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Communications Infrastructure Challenges Faced By First Responders During Hurricane Katrina

Report to the Federal Communications Commission's Independent Panel
Reviewing the Impact of Hurricane Katrina on Communications Networks

By Patrick Yoes, National Secretary – Fraternal Order of Police

Introduction

Given that terrorist attacks share some common characteristics with natural and man-made disasters, it will be the successes and failures of the Hurricane Katrina response that will make us a stronger nation better prepared and equipped to prevent and handle future disasters.

The Fraternal Order of Police is pleased to participate in the Federal Communications Commission's Independent Panel Reviewing the Impact of Hurricane Katrina on Communications Networks and we commend the commission for including the representation of rank and file law enforcement officers to contribute on such a diverse panel.

Representing over 322,000 active and retired law enforcement officers nationwide, the Fraternal Order of Police has reached out to members in Louisiana, Alabama, and Mississippi for their constructive input in this endeavor. The Louisiana Sheriff's Association also provided valuable input and insight.

My comments are not meant to be critical of any agency or response. Rather, they are offered as an explanation of the varied challenges that should be addressed before our response system is tested again. These comments come from my own observations having responded with assistance throughout Southeast Louisiana, through communications with my colleagues from public safety agencies throughout the Gulf South region, and participants through responding agencies.

Impact on First Responders

The days that followed the arrival of Hurricane Katrina set the stage for countless nightmares, unbelievable challenges, and a tribute to courage, bravery, and perseverance. While there are numerous stories and accounts of bravery in such trying times, Hurricane Katrina was a vivid reminder of the importance of being able to effectively communicate and coordinate. Hurricane Katrina brought with her challenges that tested every aspect of emergency services.

A positive “overcome and adapt” attitude adopted by First Responders should be commended. Many First Responders lost their homes, and most had significant damage. Yet, despite their personal crisis and uncertain future, they remained on the job, rescuing, providing emergency services, and reestablishing a sense of order in a ravaged region.

Communications infrastructure was crippled; repeater sites were incapacitated by floodwaters, structures failed, and extended power outages rendered nearly all communications tools inoperable at a time when the need was the greatest. Fifty-two 9-1-1 Communications Networks were disrupted, and in many cases, communications centers had to be evacuated due to flooding.

Vast areas of the affected region had no regular telephone or wireless service. Thousands of the switches and cell towers, which form the region’s telecommunications network, were destroyed, inaccessible or left without power. Nextel Direct Connect service did provide limited service in the early days of the rescue operation. For the most part emergency responders were forced to stay in touch by any means possible. For some agencies, the only means of communication for the first weeks were by personal couriers. Even this proved impractical due to the level of devastation and flooding that hampered movement.

While no communications network could be expected to remain fully operational in such extreme conditions, the inability to communicate only compounded the challenges facing First Responders.

Even though the State Smart Zone system lost multiple sites, it remained viable enough to provide some functionality in the New Orleans area, but was significantly overwhelmed by the amount of emergency traffic placed upon it. Only one of the four designated Mutual Aid channels was functional and that channel was being shared by the New Orleans Police Department, Jefferson Parish Sheriff’s Office, Port of New Orleans Harbor Police, area fire departments, and the EMS, it was difficult at best, if not impossible, to communicate under these circumstances

Clearly, there was a lack of preplanning before Hurricane Katrina made landfall at all levels. Greater emphasis should be placed on the assignment of portable communications equipment, i.e. mobile towers, antennas, repeater stations, portable power generators, fuel, and radios capable of interfacing with the current system, to a predetermined staging area to provide rapid response after the storms pass.

It is apparent that a major portion of resources at the state and federal level were focused on the New Orleans area where the demands were tremendous. However, the demands of New Orleans overshadowed the needs of many affected jurisdictions that were equally vulnerable. In areas like Plaquemines Parish, (LA), south of the city of New Orleans with limited accessibility due to its geographical position in the state, it was the National Sheriff's Association and the Louisiana Sheriff's Associations, not FEMA or state agencies, who responded with vital assistance.

In the case of Plaquemines Parish, it is very difficult to call for help when you have no way of communicating with the outside world. Future planning must take into consideration, a measured response throughout the entire affected areas.

Within weeks, many agencies were brought back on line with their Radio Communications System, thanks to vendor participation and support. These vendors and manufacturers aggressively evaluated and reestablished communications by providing antennas, radio equipment, and technicians in the field.

Successes or weaknesses in emergency communications uncovered by Hurricane Katrina

Interoperability

Hurricane Katrina brought emphasis to the lack of interoperability, system resources, and redundancy amongst current public safety systems. In many cases, search & rescue missions during the first week were conducted with no communications between the rescue parties other than face to face. With multiple agencies participating in these efforts, both safety and efficiency were compromised.

Media Outlets

With 17 television stations and 79 radio stations forced off the air by Hurricane Katrina's destructive forces, the ability to convey clear and concise messages and instructions to the general public was crippled.

In the days immediately following the arrival of Hurricane Katrina, system failures made it almost impossible for many agencies to contact media outlets to convey accurate information. When stations did return on air, a unique problem arose. Exaggerations and misinformation, apparently lost in translation from one person to the next, both among public officials and media sources alike, added even more confusion and clearly hampered emergency efforts.

Satellite Capability

Satellite service providers did not experience damage to their infrastructure. Where equipment was available, this technology helped to bridge some of the gaps left by outages by providing satellite phones for public safety. While most agencies include satellite communications as a back-up to their communications networks, in many cases, the limited number of devices hampered efforts.

Possible Goals to Enhance Communications

- Responding agencies assisting in rescue and recovery operations had very limited or no means of communicating between agencies. Hurricane Katrina brought emphasis to the lack of interoperability, system resources, and redundancy amongst current public safety systems. Until the issue of interoperability is adequately addressed and implemented, the potential for communications crisis will always plague emergency responders.
- Public safety communications networks and facilities must be built and maintained to withstand worst-case scenarios.
- Public Safety agencies must incorporate state-of-the-art interoperable communications equipment.
- Greater emphasis should be placed on the assignment of portable communications equipment, i.e. mobile towers, antennas, repeater stations, and radios capable of interfacing with the current system available for rapid response.
- Supporting 9-1-1 tandems in locations sufficiently remote to allow prompt restoration of 9-1-1 services.
- Develop training aimed at improving communications during major events.
- Create a credentialing program for technicians working to restore communications networks in restricted areas.

Conclusion

While there were many public safety breakdowns in both planning and infrastructure in the Gulf South region, a shining example of efficient and substantive response during Hurricane Katrina was local law enforcement. State and federal agencies, in their best efforts, became bogged down with issues such as job descriptions, bureaucratic and cumbersome decision making. While responses from these levels are notable, many areas with smaller populations, although equally vulnerable, received little or no support for days.

Local law enforcement rose to the challenges without the inherent governmental inertia that plagues other entities. Certainly the magnitude of Katrina placed greater demands than ever experienced before. However, local level First Responders regularly respond decisively and are in a better position to move forward.

In a Post Katrina world, planning, preparation, and response as it relates to significant events/disaster responses must include not only local law enforcement perspective, the local level must play a significant role in "driving" the initiative.

The fundamental argument for this point is that local law enforcement was there during the first week dealing with rescue, lawlessness, and supplying affected areas. This was accomplished in an almost nonexistent communication environment.

The mind set culture that has prevailed for years among state and national leaders is that this type of critical response is a state or federal responsibility. Although there were communications alternatives offered through these levels, the enormity and complexity of this crisis left many local agencies in a position of dealing with search and rescue operations absent of support from an overwhelmed state and federal support structure.

Again, I am honored to serve on this panel and excited at the opportunity to improve upon the communications capability of America's First Responders.