, Chief's, Walden Inn and Putnam Inn.

Newgent was grateful that the community held the event to honor him and his colleagues, but was quick to point out what Sept. 11, 2001 has come to mean to him.

"We're able to come together and that's great, but the main thing is to pay tribute to our fallen comrades," he said. "We always need to remember the ultimate sacrifice these people gave."

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Louisville Metro receives $2.5 Million Grant for Emergency Communications

September 12, 2008
Biz Journals
URL: http://www.bizjournals.com/louisville/stories/2008/09/08/daily42.html

Louisville-Jefferson County Metro Government has received a $2.5 million grant from the U.S. Department of Commerce’s National Telecommunications and Information Administration and the U.S. Department of Homeland Security’s FEMA Grant Programs Directorate.
The grant is part of $15.4 million award given to the state as part of the 2008 Public Safety Interoperable Communications Program.

The funds will be used for Louisville Metro’s Mutual Aid Enhancement Project, the Kentucky Office of Homeland Security said in a news release.

The mutual aid system allows emergency response agencies, including police, fire and emergency management officials to communicate with one another on a dedicated system.

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Byrd Pulls Down $260,000 for Interoperable Communications

September 11, 2008
The Register-Herald
URL: http://www.register-herald.com/local/local_story_255222638.html

Using the 9/11 tragedy as a springboard, Sen. Robert C. Byrd disclosed a $260,000 outlay Thursday to implement West Virginia's interoperable emergency communications systems.

Funded through the Department of Homeland Security, the grant is a new one provided across the nation and authorized in the 9/11 Act.

"On this seventh anniversary of 9/11, we are reminded of our moral obligation to provide first responders with the tools they need to respond in an emergency situation," Byrd said.

Byrd, who chairs the Senate Appropriations Subcommittee on Homeland Security and the full appropriations panel, said he understands how vital interoperable communications are among first responders.

"When an emergency occurs, it is critically important that local fire departments, law enforcement agencies and emergency medical services be able to communicate with each other on the scene," the West Virginia Democrat said.

"The reliability of their communications equipment and emergency planning can be a matter of life and death."

Planning, training and exercise funding are provided through the Interoperable Emergency Communications Grant Program.

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Delays, Mistakes Plague 911 System

September 11, 2008
The Christian Science Monitor
By Patrik Jonsson
URL: http://www.csmonitor.com/2008/0911/p03s01-usgn.html.com

Atlanta - Sloppy dispatchers protected by political patronage. Million-dollar software that crashes, putting dozens of emergency callers on hold. "Victims" who call 911 to complain about their Subway sandwich or their kid's refusal to go to school.

Such scenarios are part of a recent spate of delays, mix-ups, and breakdowns plaguing the nation's 911 system, sparking debate from San Francisco to Atlanta over the capacity of America's "first responders" – the calm-voiced dispatchers – to deal with emergencies quickly.

The problems come at a critical time for the nation's 40-year-old 911 network. Overall, better training, technological advancements, and increased post-9/11 funding have improved emergency response, saving many lives.

But outdated or mismatched equipment is in some cases hampering the ability of dispatchers to respond efficiently. And new technologies such as texting and video phones – New York this week began accepting text messages and video to their 911 centers – promise to put even more stress on the controlled chaos of the emergency switchboard.

"Our 911 challenges are symptomatic of an increasingly complex society where a heavy reliance on technology is at least partly to blame," says Mike Williams, the president of The Abaris Group, an emergency response consultancy in Walnut Creek, Calif. "When 911 calls fall apart, bad things happen."

Rick Jones, operational director at the National Emergency Number Association in Arlington, Va., says the system has generally improved. "However, because communications in general is going through a major transition ... we have to make an evolution into almost a totally new system."

Uptick in mistakes?

Gary Allen, editor of DISPATCH Monthly Magazine, says he has seen a marked increase this year of sometimes deadly mistakes directly traceable to the critical minutes that follow an emergency call.

In Oceanside, Calif., a 21-year veteran dispatcher failed to send officers to investigate a call from an apartment where a murder victim was later found. In Charlotte, N.C., a billiard hall owner said he waited seven minutes on hold this spring before getting through to 911 to report he'd been shot in the leg.

In Sedgwick County, Kan., fire chief Ron Blackwell said in August that he's "increasingly concerned" about a new $1.5 million computer-aided dispatch (CAD) system. Firefighters complain it isn't reliably alerting them to incidents.

And citizens don't always help. Up to 80 percent of 911 calls in the US are non-emergencies. In Hayward, Calif., police charged a man in February for making 27,000

false calls to 911. California this year passed a law that levies up to $250 fines against even legitimate callers who call more than once for the same emergency.

"These incidents are very obvious in a tragic way, and you try to figure out if it's technology related ... personnel related like long shifts and fatigue, or is it something systemic?" says Mr. Allen on the phone from Berkeley, Calif. "As people come to rely on the 911 system and that phone they have in their pocket, it becomes even more critical that the technology works and that the person who answers the call handles it correctly."

In cellphone age, endless calls

Against the backdrop of disasters like 9/11 and hurricane Katrina, of thickening traffic congestion on the coasts, and of ubiquitous cellphone use, Americans are finding more reasons to call 911.

Total volume of calls to US dispatch centers has increased from 180 million to 240 million in the past five years. Up to half of those calls now come from cellphones, often in situations where callers can't give dispatchers a clue as to where they are.

"Our exposure to hazards in the United States is going up over time due to increasing population, especially in vulnerable regions, as well as factors such as a lack of investment in infrastructure," says sociologist Carter Butts, who studies emergency response at the University of California at Irvine.

To keep up, politicians and policy-makers are trying to upgrade to new technologies, most of them proprietary, while balancing tight municipal budgets. But glitches with new technology – ranging from voice quality to interoperability between old and new radio systems – stress dispatchers' ability to keep calm and improvise as lives hang in the balance.

"We're not allowed that same field of error as far as, when you make a mistake, that you can say, 'You just made a mistake, someone died, but that's okay,' and it's not," says Jim Jones, a dispatcher at TriCom regional dispatch in St. Charles, Ill. "Our greatest fear, however, is our job being hampered by technology."

A bill signed into law by President Bush July 23 created the nation's first national 911 oversight board. It's intended in part to move the national system from analog to Internet Protocol (IP), which is less expensive and capable of handling new technology standards.

Dispatch authorities "are very aware that they need to have interoperable systems in place, so [the bill's $40 million "seed money" provision] is a key linchpin here, especially when it comes to local response," says Dana Lichtenberg, legislative director for Rep. Bart Gordon (D) of Tennessee, who sponsored the bill.

Despite the problems, Mr. Gordon says he's confident the system can be improved. "This is landmark legislation and it's going to save lives," he says.

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