

## **Emergency Responders From Across PA Discuss Ways to Improve Crisis Communications**

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The Pennsylvania State Police, Pennsylvania Emergency Management Agency, other state departments, and emergency officials from counties across the state today discussed ways to improve communications among emergency responders during the second annual PA Interop Conference.

State police and other state agencies are implementing a new public safety radio system for data and voice communications. The system, called OpenSky, is the backbone for the state's PA STARNET radio network and allows interoperability among different agencies and radio systems.

State Police Colonel Jeffrey Miller told conference attendees that the new system helped during the tragic shooting at an Amish school house in Lancaster County in 2006.

"Because of this new system, we were able to talk with local and state police who responded to this shooting, and we were able to decide what needed to be done sooner," Miller said.

"As those charged with protecting the public safety, we have to not only think about, but be prepared to act on, the unthinkable," Miller said. "If a shooting, like the one that happened at Virginia Tech last year, were to happen at Penn State, or any other college campus in Pennsylvania, state police would need to work with campus security and local police, and that means we would need to be able to talk to each other."

State police already use the public safety radio system for data transmission. The voice system is being phased in at state police barracks across the state.

"Our public safety radio system will help state police communicate better and more quickly with other state agencies, such as PEMA, PennDOT and the Department of Health, during emergencies," said Charles Brennan, deputy secretary for public safety radio in the Governor's Office of Administration. "It will also help our state agencies work better with local police, fire and other emergency responders, whether they join this system or not."

Many counties need to upgrade their emergency communications systems. The upgrades are critical to improving public safety, but they cost millions of dollars.

"The terrorist attacks on 9/11 showed the need for emergency agencies to be able to communicate reliably with one another during a crisis. The question confronting public officials is how to best achieve this goal within tight budgets at municipal, county and state levels," Brennan said. "One of the purposes of this conference is to bring emergency communications

managers together to look at new technology, and talk with their peers about how best and most efficiently to get this technology into the field."

County emergency officials received briefings on how their current systems can work with the state OpenSky system, and looked at ways to upgrade their existing systems.

The need for communication among state, county and local responders is especially critical in Pennsylvania because of the state's local government structure. In addition to several state agencies, there are 67 county emergency offices, and thousands of local police and fire departments, hazardous materials teams and ambulance services that handle emergency situations.

"Pennsylvania citizens value small, local governments that are close to the people they serve," Brennan said. "But, we need to make sure our local emergency responders have the best communications equipment available to protect themselves and their neighbors when a disaster strikes."

Brennan pledged to take information gained from PA Interop II to offer local officials the best and widest options for upgrading their emergency communications systems.