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Growing calls for improving how first responders share information

By Heather Greenfield

In the days after Hurricane Katrina, seven police officers from Greenbelt, Md., helping out in New Orleans, were preparing to rescue a doctor from his flooded neighborhood. Little did they know they were heading toward a hazardous gas leak.

To alert them to the danger ahead, a military helicopter circled over the officers' tank, flying lower and lower - until someone was able to drop a plastic water bottle containing a message.

"It's 2005. It cost a whole lot of money for the helicopter, for our equipment and for getting us down there - and we had to rely on a message in a bottle," officer Barry Byers said.

Byers is not alone in his frustration. From small places like Greenbelt all the way up to Capitol Hill, there are growing calls to come up with better ways to help emergency responders share information.

Officials say the Washington region has been addressing the issue since the Sept. 11, 2001, attack on the Pentagon. One of the solutions has been the development of a virtual, Internet-based emergency communications center. It allows first responders, public information officers and executives to be in constant contact and share the same information.

"We have a central place to store information and messages," said Diana Sun, who co-chaired the committee that developed the region's emergency center.

The Web-based system is better than a conference call because it is visual - allowing officials to share documents, maps and Web sites, said Sun, an Arlington County government spokeswoman.

For example, if people were exposed to a toxic chemical, emergency responders using the site would have access to the same information explaining what the chemical is and what needs to be done.

Although Byers had a working cell phone in New Orleans, there was no quick way for the helicopter pilot to find out the phone number. If New Orleans had a similar Web-based system in place, a commanding officer based in Greenbelt - or anywhere else - could have logged onto the Internet for emergency announcements, then called Byers to alert him.

The Washington region received the software for free from an IT nonprofit company called the Stargazer Foundation. A \$150,000 grant from the Department of Homeland Security trained people to use the system. The Web site is secured by IBM's firewall and is password protected.

"You need a computer, but that's it," said Merni Fitzgerald, who chairs the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments' emergency public communications committee.

Fitzgerald, a Fairfax County government spokeswoman, favors duplicating the system in cities across the country, but said government officials cannot endorse products - even donated ones.

Art Bushkin said he started Fairfax-based Stargazer six years ago with \$15 million in his own money to give non-profits, charities and government agencies the latest technology that they could not otherwise afford.

Bushkin said he wants to give the system away to FEMA, the Department of Homeland Security, and any city that wants it, but he has not had any takers.

"It could be replicated in New Orleans tomorrow," Bushkin said.

The obstacle seems to be that he is giving it away.

"When people are willing to provide services for free it puts the federal agencies in an awkward position," said Stephen Slivinski, director of budget studies at the Cato Institute.

"The obstacle isn't giving things away, but turf protection and budget protection," he said. "If you find savings one year, your baseline (budget) goes down."

A Homeland Security spokesman said he was unable to obtain specific information to comment on the use, or potential use, of the Stargazer system for emergency communications.

Bushkin estimates it would cost \$500,000 to \$750,000 for a town or suburban area to create a similar communication system from scratch that would allow first responders to communicate in real-time.

Washington values the system it was given at \$2 million.