



Costly Pa. radio system for law enforcement agencies isn't working as planned

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By

Taxpayers have sunk as much as \$500 million into a statewide radio system that state law enforcement agencies say is unreliable.

Agents in the field say they can be in dangerous situations with radios that they can't trust to work, or that perhaps worked in a location one time but not the next.

Some lawmakers are saying it might be time to pull the plug on this project, which has cost far more and taken far longer to complete than anticipated.

The system seems to malfunction more often than it works, said Steven Wheeler, deputy chief of the state attorney general's Bureau of Narcotics Investigations.

He told of an incident in which an undercover narcotics agent headed into a meeting with a suspected drug dealer in Philadelphia. When it appeared too dangerous to pull off, another agent had to catch up to him on the street to tell him the sting operation was off because the agent's radio didn't work.



Other incidents involving malfunctioning radios have played out on the streets of Pittsburgh, Erie, Scranton and Allentown for agents in the attorney general's office, Wheeler told a panel of senators Wednesday.

"Agents in Philadelphia so lack confidence in the system that they have abandoned its use in favor of push-to-talk cellular phone communications," he said.

State police, too, say the system is unreliable.

Capt. Adam Kirsthardt said troopers experience 161 service outages on average each month.

Lingering concerns about the reliability of the still-unfinished radio system — the largest information technology project the state has ever undertaken — led to a rare joint meeting of four different Senate committees to re-examine the project.

Despite their frustrations with the project, the lawmakers stopped short of taking steps to abandon the radio project. But they gave indications that it clearly is about to come under closer scrutiny.

The Pennsylvania Statewide Radio Network's price tag was \$179 million when the Legislature first approved it in 1996. That amount was revised to \$222 million three years later after the project was competitively bid. At that time, a state official projected the building of the system would be finished by April 2001.

Since then, the price tag has been revised again. Now it's \$368 million, not including the \$22 million annual operating cost.

Now the building of the system should be completed by year's end, more than 10 years after the initial completion date, Steve Kuller, director of administration and planning for the state's Office of Public Safety Radio Services.

"We really have to come to a decision of, how much more money is it going to take? Is it ever really going to work?" said Sen. Mike Folmer, R-Lebanon County.

Folmer suggested that perhaps the state should consider selling the radio system or privatizing all or part of it. George White, the state's chief information officer who is overseeing the radio project, said the state is moving in that direction. He said the state is hiring a company to market and lease excess space on the radio towers, and estimated it could generate up to \$500,000 a year.

Sen. John Pippy, R-Allegheny County, asked for monthly updates on the project. He agreed that abandoning the project remains an option.

The system initially was envisioned as a replacement for the more than 20 older radio systems used by state agencies that were incapable of communicating with one another. State officials became intrigued by a cutting-edge system from M/A-Com Inc. of Lowell, Mass., that was billed as providing the ability to interconnect agencies and transmit voice and data communications.

Since then, a series of road bumps have pushed the system's completion behind schedule and over budget, White said.

The Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks caused the system's requirements to expand to include the ability for the state to communicate with local emergency responders. Hurricane Katrina, which struck in 2005, led to a focus on building a system that can survive an extreme event.

A tower contractor went bankrupt, stopping work on towers for nearly nine months. Difficulty acquiring sites for towers has caused changes in its coverage design because the system relies on line of sight between the radio and tower.

After hearing the litany of holdups and knowing of places in his senatorial district where the system still doesn't work, Sen. Don White, R-Indiana County, said, "This has been an unbelievable nightmare for some of us. We, at some point, need to cut the cord or get it completed."

At this point, the buildout is nearly complete, George White said. All but seven of the state's 67 counties have enough towers and cells in place to ensure the system will work in at least 95 percent of the land within the county borders, the system's target.

James Smith, a division chief from the Pennsylvania Department of Transportation, had only good things to say about the radio system. Likewise, Dauphin County Emergency Management Agency Director Stephen Libhart said there was no problem that he was aware of with its ability to connect with counties and municipalities.

Some 17 state agencies use the system, along with multiple other government users, George White said. "In short, the system works and it works very well."

Victoria Dillon, a spokeswoman for Harris Corp. of Melbourne, Fla., which acquired M/A-Com, said, "The system continually has demonstrated its ability to meet the needs of the users."

However, George White admitted that coverage issues continue to crop up. And there also are problems when portable radios are used, because the system was designed for radios to be used in vehicles and powered by car batteries, which enhances radio transmission, not hand-carried on uneven terrain.

There also is a need to adapt the system to allow for ground-to-air radio communications. Wheeler said the attorney general's office purchased a satellite phone to provide communication with the agency's aircraft.

But at 70 to 80 cents a minute to use the satellite phone, the cost adds up during three-hour surveillance missions. Plus, he said the satellite calls can't be broadcast, so one agent has to communicate with the aircraft and then repeat information to other agents over the radio system.

At the end of the hearing, Sen. John Rafferty, R-Montgomery County, asked George White what grade he would give the system. He replied, "A B-plus."

Rafferty said he wished he had had him as a teacher.

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