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D.C. tests public safety system

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The District is testing a public safety communications system that allows firefighters, police and medical personnel to link radio communications seamlessly with the Internet.

Government and industry officials say the technology - called Radio Over Wireless Broadband, or ROW-B - has the potential to save first responders time in an emergency. By allowing a single user to view the locations of other users in a given area, the system enables firefighters and others to create an ad-hoc group of users and communicate with each other immediately and simultaneously, either over wireless broadband or through traditional wireless radios.

Interoperability is a challenge for jurisdictions across the country as most emergency officials rely on their own land mobile radio (LMR) systems while state and federal responders are increasingly using mobile Internet devices.

The 9/11 commission identified interagency communication breakdowns on Sept. 11, 2001, as hampering the response to the terrorist attacks on the Pentagon and in New York. While the government subsequently ordered the creation of a nationwide, interoperable communications network for first responders, its future is uncertain after a federal plan to auction off airwaves for the network to private bidders - who would build the network and give public safety top priority -



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Absent funding for a nationwide network, "You've got to start with what you've got," said the Department of Homeland Security's David Boyd, director of the command, control and interoperability division within the agency's Science and Technology Directorate.

First responders in the Washington area have had interoperable communications since before the Sept. 11 attacks, putting the region ahead of the curve, but officials decided to test ROW-B here because the city operates its own wireless broadband network devoted to public safety.

At a Wednesday press event with Mr. Boyd, Deputy D.C. Fire Chief Demetrios Vlassopoulos and officials from ISCO International Inc., Raytheon JPS and the National Institute of Standards and Technology demonstrated the technology, making successful calls to an LMR device and several mobile laptops at the same time.

The system's Web interface shows a map of its user's location as well as others in the area. It also displays buildings, fire hydrants and other infrastructure.

Mr. Vlassopoulos stressed that the pilot project doesn't mean the District will adopt it. Mr. Boyd said the federal government is evaluating ROW-B until the fiscal year ends next month and most likely will draft a report after that.


While industry is developing so-called "multimode" radios capable of operating on all known first-responder networks, the radios will be costly and take time to implement. In the meantime, Mr. Boyd emphasized the need for jurisdictions to make use of the equipment they have. Some, like the District, might have enough money to build their own broadband networks, while others may opt to contract with a company like ISCO to manage the service. The cost of any system varies greatly according to a region's geography, population and other factors.

Another option for first responders would be to rely on a commercial cellular broadband network, but officials emphasized that those networks are quick to become clogged in the aftermath of a disaster.

"The commercial providers aren't there within a few seconds after the event," Mr. Boyd said.

Gordon Reichard, chief executive officer of ISCO, which developed the software platform for ROW-B, said he is in talks with half a dozen municipalities.

"While we'd all like to see the national [public safety network], this solution does not require that network," Mr. Reichard said.

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