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Fire radio problems must be resolved quickly

Editorials

In the late 1990s, still laboring with a 50-year-old emergency communications system, Hamilton County fire chiefs had to carry three to five radios to coordinate activity among various departments at a large fire.

More than $35 million and a decade later, the chiefs usually need to carry only one radio, thanks to the county's unified digital, 800mHz system - but incredibly, firefighters in the midst of a blaze are finding they may get a busy signal, garbled transmissions or simply silence when try to call for help.

And that's like carrying no radio at all.

These are not mere technical glitches. They are potentially serious flaws that put lives at risk - and in one case, may have contributed to the deaths of two firefighters.

The situation is outrageous and unacceptable. The problems with the county's emergency communications must be fixed - and quickly.

After a close call early this month involving two Cincinnati firefighters trapped in a burning building, Hamilton County Commission President David Pepper called for a review of the system. The Cincinnati firefighters union understandably is demanding answers as well.

Such a review ought to be swift, thorough and frank. And it ought to result in changes or alternatives to help keep emergency workers safe.

For years, safety officials lobbied for an improved communications system because emergency personnel from different jurisdictions couldn't talk to each other. Yet despite the costly digital upgrade, which was activated in 2003, they *still* may not be able to talk to each other when crunch time comes:

In April 2008, two Colerain Township firefighters died after a floor collapsed in a burning house. The parents of Fire Capt. Robin Broxterman have sued several firms, including radio system maker Motorola, alleging that her "mayday" calls were not heard or understood because of radio problems.

On Jan. 7, Cincinnati firefighter Kevin Phillips fell down a set of stairs in a fire, losing his face mask, and "mayday" calls by his partner, Lt. Tim Pride, went unheard and unanswered. Pride was able to lead Phillips to safety.

Apparently, these were not isolated incidents. "We're finding out this is happening every day, not just in big fires," Sycamore Township Fire Chief B.J. Jetter told The Enquirer.

Certainly, nobody dreamed this would happen when safety officials lobbied for new system. In fact, the new system was supposed to *prevent* just such incidents.

Between 1996 and 1999, Hamilton County voters rejected three tax proposals to pay for the system, amid questions about the technology and its price.

In August 1999, county commissioners decided to pay for it with general fund dollars instead, using part of a $43 million surplus (those were the good old days) to buy the towers, computers and other network hardware. Individual jurisdictions were responsible for buying the expensive radios, which proved a burden for some localities. Financier Carl Lindner ponied up $300,000 so his home town of Norwood could buy radios.

As The Enquirer's Sharon Coolidge reports today, officials see a possible solution for the garbled transmissions that firefighters have struggled with, but the "busy" and dropped signals are more problematic. So is the fact that firefighters aren't actually talking directly to each other; their transmissions are routed through a computer.

There's even the option of a "dual system" using a combination of digital and analog radios, as cities such as Columbus have adopted.

City and county officials say that despite its problems, the digital system is far better than the old system. Better for *whom* ? It may be better at the command and coordination level, but is it better for those at the front fighting fires, crimes and natural disasters?

We owe it to firefighters, police officers and others who put their lives on the line not only to make sure they have the tools they need to protect us and themselves, but to make sure they can place their full confidence in those tools.

Fix the emergency communications system.