

Big Decisions

Require Great Leadership

By Karen Yeager

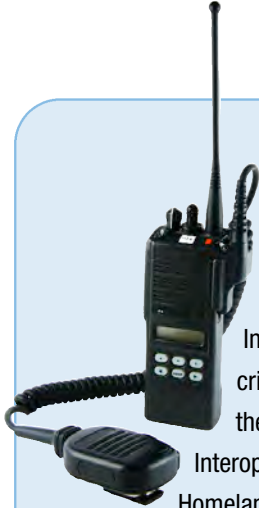
Across the nation, first responders are still struggling to talk and hear one another. This is bad news for the citizens of the most technologically advanced country in the world. The horrific events of 9/11 compelled us to question what went wrong and seek solutions. Much attention was given to the issue, and the President's 9/11 Commission strongly urged greater awareness and stronger leadership to ensure the basic problems of emergency communications and interoperability be given the highest priority. Then, this past fall, hurricanes Katrina and Rita showed the world that our emergency communications abilities – including interoperable communications – failed again despite several years of Herculean efforts by both federal and state officials.

Not only was the infrastructure enabling communications destroyed, but when the systems came back online (relatively quickly considering the devastation), the repaired systems faced the same challenge – first responders could not speak with one another, and the tremendous influx of national responders complicated the communications quandary even more.

Governor Haley Barbour, with help from his friends in the private sector, has brought Mississippi to the forefront of solving many of the most critical problems facing emergency communications and disaster response. These problems and their solutions can be broken down into three parts. The first two are more easily defined and solved than the third.

First is the need for immediate fail safe communications when normal means of communication are down. Leave it to a Mississippi Governor and a Mississippi company to be the first among our nation in developing and implementing a solution. Back in November of last year, Governor Barbour announced the state awarded GSSNet, a Mississippi-based company, the contract to create the statewide emergency alert system. It provides emergency messaging to both government and public subscribers via FM frequency, and is viewed as a tremendous success in emergency broadcasting. GSSNet will be deploying thousands of alert radios and home receivers this year to residents living in temporary housing, among others.

The second problem is investing in redundancy, and finding alternative affordable back-up communication devices. Many states are now examining satellite communications as a back-up communications device. In the event that land and mobile systems fail, satellite communications allow for easily deployable communications solutions for voice, data and video at high speeds. Traditionally too expensive to deploy,



Interoperable communications is a critical issue facing our nation – and the State of Mississippi. An Office of Interoperability within the Department of Homeland Security was created to help solve this problem; however, more bureaucracy doesn't solve the problem – elected officials rising as leaders who are willing to call on the private sector and make difficult decisions do.

new innovations such as the SES RediSat are now more cost effective and require very inexpensive "stand-by" fees with minimal charges for installation. Other back-up communication systems like SouthernLINK Wireless performed very well for Mississippi Power in the restoration of electricity to the area in the days following Katrina.

The third, and most talked about and more complex emergency communications piece is interoperability. One of the major issues facing the Emergency Services Sector is the inability of emergency service workers, including traditional "first responders," to communicate with one another when the need arises. For more than 20 years, FEMA has defined emergency first responders as the "first arriving organized responders with the capability and mission to contain, mitigate, and resolve the emergency at hand." An effective and efficient emergency response requires coordination, communication, and sharing of vital information among numerous public safety agencies. Most communications systems were designed to meet the unique needs of each agency. The fact that many existing first responder communications systems fail to provide adequate levels of interoperability limits the ability of agencies to respond to emergency situations quickly in a coordinated manner.

Interoperable communications is a critical issue facing our nation – and the State of Mississippi. An Office of Interoperability within the Department of Homeland Security was created to help solve this problem; however, more bureaucracy doesn't solve the problem – elected officials rising as leaders who are willing to call on the private sector and make difficult decisions do.

In light of our "lessons learned" in a very short period of time between 2001 and 2005, solving the issues of interoperable emergency communications can wait no longer. There must be leadership at the national level, as well as in each of the states.

In order to achieve interoperable communications for Mississippi, two significant developments have occurred this year enabling Mississippi to further achieve its interoperability goals: 1) the establishment of a \$1 billion federal fund for interoperable communications; and 2) the State of Mississippi has launched its own interoperable communications program.

At the federal level, Congress took a major step forward this year. In addition to the federal homeland security grants administered and released by the Office of Domestic Preparedness within the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, a new funding source has been dedicated to this national problem – and thanks are due to Senators Trent Lott and Thad Cochran as well as the rest of the Mississippi Congressional delegation for their leadership in this effort. When Congress passed the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005, it provided America's first responders with the 700 MHz spectrum needed to protect the citizens of our country as well as \$1 billion in funding to support states and localities in acquiring the radio equipment needed to utilize the spectrum and attain improved interoperability.

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration within the U.S. Department of Commerce, in close coordination with the Department of Homeland Security, is now considering how to best implement this program and is being provided with suggestions by a variety of interested parties. Of greatest importance is that the NTIA and DHS agree to draw down on these funds in October, as approved by the legislation, so as to get the funding to the states that need it sooner.

In order to achieve interoperable communications for Mississippi, two significant developments have occurred this year enabling Mississippi to further achieve its interoperability goals:

- 1) the establishment of a \$1 billion federal fund for interoperable communications; and
- 2) the State of Mississippi has launched its own interoperable communications program.

The NTIA should be prepared to fund short term, medium term, or long term state projects depending on the justification contained in the grant applications. Short term projects could include creating caches of radios for use in emergencies or buying deployable communications systems that can be moved into disaster areas to replace or support systems that are damaged or destroyed. Medium term projects could include the acquisition within states of advanced bridging systems that enable different radio technologies to communicate with one another using a secure IP backbone within the state. Long term projects could include the acquisition or expansion of statewide systems that enable interoperability by means of the Project 25 standard with preference given to systems that will use the new 700 MHz spectrum in helping the states. Further, the funds should recognize and apply to other technologies that support emergency communications and interoperability.

At the state level, Mississippi is in the process of making a critical decision that will affect all of the citizens of our great state. Three years ago, Governor Barbour had the foresight to initiate Executive Order No. 874, to establish the State Interoperability Committee. This committee has worked diligently to assess the state's current emergency communications systems and determine how to deploy a fully interoperable system for communications between first responders. After three years of planning and preparation, the long awaited scope and requirements have been completed, and the commission has now released a request for proposals. Local and county governments would be able to sign on to the system, once deployed, and under state-bid prices, buy radios or upgrade their systems. Due in June, the commission will work through the fall to make its selection.

Mississippi should consider heavily the investments the state, counties and municipalities have made in technology, and look to leverage those assets. Further, the state should complete significant due diligence on the companies that can perform such services and technologies, and look to their past projects, successes, failures, and financial and corporate stability. All too often investments in technology have been made in companies that potentially could not deliver what they promise, nor stay on-time or on-budget in their delivery. Now is not the time to experiment with hurricane season upon us.

The simple fact is that hurricane season comes every year and disasters wait for no man. Interoperability is the end-goal but it can't be achieved overnight. As the governor and other state leaders work toward the next and more complex decision of a fully interoperable system for our first responders, I urge them to show the same leadership they have to date and select the interoperability solution that is best for the first responders and the well being of its citizens.

The simple fact is that hurricane season comes every year and disasters wait for no man. Interoperability is the end-goal but it can't be achieved overnight. As the governor and other state leaders work toward the next and more complex decision of a fully interoperable system for our first responders, I urge them to show the same leadership they have to date and select the interoperability solution that is best for the first responders and the well being of its citizens.

To quote President Ronald Reagan, "There are no easy answers, but there are simple answers." Governor Barbour has taken the right approach to date in solving our emergency communications issues. He implemented the digital Emergency Alert Network in time for this hurricane season while he works to select the interoperability solution that is best for the first responders. Our citizens are safer this hurricane season because of it. ■

You may contact Karen at karen.yeager@dutkoworldwide.com

Karen Yeager is vice president of Dutko Worldwide and is a Mississippi native and former senior official at the Department of Homeland Security and FEMA.

2006 Hurricane Names

Experience shows that the use of short, distinctive given names in written as well as spoken communications is quicker and less subject to error than the older more cumbersome latitude-longitude identification methods. These advantages are especially important in exchanging detailed storm information between hundreds of widely scattered stations, coastal bases, and ships at sea.

Since 1953, Atlantic tropical storms have been named from lists originated by the National Hurricane Center. They are now maintained and updated by an international committee of the World Meteorological Organization. The original name lists featured only women's names. In 1979, men's names were introduced and they alternate with the women's names.

Alberto
Beryl
Chris
Debby
Ernesto
Florence
Gordon
Helene
Isaac
Joyce
Kirk
Leslie
Michael
Nadine
Oscar
Patty
Rafael
Sandy
Tony
Valerie
William

from www.nhc.noaa.gov

FactPointe