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Dropped calls put firefighters in danger

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Hamilton County firefighters hate a communication system that taxpayers spent \$35 million on because it doesn't do what it's supposed to do when they're in a burning building: Let them talk to each other.

The radio failures - which some firefighters say happen daily - played a role in the death of two Colerain Township firefighters nearly two years ago and local fire chiefs say if a solution isn't found other firefighters' lives are at risk.

The issue surfaced again last week when radio problems resulted in near miss for Cincinnati Firefighter Kevin Phillips who fell down a set of stairs, which knocked his helmet and air mask loose, causing him to become disoriented.

A transcript of the radio transmissions obtained by The Enquirer shows it took three minutes before fire command at the scene responded to the mayday call by Phillips' partner, an eternity in a burning building, firefighters say.

Cincinnati Fire Chief Robert Wright did not return two calls for comment. Firefighters at the Glenway blaze say Wright met with them Tuesday, listened to their concerns and asked what would help them.

Hamilton County taxpayers spent \$35 million on the digital Motorola system which was activated in 2003, replacing a fire radio system that dated to the 1940s and a police system that was nearly as old. The new system was hailed for allowing agencies to talk to each other, an impossibility on the old system.

But problems crop up when more than one firefighter tries to talk at once, resulting in firefighters getting a busy signal when they try to call and in garbled transmissions due to background noise like engines and burning buildings. In addition, metal construction blocks communication when firefighters are inside large buildings like downtown high rises or hospitals.

"We're finding out this is happening every day, not just in big fires," said B.J. Jetter, Sycamore Township Fire Chief and president of the Hamilton County Fire Chiefs Association.

"And not only with fire and EMS, but for police too," he said. "It's system wide."

The issue came to the forefront in April 2008, when Colerain fire Capt. Robin Broxterman and firefighter Brian Schira died in a blaze on Squirrel's Nest Lane. A review of the radio calls made during the fire showed the firefighters repeatedly made mayday calls, which were never transmitted.

"I don't think the full impact or level of concern (about the issue) was realized until we were able to see the radio call log from the Squirrel's Nest fire," said Colerain Fire Chief Bruce Smith.

Broxterman's parents are suing over the fatal fire, naming in the lawsuit among others, Motorola.

The problem became evident to all county public safety agencies during the Sept. 14, 2008, windstorm. All agencies were trying to use the radios at once. While that is an extreme situation, it locked up radios and prevented people from communicating.

County communication center officials questioned Motorola about possible fixes, but there isn't a solution right now, the company told the county, said Mike Bailey, of the Hamilton County Communication Center.

"This is not an extreme emergency at this point, but it is a very big concern," Bailey said.

A Motorola spokesman in charge of public safety for North America did not return a call for comment.

Cincinnati Fire department spokesman Capt. Michael Washington said the current system is better than the old one, and the department must work with what it has.

As the county grapples with what to do, Jetter said firefighters, police officers and the public are in danger. "It gives me heartburn that we have this situation," he said.

Fire departments nationwide have reported problems with the digital radios.

The city of Phoenix has the same system, but when fighting a blaze the fire department uses the old analog system that transmits calls radio to radio, instead of through a computer system.

The International Association of Fire Fighters is now recommending fire department not use digital systems in fires.

"Radios are the most important piece of safety equipment a firefighter has," said Richard Duffy, assistant to the president of the international union. "If you can't communicate on the fire ground, you put yourself and others at risk."

Duffy said Motorola should be held accountable.

Jetter said the problem is so bad it's almost like having no communication at all. "We're going back to the old days of using runners, where somebody runs in to deliver a message," he said. "In an age of technology, this shouldn't be an issue."

Cincinnati Fire Union President Marc Monahan said last week's missed mayday call "could have been really bad." "We've had problems, we've pointed them out and nothing has been done," he said. "Hopefully, this is enough evidence that will force some changes."

The union plans to once again address the issue with fire administrators at the quarterly safety committee meeting Wednesday. Jetter said he's not sure what the solution is. "We can complain all we want," he said. "I don't know how this gets resolved."
