

Emergency Preparedness News

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Vol. 30 No. 10

May 16, 2006

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SLANTS & TRENDS

WHAT TO DO WITH FEMA? Congressional reformers are surprisingly in sync when it comes to how to strengthen the agency from the inside (*see story, p. 74*). But battle lines are officially drawn over whether FEMA should remain within DHS. A bipartisan Senate bill introduced by the appropriate emergency preparedness power players in that body would keep a significantly more “muscular” FEMA within DHS to draw on its other disaster-related resources. A similarly well-backed House bill would return FEMA to its status as a cabinet-level agency and—hopefully—its “track record of effectiveness.” Each side presents its solution as the best way to prepare for both natural and manmade disasters. Despite the organizational disagreement, both camps concur that something’s gotta give. Senate Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs Chair Susan Collins (R-Maine) may have spoken for all reformers when she declared that to call on the current FEMA in a crisis is like “bringing a donkey to the Kentucky Derby.”

Interoperability Fixes Must Not Ignore The Human Factor, Advises Fire Chief

Editor’s note: The following article is the second in a two-part series about the interoperability challenges faced by emergency responders and some solutions on the horizon. Part I emphasized the technological side of interoperability (EPN, May 2, p. 65); Part II addresses the human factors.

Although major disasters often highlight interoperability challenges, the communications that occur among public safety agencies day-to-day can be equally as frustrating and worrisome when incompatibility interferes with responders performing their jobs.

“I don’t believe that it’s mainly an issue of technology; it’s how you use that technology,” says Willis Carter, first vice president of the Association of Public-Safety Communications Officials International and chief of communications for the Shreveport, La., Fire Department. Carter has observed

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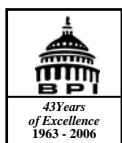
interoperability from the day-to-day to the dramatic—his department assisted in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, and he served on an APCO fact-finding mission to gather lessons learned from the Gulf Coast disaster about how 911 system operations can be improved.

The Shreveport Fire Department can offer a case in point about how policy decisions are as important to interoperability as technology. Although radios for both the department and the Louisiana State Police operate in the 800 MHz band, they lacked interoperability due to special software technology in the police system. The fire department had to purchase a firmware patching system, obtain authorization to communicate with the police, and register to talk on their network—a process that cost \$800 per fire department radio, according to Carter. So far, 16 of the department’s 275 radios are compatible with state police equipment.


Interoperability is more widespread in Carter’s own region, where 52 different agencies subscribe to a public safety system that provides them with common channels over which fire fighters, police, emergency medical technicians, and other responders communicate at the scene of an event. “A lot of jurisdictions do not have the ability to talk across those lines” even during routine operations, he told *EPN*, and emergency response is slowed because messages must go through dispatch centers.

The first wave of interoperability hurdles thrown up by the catastrophic disaster that was Katrina were actually “operability” problems due to

(Continued on p. 74)



Business Publishers, Inc. • 2601 University Blvd. W • #200 • Silver Spring, MD 20902 • Adam P. Goldstein, Publisher • Leonard A. C. Eiserer, Publisher Emeritus
Editorial Director: Ami Dodson Editor: Deborah Eby

Emergency Preparedness News—ISSN 0275-3782 (print); ISSN 1545-4894 (email)—published 24 times a year. Subscription rate: \$387 per year (includes shipping). For subscribers outside North America, please add \$16. Six-month and multiple-year rates available on request. POSTMASTER: Send address changes to BPI, 2601 University Blvd. W, #200, Silver Spring, MD 20902. Editorial: (301) 929-5700; FAX (301) 949-8844. Customer Service: (301) 929-5700, ext. 606 or (800) 274-6737; FAX (301) 949-8855. For fastest service, include account number when you call or write. For information on reprints, contact Copyright Clearance Center, (978) 750-8400. To purchase documents flagged , call 1-800-274-6737.

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