

Emergency communications system seeks takers

By Heather Greenfield

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Local officials have a new, virtual communications center enabling them to be in constant contact with first responders and share information like data on toxic chemicals.

It could be a great tool for other cities — and the foundation providing the software is willing to share it — but they can't give it away.

The Web-based system allows officials to share documents, maps and Web sites, said Diana Sun, an Arlington County government spokeswoman and co-chair of the committee that developed the region's emergency center.

Software for the system was donated by the Stargazer Foundation, a Fairfax-based, nonprofit IT firm. A \$150,000 training grant came from the Department of Homeland Security. "You need a computer, but that's it," said Merni Fitzgerald, a Fairfax spokeswoman who chairs the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments' emergency public communications committee.

The system is estimated to be worth \$2 million.

Fitzgerald favors duplicating the system in cities across the country, but said government officials cannot endorse products — even donated ones.

Art Bushkin said he started Stargazer six years ago with \$15 million of his own money to give nonprofits and government agencies technology that they could not otherwise afford. Bushkin said he wants to donate the system but has not had any takers.

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.

"If you find savings one year, your baseline [budget] goes down," said Slivinski.

A Homeland Security spokesman said he was unable to obtain specific information to comment on the system.