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Outdated Radios Fail Capitol Police

Replacement Cost Would Be 'Huge'

By Mary Beth Sheridan
Washington Post Staff Writer
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The U.S. Capitol Police guard one of the nation's biggest terrorist targets. But their radios conk out in "dead spots" around congressional buildings and have limited connections to local police in the Washington area, officials say.

Channels on the Reagan-era police radio system often crash, officers said. One went down during President Bush's State of the Union address to Congress in January, according to several officials. Last year, all five Capitol Police radio channels briefly collapsed, prompting officers to whip out their personal cellphones to communicate, officials said.

"It has some type of failure at least once a week," said Matt Tighe, head of the Fraternal Order of Police labor committee that represents Capitol Police officers.

Despite receiving billions of federal dollars since the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, the nation's first responders still struggle to communicate, even in Washington. In recent years, local police and firefighters have built a modern, digital radio network. But they can have trouble reaching federal officers who use different frequencies and outdated equipment.

The Capitol Police force isn't the only one with radio problems. The U.S. Park Police, in charge of protecting the Washington Monument and other icons, have a radio system that is between 20 and 30 years old, officials said. And a report last year found that 84 percent of FBI radio systems nationwide are obsolete.

"Logically, 9/11 is a wake-up call that federal, state and local agencies ought to work together to build something much better than what they have today," said Jon M. Peha, associate director of the Center for Wireless and Broadband Networking at Carnegie Mellon University. But, he said, "little progress has been made" toward a strong national system.

The Capitol Police rely on hand-held and car radios on an analog system. The equipment doesn't work in several "dead spots" around congressional buildings, officials said.

The system's age complicates efforts to link it to those of nearby law enforcement agencies. Because of such difficulties, the Capitol Police have resorted to installing D.C. police radios in their cars alongside

their own radios. Another concern for officers: Most of the Capitol Police system does not have encryption, as newer equipment does.

"It can be monitored by the public, media and our adversaries," said one officer, who spoke on condition of anonymity because he was not authorized to comment.

Phillip D. Morse, who became Capitol Police chief in 2006, has been blunt about his force's "antiquated" radio system. "We cannot communicate effectively with each other," he testified before a House subcommittee last year. Morse declined a request for an interview.

Congress has given the Capitol Police hundreds of millions of dollars to enhance anti-terrorism protection since the Sept. 11 attacks. Terrance W. Gainer, the Senate sergeant-at-arms who helps oversee the force, said the money went to other priorities, including a hazmat unit and officer hiring.

One difficulty in building a better radio system is the project's scale, said Gainer, who led the Capitol Police force from 2002 to 2006. The radios must work not just on streets but also throughout the thick-walled, marble-sheathed congressional buildings, including the basements. Officials also want the new system to have backup capacity to prevent failures.

"The price tag is huge," Gainer said.

Congress has appropriated $10 million for the project so far, but it is expected to cost tens of millions more, according to Capitol Police officials.

Capitol Police officials recently told Congress that they have completed the design and cost analysis for a new system. When construction begins, the system will take at least two years to complete, police said.

Gainer noted that in the meantime, Capitol Police officers have found ways to communicate with other agencies. The radio problems have "not ever put the Capitol complex, staff or visitors at risk," he said.

Decades ago, it didn't matter much that local and federal officers were working on a patchwork of communications systems, with different frequencies and equipment. The Capitol Police, for example, used to be a smaller force, more worried about controlling tourists than terrorists.

But with growing threats in recent years, law enforcement agencies collaborate more closely. For example, when the World Bank received a wave of bomb threats in January, D.C. police asked other forces to help them sweep the buildings for explosives. Participating Capitol Police officers found themselves unable to talk to their counterparts at the scene, two officers recalled.

The fractured state of the country's emergency communications burst into view during the Sept. 11 attacks, when New York's firefighters and police were unable to share information. In the Washington

area, the issue emerged even earlier, when an Air Florida jet slammed into the Potomac River in 1982, killing 78 people. Rescue officers from the District, nearby suburbs, the Park Police, the military and National Airport responded.

"Nobody could talk to each other," said James Wadsworth, manager of Fairfax County's radio services center.

Today, nearly all local police and firefighters in the Washington area can communicate on digital Motorola radios on the same 800-megahertz band. With the flick of a switch, a Fairfax firefighter can jump onto a Montgomery County fire channel or talk to police. The region also maintains 1,250 extra radios to hand out in emergencies.

The Department of Homeland Security gave the Washington area a top score last year in a nationwide survey of communications "interoperability." That success is partly attributable to federal grants. Since 2003, the federal government has given more than $5 billion to state and local governments to improve emergency communications.

But such grants are not available to federal agencies. When the cash-squeezed Park Police tried to design a radio system a few years ago, they discovered that the price tag was "twice the amount of funds we had available," said Lt. David Mulholland, the force's technology chief.

The Park Police have tried to compensate by partnering with other agencies. They considered joining a project started in 2001 to create a nationwide wireless network for 81,000 agents in the Justice, Homeland Security and Treasury departments.

But that project became bogged down in funding issues and differences among agencies, according to a report last year by the Justice Department's inspector general. Justice is hoping to start the network in the Washington area in 2009. Because of the delay, some federal agents are using unreliable equipment; 84 percent of the FBI's radio systems nationwide are obsolete, according to the report.

Officials in the Washington area emphasized that they have ways to connect local and federal forces with disparate equipment and bands. Dispatchers for various agencies can monitor one another's radios. And the Capitol Police and other agencies can use technical "patches" to tie themselves to other departments' radios. The Justice Department has spent more than $1 million installing a patching system for local and federal responders in the Washington area.

But patches can tie up an entire radio channel, limiting other communication, especially in older systems, officials said. Some patches can be unreliable or time-consuming to install.

Some experts are calling for building a national emergency communications system from scratch, instead of having agencies create new systems and then try to link them. It would be the first-responder

equivalent of the kind of national network set up by cellphone companies.

The Federal Communications Commission is trying to create such a system on a chunk of spectrum being vacated by television broadcasters switching from analog to digital signals. But the FCC has yet to find a commercial partner, and the system could take 10 years to complete.

Jerry Brito, a fellow with the Regulatory Studies Program at the Mercatus Center at George Mason University, said only a national system can provide the efficiency and seamless communication emergency responders need.

"You have about 50,000 public-safety agencies in the country, everyone from the local sheriff in Mississippi to the FBI," he said. "Even if each agency wanted to get together and coordinate, it's impossible."

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