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Essex County

In times of danger, workers will have help in responding

Tuesday, September 30, 2003

BY BARRY CARTER
Star-Ledger Staff

If a Newark police officer sees what appears to be a large explosion near the Belleville-Bloomfield border, today he'll contact dispatch, which in turn tries to reach the municipality over a police network.

If the network is busy, dispatch has to pick up the phone to make the call, something police say is one step too many during an emergency.

A \$2.8 million federal grant announced yesterday by Sen. Jon S. Corzine (D-N.J.) is to change how police, fire departments and emergency service workers will communicate with one another during a major disaster or a terrorist attack.

"If there was anything that was a lesson learned from September 11, it is that we need to have the ability to communicate from one of our first responders to another," Corzine said.

"There was a feeling that there was real danger brought to everybody because we didn't have that kind of communication. We flat out couldn't talk to each other."

The grant, funded by the U.S. Justice Department's Office of Community Policing Services, is to make Newark a communication hub with an upgraded system that allows police, fire and emergency service workers in six counties to talk to one another on one channel during an emergency.

Besides Essex, the other counties are Hudson, Union, Morris, Warren and Sussex.

Newark, one of 14 cities to share in a \$66.5 million grant under the "Interoperable Communications Technology" program, is reviewing the latest technology needed to make the program work.

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Police Director Robert Rankin said the department has been to Florida and California and is preparing a report for the city administration.

"Without this grant, local government couldn't afford the type of technology that we're getting ready to receive," Rankin said.

"What we know is communication failed miserably on 9/11, and we never want to be put in a position where first-line responders lack the ability to communicate."

Mayor Sharpe James praised Corzine and the New Jersey congressional delegation for making sure funds were available for a much needed program.

"The city, county, state and the nation are facing a fiscal crisis, and it's because of Sen. Corzine's leadership that we are able to stand here today and talk about \$2.8 million," James said.

While the grant helps, Corzine said, the funding for homeland security is not where it should be in the country under the Bush administration.

"We're not putting the dough down that would really protect the American people," he said.

Rep. Donald Payne (D-10th Dist.) agreed, saying the grant for Newark and other cities could have been more if President Bush had not proposed tax cuts over the next 10 years benefiting the wealthy.

"This (grant) is certainly a step in the right direction, but we have been fighting the Bush administration to change its point of view," he said.

City officials said Newark police are making arrangements with first responders to explain the benefits of the technology and how it works.

Sussex County Sheriff Robert Untig said he's looking forward to the gathering, even though his county had already started to look into ways of improving its communication system.

Barry Carter covers Newark. He can be reached at bcarter@starledger.com or (973) 392-1827.

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