

Emergency network tested at Love Field

Dallas: System will allow groups to communicate during a disaster

08:14 PM CDT on Thursday, September 14, 2006

By SUZANNE MARTA / The Dallas Morning News

A communications system unveiled Thursday in Dallas seeks to solve one of the biggest challenges that authorities face in an emergency – coordinating crews from an array of federal, state and local agencies.

Financed with a nearly \$1 million grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security, the system uses computers to provide a bridge for each agency's existing communications equipment.

The equipment, housed at Dallas Love Field, has a range that reaches most of Dallas County. It works by linking each agency's communications via a combination of hardware and software.

"This goes a long way toward shoring up our first responders," said Ron Chandler, chief engineer for the Transportation Security Administration.

Interoperability of emergency communications systems has been a big issue in recent years nationwide, particularly following difficulties that New York police and fire crews faced when responding to the 9/11 terror attacks.

But it's been a problem in North Texas, too. When a tornado hit downtown Fort Worth in 2000, some crews lost communication with key members and couldn't talk to other agencies.

"There was a lack of coordination," said Dallas Fire Chief Eddie Burns, who was working as a deputy chief for the Fort Worth Fire Department at the time.

"We all felt we knew what we needed to do, but we couldn't initially talk so we could work together as a team."

Sometimes, state and local agencies communicate using "mutual aid" radio channels, but those can be overloaded during a major event and aren't accessible by federal agencies, which use different radio systems. In a pinch, commanders from different agencies simply swap radios so they can monitor everything going on and talk to each other – a solution that's less than ideal.

The new system, from CoCo Communications Corp. of Seattle, provides the basic interoperability standards required to meet a January 2007 deadline for agencies throughout the state.

CoCo officials believe their equipment could be a low-cost model for the nation. A mobile version of the system is currently used by Coast Guard crews.

CoCo's system also supports an advanced digital service that allows devices, such as personal digital

assistants, laptops and cellphones to share voice, video and other data on a secure network.

Even if cell towers are jammed– as they were following the 9/11 attacks – emergency crews could use their phones to tap into common network.

That service was not included in the grant, but city officials said they are negotiating a deal to subscribe.

E-mail smarta@dallasnews.com

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