

# Telecoms innovating emergency improvements

March 16 2006

---



A conference Wednesday that brought together professionals from the telecommunications industry, academia and governments is seeking to iron out problems in interoperability and emergency management communications in the wake of Hurricane Katrina. Emergency communications have been a very important homeland security issue since Sept. 11, 2001, when interoperability problems contributed to problems faced by first responders.

Sen. Susan Collins, R-Maine, is the chairwoman of the Senate Committee on Homeland Security and Governmental Affairs. She addressed the conference with her concerns and suggested solutions that will likely appear in a report to be issued by that committee detailing the investigation into the government blunders of Hurricane Katrina.

Quoting from the 1967 film "Cool Hand Luke," the senator stressed, "What we have here is a failure to communicate." She outlined three distinct failures in that realm: the widespread lack of cooperation and cohesion of emergency management and government officials, the collapse during the storm of critical physical infrastructure, and the lack of interoperability in the communications equipment that did survive the storm.

"Since 9/11 many people have worked very hard to create a partnership in emergency management," said Collins. "This was the first great test of the partnership and we failed to deliver."

More and more the government is looking to the private sector as a reliable model for how to structure communications effectively. "The private sector did better," said Collins, who pointed out that while private companies moved quickly to restore communications in the wake of the storm they were stymied by government officials restricting access to areas crucial to repair. The senator suggested that a standard ID system that government officials would respect in times of crisis would aid in this problem.

BellSouth currently has a pilot program to do just that. "The problem we faced with Katrina was that certain areas were closed off and nobody could go in and this nobody included us," said Bill McCloskey, a representative from BellSouth. "We think we can work cooperatively with police and DHS so that we have some sort of ID that they would recognize."

McCloskey said that the trial will be in Savannah, Ga., and BellSouth is hoping to initiate the rollout by the beginning of the hurricane season. "Assuming that it works, we have it in mind to roll it out to the rest of the BellSouth region," McCloskey said. The program is designed to act as a kind of a stopgap measure and get the region to agree to recognize

employee IDs and eventually to create a single credential for everywhere.

McCloskey said that they are working with the federal government on a national recognizable identification. "The idea was reviewed by DHS and they have helped us to come up with this proposal and we hope it works."

Collins said that this is where the private sector is thinking ahead. "The performance of the private sector -- in every case they had plans, they had prepared, and they activated those plans, positioning supplies and personnel early," said Collins. "They empowered people on the frontlines to make decisions faster than the government and restored communications faster." To that effect Collins suggested that there should be pre-arranged public/private cooperation agreements that can be "pulled off the shelf and implemented in a disaster."

Other recommendations that are expected to come out of the committee report on Katrina include funding for investment in interoperable equipment and structured regional response teams that train and coordinate before disaster strikes. Collins quoted one witness from the committee's hearings who said, "Emergency management officials should not be exchanging business cards during the crisis."

Conference sponsor Lewis Branscomb of Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government said there were only two approaches to ensuring communications reliability when the technical solutions go so far: regulation and markets. "There is not a lot of enthusiasm for regulation in this group, but there is not enough market incentive for the capital investment needed to make sure that they can respond," Branscomb said.

Rep. Bernie Thompson, D-Miss., the ranking member on the House Committee on Homeland Security, also emphasized government

cooperation with the private sector.

"Response plans mean little if we can't implement them," he said. "It doesn't play out well when CNN can run coverage on TV and Wal-Mart can get water to people and agencies can't."

He hopes that the House will create legislation to move more money toward the purchasing of equipment and to emphasize that technology can act as a bridge to making current communications work. "Too many times I've seen the Department (of Homeland Security) try to recreate the wheel, when it would be worked on much better by the private sector," Thompson said.

As a legislator from the Gulf region, Thompson said that he hopes that reforms to communications problems will come quickly.

"I'm not convinced that we can apply the lessons learned to the next hurricane season, which starts June 1st," he said. "If the system goes down, we haven't put the technology in place for first responders."

*Copyright 2006 by United Press International*

Citation: Telecoms innovating emergency improvements (2006, March 16) retrieved 25 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2006-03-telecoms-emergency.html>

This document is subject to copyright. Apart from any fair dealing for the purpose of private study or research, no part may be reproduced without the written permission. The content is provided for information purposes only.