

Katrina Rescuers Improvise Communications

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When the phones don't work, improvise. That's what emergency responders and civilians were forced to do in the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina, which trashed the telephone system on the Gulf Coast of Louisiana and Mississippi.

Police in New Orleans, their main communications system knocked out, have been taking turns talking on a single radio channel with their walkie talkies. The Mississippi National Guard even resorted to ancient battlefield tactics, sending runners back and forth among commanders with information. And a local sheriff, Sid Hebert of Iberia Parish, helped keep an ambulance company handling medical evacuations across southern Louisiana running by loaning it a portable command center.

"He personally drove it to (our headquarters). He got us back on the air," said Richard Zuschlag, chief executive of Acadian Ambulance Service Inc.

By Thursday, nearly 10,000 satellite-based wireless phones had poured into the hurricane zone to coordinate relief efforts by federal disaster personnel and Red Cross workers, said service providers Globalstar LLC and Iridium Satellite LLC.

But satellite phones were spread far more thinly among the ranks of local public safety personnel and emergency responders.

Before the storm, a few thousand satellite phones at most were in use across the three-state region hit by the hurricane, and perhaps only a few hundred of those were in the hands of local authorities, including

at least four Louisiana Parishes.

Though government officials have never before had to contemplate a communications breakdown of this magnitude, it was not immediately clear — with \$8.6 billion in federal money handed out to states since September 11 for emergency preparedness — why more satellite communications systems were not in place.

Without such handsets, the most drenched and devastated areas of the Gulf Coast were cut off from the outside world in more ways than one.

The grim TV footage showing a collapsed bridge that once crossed Lake Pontchartrain, one of the main roadways into New Orleans, make it clear why evacuations have been so difficult. That bridge also happened to hold the fiber-optic cables that transported calls and Internet traffic to and from the city as well.

While every major phone company has been scrambling to patch its way into the city and other hard-hit areas using alternate routes and backup equipment, it could be some time before many local phone and Internet lines are back in service to receive calls and data.

BellSouth Corp., the local phone provider for much of the region, said about 1.6 million customers could be without phone service in Mississippi, Louisiana and Alabama. The company said it was able to restore service for about 150,000 customers between Wednesday and Thursday.

In the meantime, emergency personnel were often struggling to communicate as

they dealt with desperate circumstances.

In New Orleans, police officers crowded a single frequency on their patrol radios.

"That has posed some problems with people talking over each other," said Warren Riley, the deputy police chief. "We probably have 20 agencies on one channel right now."

Worse, with little power to recharge their batteries, some of those radios were running out of juice. Riley said the police were setting up a new communication system next to the Superdome and waiting for a generator to fire it up later Thursday.

In storm-ravaged southern Mississippi, the national guard was doing things the old-fashioned way.

"We've got runners running from commander to commander," said Maj. Gen. Harold Cross of the Mississippi National Guard. "In other words, we're going to the sound of gunfire, as we used to say during the Revolutionary War."

Restoring phone service isn't merely a matter of waiting for the flood waters to recede and restoring power. While many cables may be salvageable, the electronics that pass the signals across those lines will need to be replaced.

"It's essentially analogous to putting a PC in your bathtub. It's not going to work once it dries," said Jim Gerace, a spokesman for Verizon Wireless.

Associated Press Writers Jennifer Kerr, Brian Skoloff and Brett Martel contributed to this report.

