

Chief: Radio system putting firefighters in danger

By TIM STONESIFER The Evening Sun
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It was the worst-case scenario, the situation Hanover-area firefighters have feared for 18 months - the black of night, and a call for a working structure fire along a secluded country road.

Firefighters from York and Adams counties grabbed their gear and responded to the scene in rural West Manheim Township. Firefighters arrived on the scene, steeled themselves and were ready to wade in, Penn Township Chief Jan Cromer said, when they called on York County's emergency radio system to patch together the frequencies for the two counties' departments.

Then suddenly, in the midst of the night's action and adrenaline - a shattering nothing.

Radio silence, Cromer said.

"There's a working fire," he said, "and it's like everyone's out there all alone." That system failure was only the latest problem local emergency responders have had with a 911 radio setup Hanover-area fire officials say is unreliable and was implemented too soon, without proper testing or the appropriate back-up measures in place. It's a system Cromer said this week works fairly well - right up until it doesn't.

And right up until it risks his firefighters' lives.

The International Association of Fire Fighters has already drafted a letter to the county on behalf of local responders, Cromer said at this week's Penn Township public safety committee meeting, complaining about the dangers of the current setup. And based on recent communication problems, Cromer said, that concern is quite warranted.

"(The IAFF) is very concerned about these firefighters' safety," he said. "And I am, too."

Cromer said the West Manheim fire was brought under control without incident - though it took communication by personal cell phones to get it done because the \$36 million county radio system was not restored in time to do any good.

Emergency responders in the Hanover area have been critical of the York County radio system since it went into service for fire companies and EMS in July 2009, complaining for the last 18 months of dropped or missed radio calls and pages, particularly in the county's southwestern corner. York County recently agreed to add two booster towers, on the West Manheim Township water tank and atop Hanover Hospital to help.

Those installations have been completed, but Cromer said this week problems still clearly exist, most obviously when an entire system goes down.

"You've got firefighters left in the dark," he said. "These are big problems."

But Eric Bistline, executive director of the York County Department of Emergency Services, said on Tuesday the problem is being addressed. Both county officials and technicians from Harris Corp., the radio system's contractor, are trying to isolate the problem, which only occurs when county operators try to patch York's responders in with those from other counties, Bistline said.

Fire companies from Adams County often respond to fires in the Hanover area.

Bistline said the problem appears to be in one piece of the system's equipment, but becomes difficult to pinpoint because it's random and seems to appear with "no rhyme or reason."

"The system now is not working the way we want it to work, obviously" he said. "But we recognize its importance, and we're trying very hard to correct it."

The radio system has gone down three times in the last four weeks, Bistline said.

He said there is currently no timeline for when the problem might get fixed, but he added in addition to the new system all Hanover-area companies carry radios that work on an older network, where they can raise Adams and other counties' departments at any time, even if York County's system fails.

"They're not completely dead in the water out there," he said. "It's not that they don't have alternatives."

But Cromer said switching radios in the midst of an active fire ground is impractical and should not be necessary. Firefighters don't carry two separate radios at a scene, he said, and there's no time to go back to the trucks or worry with such things during an emergency.

"The system is breaking down while we're using it," he said. "How quick can you change out everyone's radio? We're in an emergency situation, we're not dilly-dallying around out there."

Hanover Fire Commissioner James Roth said his firefighters are concerned with a system that could potentially leave them in a burning building with no communication to those on the outside. While there was a time when firefighters didn't have portable radios, he said, today the radios are required under standard safety regulations and provide a vital link to other responders at the scene.

"Any time a fireman can't communicate with people outside the building, the fireman's in danger," he said.

Penn commissioners agreed at Monday night's committee meeting to send a letter to the county asking that the problem be addressed. They also agreed to send a letter to local state representatives, in the hope that would speed a fix they think should have been completed long ago.

"We have an obligation to protect our emergency responders," Commission Wendell Felix said. "We should do whatever we can to make sure this finally gets done right."

Commissioner Phil Heilman said the group hopes to get answers from the county soon, specifically one that's different from the "boiler plate" responses of the recent past. Every day until then, he said, there's a clear danger for both local responders and anyone who relies on them at the scene of a fire.

"This is a system that was dictated to us (by the county), and that makes it all the more frustrating" he said. "Right now, it's putting everyone in jeopardy."

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