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Old technology fills 21st century response need

When it comes to getting the word out about terrorist attacks, ham radio operators and government are on the same frequency

By: Ben Jones

The U.S. war on terrorism is a technical battle fought with satellites and unmanned Predator drones.

But as state officials make plans to deal with the next terrorist attack, they are seeking help from a group of volunteers with technology that predates World War I.

When there is a major emergency, the entire phone system gets clogged, said Lori Getter, Wisconsin Emergency Management public information officer.

It's a problem in any emergency, be it a tornado, flood or fire. But ham radios, outfits that require a Federal Communications Commission license and a certain amount of technical training to operate, don't depend on cellular towers or telephone lines. And they have a range that can reach around the world.

So when disaster strikes in Wisconsin, officials look to the men and women who call themselves "hams". There's a statewide network of about 1,300 hams who have assisted in such emergencies as the March 4, 1996, Weyauwega train derailment and the June 18, 2001, tornado in Siren in western Wisconsin.

Now state officials are planning for the day when they may have to use the hams for a terrorist disaster.

They are a wonderful support, Getter said. In this electronic age we think everything is going to work. But when the phone lines go down, they are still up and running.

In a state bioterrorism exercise earlier this month, ham operators trained with representatives of the FBI, Wisconsin National Guard and American Red Cross.

Ham radio volunteers operate under two organizations: the American Radio Relay League (AARL) and the Radio Amateur Civil Emergency Service (RACES).

Many hams volunteer for both groups as well as gather information for the National Weather Service.

Stanley Kaplan, RACES Wisconsin chief radio officer, said that while there is newer technology in existence, the reliability and effectiveness of ham radios keeps them relevant.

The radios can be set up to send both voice and typed messages. Kaplan said hams are useful when two agencies that have incompatible radios need to communicate or when other communications infrastructure is out of service.

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"Hams can fill that gap by putting one radio with one institution and one with the other, he said.

Kaplan said it makes sense to include ham radios in emergency plans for terrorist attacks because the problems could be similar to other emergencies. Volunteer ham operators assisted in the emergency effort in New York City following the Sept. 11 terrorist attacks.

Anytime normal communication methods fail, Kaplan said.

Don Quinn, a ham from Neenah, said he thought hams would be useful in assisting officials with a terrorist incident.

We've got the radios and we've got the frequencies, he said.

The hobby is not cheap. A basic used ham radio set can be had for a few hundred dollars, but serious hams can easily spend much more.

Many thousands, but that's because I'm crazy, said Gary Keating, a ham from Kaukauna.

Appleton ham Wayne Pennings said radio volunteers are often the first to arrive on the scene of a disaster and the last to leave.

It's the same reason we get on the air every day, Pennings said. It's a chance to give back to the community.

http://www.wiscinfo.com/postcrescent/news/archive/local_2870012.shtml