

# Radio system keeps counties in touch

Homeland Security grant provided funds

By ALIANA RAMOS  
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BELLEVILLE — It's 7:30 a.m. Wednesday and St. Clair County Board Chairman Mark Kern is waiting for the go-ahead to speak during Illinois' first county-to-county call on a new emergency communications system.

"Good morning, McLean County," Kern said via a handheld radio to a group at the McLean County Chamber of Commerce in Bloomington. "Certainly, we are making history today. We can throw out our tin cans and string."

Kern's 700/800 megahertz radio was one piece of a new \$8.9 million St. Clair County system designed to allow state and local agencies to communicate during a crisis or natural disaster.

St. Clair County was the only local government entity in Illinois to receive a grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security in 2003 to develop the communications system. The county received \$3.8 million from Homeland Security to build its radio system.

"Before, it was a bunch of different radio systems using different radio signals," said Norm Forshee, 911 coordinator for St. Clair County, who was present during the test run. "Now we can communicate with the city of St. Louis, as far north as McLean County and as far south as Marion."

The system is part of a push by the federal government to address communication problems experienced by first responders during the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11, 2001.

"Bad guys don't stop at the (Mississippi) river."

Norm Forshee  
911 coordinator for St. Clair County

But Forshee stressed the system is not only for disaster rescue efforts. It can be used daily by emergency personnel, especially between the metro-east and St. Louis.

"Bad guys don't stop at the (Mississippi) river," he said.

The system will have 10 towers throughout the county and allow for agencies to have their own talk groups. The initial infrastructure can support about 600 users with a potential to accommodate up to 1,600, Forshee said.

So far, the organizations that have or are scheduled to have access to the system include the Millstadt Police Department and emergency personnel; St. Clair County Sheriff's Department; Memorial Hospital; Illinois Department of Transportation; Dupon Police Department, St. Clair County coroner's office, and the St. Louis Police Department.

"This system can grow from Chicago to Kansas City," he said.

The system is slowly being phased in. The county expects to sign a 10-year agreement with the manufacturer, Motorola, by the end of December.

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