

CQ HOMELAND SECURITY – LOCAL RESPONSE
Oct. 28, 2004 – 9:15 p.m.

Emergency Officials Building Tools to Share Incident Information

By Alice Lipowicz, CQ Staff

Within minutes after eight cruise missiles spilled from an overturned truck onto a stretch of Interstate 70 in Maryland three years ago, John Markey, the emergency manager for Frederick County, Md., was juggling cell phones in an effort to reach numerous emergency response officials, including weapons specialists at the Pentagon.

“We have to communicate by voice,” Markey said in a phone interview Thursday. “I had multiple people dialing phones for me.”

The highway shutdown from that October 2001 accident caused traffic jams in Maryland and the District of Columbia as well as nearby Pennsylvania, West Virginia and Virginia.

Assessing, and neutralizing, the possible dangers from the missiles also spurred intense activity among multiple government agencies.

What would have been very helpful at the time, Markey said, is software that would have enabled him to instantly broadcast a text message explaining the incident to a wide variety of agencies.

“I needed to get the information to a large group of people, both geographically and to levels of government, and I want to be able to do that quickly,” Markey said.

Since the missile incident, Markey has purchased software that lets his computer broadcast messages to other agencies in Frederick County, but he is still not linked to agencies in other counties and states.

Markey and other emergency management officials are supporting national efforts, also involving the Department of Homeland Security, to stimulate the development of tools that allow data-sharing among federal, state and local emergency management agencies and, more broadly, among a much larger group of response agencies — including hospitals, 911 centers and fire stations.

Leading that national drive are two broad coalitions.

The first, the Emergency Interoperability Consortium (EIC), is a standards-promoting group made up mostly of software and communications equipment manufacturers. Formed in 2002, the consortium also includes public safety agencies, DHS and other federal agencies.

The second group is the Communications for Coordinated Assistance and Response to Emergencies (ComCARE) Alliance, a national nonprofit coalition of government agencies and private companies pushing for improved emergency communications and response.

DHS’ role is spearheaded by the Federal Emergency Management Agency’s Disaster Management Program. FEMA officials involved in the program could not be reached by press time.

Common Language

Last year, the EIC released its first emergency data standard, known as the Common Alert Protocol, a format for exchanging disaster information through a number of devices such as computers, cell phones and Web sites. The format sets common terms for incident types, time of day, location and the affected area.

That protocol is now being applied in several types of emergency management software developed by manufacturers such as Blue292 and E Team.

Last month, the EIC released preliminary standards for Emergency Data Exchange Language — programming language that enables a message to be targeted to a particular group of users based on their geographic area, type of agency, title or other categories.

A demonstration of several of the new data-sharing technologies took place Oct. 26 at the George Washington University Medical Center in Washington, D.C.

“What you’re really seeing is tangible progress against one of the core issues of homeland security, resulting from an effective public-private partnership,” EIC Chairman Matt Walton said in a phone interview.

Although much of the focus for interoperable emergency communications so far has been on police and fire radio systems, developing a common language for sharing critical data among agencies, and across jurisdictions, also is critical, Walton said.

Currently, most of the thousands of state, county and municipal emergency management agencies in the nation use some sort of disaster data software, but very few of those communicate with agencies in other communities or states, ComCARE Alliance Director David Aylward said in a phone interview.

“Our mission is to get every organization for emergency response to be hooked together,” Aylward said. “Right now they are still using faxes and phones.... They are way behind the times.”

ComCARE received a \$1.7 million grant from the Justice Department in September 2003 to develop the Emergency Provider Access Directory, a listing of emergency agencies that can be used to target recipients of messages about disasters, Aylward said.

The system currently is operating as a prototype, although he said he expects it to be fully operational next year.

Crash Data

Hospitals and emergency room physicians also are interested in data-sharing systems as a way to exchange information, including notifications that an emergency room is overloaded and patients are being diverted to other hospitals.

Vehicle crash data also could be sent on the system.

“We want to be able to get crash data in the emergency rooms to help us provide appropriate care,” said Dr. Jack Potter in a phone interview. Potter is the emergency services director at Winchester Medical Center, part of Valley Health System, in Winchester, Va., and a board member of ComCARE.

Crash data are not currently available in emergency rooms before rescue workers arrive with the victims, Potter said, although in the future such information could be as more cars contain telematic systems that automatically transmit information such as air bag deployments, speed at impact and the location of an accident.

Alice Lipowicz can be reached via alipowicz@cq.com

Source: **CQ Homeland Security**
© 2004 Congressional Quarterly Inc. All Rights Reserved