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Emergency-radio issues are still up in the air

Board cancels meeting; police, fire leaders sought to address safety concerns

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Officials worried that their firefighters have radios that will fail them in an emergency faced a new hurdle Wednesday.

The board that has the power to fix the problem canceled its meeting for the second month in a row.

Wednesday's scheduled meeting of the board for the Metropolitan Emergency Communications Agency has been postponed indefinitely, despite calls from public safety officials for a public meeting to address their concerns -- and complaints that the agency has refused to recognize the system's problems.

The agency, which oversees police and fire communications for Marion County, started shifting last week to a \$37 million digital emergency communication system, which officials say is an upgrade over the old analog system. Police and fire leaders, however, say there are issues in the new system that must be addressed.

MECA Board President Joe Wright, the mayor of Beech Grove, did not return calls for comment.

Testing by the National Institute of Safety and Technology found analog radio outperforms digital in several emergency firefighting situations. Chief among those: situations when a firefighter is in so much danger that the alarm system he or she carries goes off.

The alarms, activated when a firefighter stops moving or begins to run low on oxygen, disrupt digital transmissions at the very time some officials worry they are needed most.

The problem affects radios made by every manufacturer, including the Motorola models used by Marion County.

Marion County Fire Chief's Association President Dale Henson and Indianapolis Fraternal Order of Police President William Owensby said they had planned to raise their concerns at Wednesday's meeting.

In May, the fire chiefs wrote a letter that warned of safety issues in communication when firefighters use their personal safety alarms. The chiefs asked MECA to delay implementing the digital system until a solution was found.

"What we need to have is open communication," said Mike Reeves, president of the Marion County firefighters union. "We need to quit pointing fingers at one another, and let's fix the problems."

The Speedway Fire Department switched to the radios last week and used them Monday during the fire at the International Village apartments. The digital communication was clear, said Division Chief Mark Watson, although no alarms had to be used.

The new system also poses serious problems for police dispatchers, said Owensby. Dispatchers

listened to both 911 calls from citizens and transmissions from police officers through a headset in the old analog system. Now, police transmissions go to a speaker instead.

By forcing dispatchers to listen to headphones and speakers at the same time, Owensby said, the system could be too confusing.

The new system has "huge safety issues that MECA refuses to acknowledge or change," the Fraternal Order of Police said in a news release Monday.

After the cancellation of the June MECA Board meeting, Marion County Sheriff Frank Anderson wrote a letter to Wright formally requesting a meeting.

Anderson is out of town and was unavailable for comment, but Deputy Chief Joe McAtee said Wright has not responded to Anderson's letter.
