



Sounding The Alarm: An I-Team 8 Exclusive

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Marion County's fire chiefs don't want to use the county's new digital radios when fighting fires.

The county is scheduled to switch to the new \$37 million digital radio system May 27. But firefighters want to stick with the old analog system.

I-Team 8's investigation, "Sounding the Alarm," exposes serious problems that prevent firefighters from understanding what they're saying to each other over their radios. The problems are unique to firefighters and the breathing apparatus they wear. We were given demonstrations, using both old and new radios, while a firefighter activated the VibraAlert and PASS alarm (more about those later). We could understand the analog radio transmissions, but not the digital transmissions.



Because of political and other pressures, no one was willing to do a demonstration for our cameras. Not firefighters. Not MECA (Marion County Emergency Communications Agency). Not Motorola, the manufacturer of Marion County's old and new radio systems.



However, a confidential source provided I-Team 8 with audio from tests performed by the National Institute of Standards and Technology. The test audio we aired used digital and audio transmissions made from a fire truck going 60 mph -- without a siren. The digital transmission sounds garbled, while the analog transmission is easier to understand.

But fires are far noisier than traveling in a fire truck: There are the sounds of fire and smoke alarms, the fire itself, the pumper truck, the water from the hoses, the saws, the fans and more.

While firefighters can move away from some noises, they can't move away from the noises that are part of the self-contained breathing apparatus they wear when they enter burning homes and buildings.

What worries firefighters most? Worst case scenarios: The firefighter learns he has maybe five minutes of air left when his VibraAlert goes off. It's in the breathing apparatus mouthpiece and vibrates, making a loud clicking noise. Or the deafening alarm of the firefighter's PASS device, which is activated if the firefighter is in trouble -- down, unconscious, trapped. Those particular sounds make communication over the new radios difficult -- if not impossible -- to understand.

Fires aren't only noisy. They're unpredictable. And potentially fatal -- even with improved radio technology. One Indianapolis firefighter told I-Team 8: "We've done this before. We're not gonna do it again."

In 1992, two Indianapolis firefighters died fighting a midnight fire at the Indianapolis Athletic Club.

Captain Michael Spalding was awarded a Medal of Valor for trying to rescue the men.

Now a chief, Spalding told I-Team 8 his then-new radio didn't help him. He was seriously burned when he had to remove his glove to activate the radio's emergency button. No one heard him call for help. A U.S. Fire Administration report found that firefighters weren't well trained to use the month-old radio system.

Chief Dale Henson, head of the Marion County Fire Chiefs Association, told I-Team 8 this isn't about resistance to change.

"We have to take care of our own first. And if we can't take care of our own firefighters, we can't take care of you," said Henson.

After testing the new radios, the chiefs sent a letter to the Metropolitan Emergency Communications Agency, asking to use the old analog system until a solution is found.

But MECA wants to push ahead. After 9/11, the federal government mandated a move to digital radios that allow first responders from different agencies to communicate.

"The benefits of this new digital system far outweigh anything that's involved with this current analog system," said MECA Executive Director Ray Raney.

The switch to the new system was originally supposed to happen April 27.

But after hearing the chiefs' concerns, Indianapolis Public Safety Director Scott Newman got MECA to agree to a 30-day delay. He told I-Team 8 he plans to request that fire departments be allowed to continue using analog radios when fighting fires until a solution is found.

"We're not going to plunge head-long into something that jeopardizes any firefighter's life." Newman said. "If it doesn't improve firefighter safety, it's not an upgrade to us, it's a downgrade, and we'll throw it in the trash."

MECA knew about the problems a year ago when the International Fire Chiefs Association alerted chiefs around country about the issue.

This is a national problem: Digital radios by all U.S. manufacturers have the same issues as Marion County's system.

National testing is being conducted. When those test results are released, I-Team 8 will update the situation.

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