

Capitolwire: Troopers, PennDOT say radio system unreliable. Administration says otherwise. (04/19/2010)

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HARRISBURG (April 19) – The state’s public safety radio network is untrustworthy, say officials who regularly use it, but administration officials defended it.

Secretary of Administration Naomi Wyatt told a joint Senate committee Monday that the state’s radio system, called PA STARNet, is worth the \$368 million to build and is getting better all the time.

However, representatives of State Police and Department of Transportation employees – the people who use the system the most – painted a much less rosy picture of the radio network.

Bruce Edwards, president of the Pennsylvania State Troopers Association, said during the hearing troopers “do not have confidence in this system.”

Because the system sometimes doesn’t work, troopers are forced to use their personal cell phones, he said.

“A cell phone is not a good replacement for a radio,” Edwards said.

He said he’s been hearing complaints about the system since it started going online over the past seven years.

PA-STARNet uses 800-megahertz technology as part of a national effort to connect safety agencies to various radio frequencies and technologies. Similar to cell phone technology, the system uses numerous towers built throughout the commonwealth that together comprise a single communications network.

State officials determined in the mid-1990s that creating a public safety radio network would be more fiscally responsible than upgrading or replacing individual systems for state agencies, Wyatt said.

The new statewide system, she said, covers over 43,000 square miles and provides radio coverage to 95.3 percent of the state.

The state spent \$221 million from 1996 through 2003 on developing the system and setting up towers, Wyatt said. An additional \$90 million was spent since 2003 to achieve greater coverage of the state, she said.

The state will spend an additional \$57 million over the next three years to complete installation of the system, according to Wyatt's information.

Wyatt said there were 78 "significant issues" identified with the system since May 2008. Of the 79 issues, 28 have been resolved and 50 will soon be resolved, she said.

Timon "Ty" Moore, a retired state police corporal, said he has worked to implement PA STARNet for the past seven years. It "is a tremendous system that greatly enhances our communications in both voice and data transmission far and above the old VHF radio system," he said.

The problem, however, is that the system does not work properly all of the time, Moore said.

Moore, in written testimony, stated PA STARNet is "more of a line of sight system, which in its simplest form means that if anything comes between the transmitter and receiver, the signal could be blocked or interrupted."

"The bottom line is that, despite our best efforts, the PA STARNet system has left the rank and file troopers very skeptical about the reliability and coverage areas of the system," he said during the hearing.

Moore said the radio is the "life line" for "the trooper in the field."

"The lack of communication at a critical juncture, or in coordinating movements of other troopers on scene, may be the difference between life or death," he said.

Moore said the radios work in certain spots one day, but fail to work in the same place on other days.

"The system may work today ... in downtown Harrisburg, and may not work tomorrow," Moore said. "It may work right outside of Three Mile Island today, but it may not work tomorrow when I need it."

Bill Brenner, spokesman for Department of Transportation union employees, said problems with the system "still exist."

He said there are some areas where "absolutely no" communication is possible.

Brenner said sometimes communications between department vehicles that are following each other doesn't work because of radio system outages.

Moore said he believes the way to fix the problem is to spend more money on the system and build more towers.

Wyatt said after the hearing she was "a little bit surprised" by some of the things said by Moore, Brenner, Edwards and others about the system.

"The data we have doesn't show those kinds of issues reported to us by PennDOT or state police," she said. "There's obviously some kind of disconnect going on there."

Sen. Jane Earll, R-Erie, said during the hearing it is "difficult from our perspective sitting up here listening to what are quite different ... indications of reliability of the system.

"It's very concerning and disturbing," she said. "Clearly there's differences of opinion about reliability and coverage that are pretty drastic."

Senate Transportation Committee Chairman John Rafferty, R-Montgomery, and Senate Law and Justice Committee Chairman John Pippy, R-Allegheny, decided to recess the hearing. The two agreed the radio system problems outlined during the hearing warranted further discussion with administration officials.