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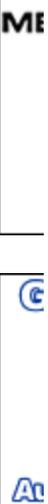
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Emergency system hits air

Ham radio operators test verbal warnings

By **AMANDA PARRY**
Monitor staff

Concord

It would be like having Paul Revere camped out in your basement.

Two local companies are testing a piece of technology that warns people of emergencies by speaking to them.

"They look like caller ID boxes," said Jim Van Dongen of the state Office of Emergency Management. "But they work a little bit differently."

The small boxes - which are linked to a dispatch center - squawk announcements warning of everything from a storm to a terrorist attack.

While it could eventually be a household device, for now the gadget is being tested on a very specific local group: amateur ham radio operators.

The two Concord companies that make the device, ClassCo and Exacom, chose radio operators because they knew they'd be working with people who were "technically minded," according to Jerry Blanchard of Exacom.

The deal works out well for the radio operators testing the product because they are also involved in a program where they help emergency workers communicate with each other.

All 20 members of CAARES, the Capital Area Amateur Radio Emergency Service, lend their equipment and their expertise during emergencies, according to Van Dongen, who is a member of the group.

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"For example," he said, " a few Saturdays ago there were two fires at the same time in Concord. The Red Cross set up a temporary shelter at the (Green Street Community Center). One of our guys went down there and the other went to the Red Cross's headquarters so they could communicate with each other."

Up until now, the radio operators would get word that their help was needed through a call tree: Dispatch would call one member of the group, who would call another, who would call another, and so on.

It could take 30 minutes to find enough members to respond to an emergency.

But with the new call box device, every member gets the warning at the same time, assuming they're home. That has cut response time down to about five minutes, according to Van Dongen.

The companies that make the device say it could eventually be used to warn rescue workers such as volunteer firefighters or EMTs.

It could also be put in people's homes to let them know about impending calamities, both natural and manmade.

"It would be a much more direct way of warning people," said Ray Chadwick, president of ClassCo. "It's like the messages that come on the TV, like a tornado alert, except you don't need to turn on the TV."

Both ClassCo and Exacom had started looking into emergency related technology before Sept. 11. But since the terrorist attacks, demand for these kinds of products has risen, Chadwick said.

The companies are housed in the same building on Airport Road, and employees have a lot of interaction. It was during casual conversations last year that the two decided to join forces on the project.

ClassCo makes telecommunications products, such as caller ID boxes that read the incoming number out loud. (This way you don't have to get up and check the box, Chadwick said.)

The company's products are installed in 1,500 homes in the area of the Point Lepreau nuclear power plant in New Brunswick, Canada. The boxes replace the old system the nuclear plant had of sending people door to door - all 1,500 of them - with a warning.

Exacom is in the digital recording business. It makes products that record, for example, conversations between dispatchers and callers and dispatchers and emergency workers. The company's products are in fire and police stations and airports across the country.

The companies combined their products to produce a box that speaks a

warning and then records conversations.

This way, if an emergency worker calls in for instructions, he or she will be able to go back and double check information.

The recordings can also be used later on if rescue crews want to recreate what happened, either for a general investigation or to see if they could have done something more efficiently.

Right now the companies are just testing the devices. Officials at both said they're not sure when the product might come to market or how much it would cost.

"This could change a lot," Van Dongen said. "It's exciting to be part of this kind of experiment."

Tuesday, May 27, 2003

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