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Jefferson Co. police air concerns about new radio system

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CHARLES TOWN, W.VA. — At least three police chiefs in Jefferson County are expressing concerns over the capabilities of a multimillion-dollar emergency radio system for the county.

One chief said the problems are compounded by a lack of help for police by the county's 911 center, which oversees the system.

Jeff Polczynski, who oversees the county's 911 operations, defended the system, saying there is no radio network that can provide perfect reception.

Jefferson County is about to switch from an outdated analog radio system to a digital system that will coincide with a new 911 center in Bardane, west of Charles Town.

Area police have had trouble at times communicating on the current system and some officers have been given cell phones to make sure they can communicate, officials have said.

Although Polczynski could not say how much the new radio system cost, Charles Town Police Chief Barry Subelsky said it is probably around \$3 million.

There have been problems in other parts of the country with digital radio systems, and state officials are looking into some problems with the radios, according to The Charleston (W.Va.) Gazette. Firefighters in Marion County, W.Va., have had trouble with digital radios, and some police and firefighters have found that the radios' digital signals can be interrupted by background noise or walking into a building, according to the newspaper's Web site.

Some local police chiefs said they have been testing the new digital equipment and there are "dead" areas, meaning the radios can't transmit.

Shepherdstown (W.Va.) Police Chief Terry Bellomy said there are dead areas in the Maple and Birch residence halls on the west campus of Shepherd University, some sections of the Potomac River and in the basement of Tony's Pizza on German Street in Shepherdstown.

Bellomy said he also has heard about problems with officers "blocking each other out" on the radios when a group of them are working closely at a scene.

Subelsky said there have been problems with radios picking up background noise.

About two weeks ago, Subelsky said he and Harpers Ferry (W.Va.) Police Chief Donald Buracker tested a portable digital radio, which is hand held. Buracker stood beside a cruiser with a siren on and Subelsky said he could not pick up Buracker's voice. When Buracker backed away from the cruiser, reception improved but it was not audible, Subelsky said.

Buracker said Monday that he is concerned about the system's limitations.

Bellomy said the problems are compounded by the fact that police can't get any help from the 911 center. Polczynski does not attend periodic meetings of chiefs of police, where issues are discussed, Bellomy said.

"You got millions of dollars in equipment and no real solutions," Bellomy said.

Polczynski declined to comment about the police chief meetings, saying he is often busy with job responsibilities and that the meetings often concentrate on other areas.

Polczynski acknowledged problems with digital radio transmission in Maple and Birch halls at Shepherd University. When someone carrying the radios walks into hallways in the buildings, the signal goes out, but the reason is unclear, Polczynski said.

Subelsky said the problem in the dorms can probably be corrected by installing antennae in the buildings.

Regarding police officers "blocking each other out" on radios, an officer's radio will not pick up another officer's radio if they are very close, Polczynski said. But the condition is resolved once the officers move away from each other, and the situation does not affect an officer's ability to talk with a 911 center, Polczynski said.

Polczynski said there has been good coverage on the portable radios, although there are some dead spots. Mobile units in the cruisers have not been extensively tested, Polczynski said.

Polczynski said he did some testing with a sheriff's deputy's cruiser and was concerned about background noise, although the problem improved as he worked with the unit. He said the system deserves more testing.

"There is no radio system out there that provides 100 percent coverage 100 percent of the time," said Polczynski, who hopes to have the new system working by next month.

Jefferson County Commissioner Dale Manuel said he was not aware of police concerns with the new system, but he expressed confidence in being able to work them out.

Berkeley County already switched to a digital system and 1st Sgt. Eric Burnett of the West Virginia State Police said his agency has not had problems with the radios there.

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