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Five-Hour Outage Latest Problem With Digital Radios

August 28, 2008

West Virginia - Kanawha County officials are still worried about expensive digital radio equipment after Charleston fire and police department radios crashed for five hours last week. State officials have channeled roughly \$50 million in federal grant money so far pushing a project to upgrade emergency radio equipment all over the state to a new digital system. Kanawha County recently received about \$1 million to buy digital radio equipment, and Charleston spent about \$450,000 to convert its fire department and police department traffic division to digital communications.

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Charleston's system failed on Aug. 20, according to Dave Erwin, emergency operations center coordinator for the Kanawha County Metro 911 Center. Erwin, who is in charge of the digital radio plan for the county, said none of the 100 or so fire department or police digital radios worked for about five hours because of the breakdown.

Erwin said he received a call just before noon that the radios were not working. The problem was quickly attributed to a faulty communications tower, but Erwin said it took about two hours to contact a state technician to fix the problem, and another two hours for the technician to get from Sistersville to Charleston to investigate.

"Once he got here, it took a whole 20 minutes to isolate the problem," Erwin said. The culprit turned out to be a bad computer patch cable.

Charleston police and fire units switched back to their old analog systems to communicate during the breakdown, but the failure and lengthy repair time reinforced worries that the digital radio system is not all it's reported to be.

"I don't find it acceptable," Erwin said of the breakdown and delay getting the problem fixed. "I realize the system is still in its build-out phase. I'd like to see more [built-in] redundancy."

Police and fire departments all over the country have had problems with digital radio technology, saying the radios don't always work in the field. Firefighters in Marion County, one of the first three counties in the state to get the digital radios, have reported problems with their equipment.

Kanawha County Commission President Kent Carper remains sold on the need for the digital radio system, but wants to make sure the radios work properly and can be fixed when they break.

He wrote to the state officials in charge of the statewide radio program this week to tell them about the recent breakdown.

"I have concerns - serious concerns," Carper said Tuesday.

At the very least, he said, the state needs more trained technicians to fix problems when they arise. "I do not think they have the support system that they need in place," he said.

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Written by Rusty Marks

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