

## **Katrina revealed gaps in emergency response system**

By Heather Greenfield

ASSOCIATED PRESS

In the days after Hurricane Katrina, seven police officers from Greenbelt 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.

Officer Byers is not alone in his frustration. From small places such as 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 said the Washington region has been addressing the issue since the September 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 helped lead 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 Miss 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 Officer 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 Officer Byers to alert him.

The Washington region received the software for free from an information technology 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 heads the Metropolitan Washington Council of Governments' emergency public communications committee.

Miss 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.

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