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Washington, D.C., Partners with Feds to Test 4G Technology for National Public Safety Network



Feb 3, 2010, By **Russell Nichols**

At the end of 2009, the world of fourth-generation (4G) mobile telecommunications technology got a boost when a Swedish telecom

operator deployed the first-ever commercial long-term evolution (LTE) services in Stockholm, Sweden and Oslo, Norway.

This is critical because even though the company, TeliaSonera, launched the network for commercial purposes, U.S. public safety agencies support LTE technology for a proposed nationwide public safety network on the 700 MHz radio band.

Such a network would give emergency responders access to advanced communications technologies and massive data files (video, mapping and GPS applications, etc.) at faster speeds from anywhere in the country.

"The best analogy would be to think an individual who roams from area to area on a cell phone," said Bryan Sivak, chief technology officer for the District of Columbia Government. "You obviously want uninterrupted coverage. If there's a national disaster that requires assistance from everywhere around the country like 9/11 or Katrina, we need to have something nationwide that allows all of these pieces of equipment to work regardless of where that person happens to be."

In the next few years, as wireless carriers begin rolling out 4G networks in the United States, these public safety and telecommunications agencies have an opportunity to take advantage of the large-scale manufacturing efforts, in which they could affect standards and also save money.

This Is Only a Test

Recently the District of Columbia's Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO) announced plans to partner in the federally funded Public Safety Communications Research (PSCR) program. Announced in December by the National Institute of Standards and Technology (NIST) and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA), the program will evaluate the future of wireless communications for public safety agencies, develop public safety requirements and test interoperability of multiple systems.

"In an emergency, when there are lots of people using devices, all those requests for service are hitting the same cell towers," said Ken Boley, director of intergovernmental initiatives for OCTO. "If you're a first responder using the same communications company, you're going to be competing with civilian traffic. It's a matter of prioritization for public safety traffic."

But testing a national public safety network is tricky.

For one, it's too risky to use beta technology during a live incident; emergency responders need reliable equipment and stable service on the scene to do their jobs. For two, the U.S. has no government or independent laboratory facilities to test and demonstrate such a network.

That's why the program will also establish a Public Safety Broadband Demonstration Network, using a portion of radio frequency freed up by the country's analog-to-digital technology transition. On that network, manufacturers can deploy their systems early, experiment in a multi-vendor environment and create integration opportunities for commercial service providers.

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"The demonstration of these new technologies, implementations and services is a critical step in successfully deploying the next generation of mission-critical systems," Dereck Orr, PSCR program manager, said in a statement.

Building a Network

With 4G technology, emergency responders would be able to transmit data more than 10 times faster than current 3G wireless technologies, but building a national network requires input from public safety officials from everywhere as different cities have different needs.

"We're trying to provide an environment that should mirror a generic urban environment," said Sivak, adding that major city chiefs have already started coming together to lend support and help set requirements. "We have to make sure there's a good consensus among all jurisdictions."

But much of the process is still in the early stages. Boley noted that manufacturers have not yet come public with chip sets. But once the requirements have been established and the devices have been tested, Sivak said, public safety agencies will be in a strong position to affect the pricing and one step closer to connecting emergency responders across the county to a national network.

"Once we overcome the policy and technology hurdles," Sivak said, "it should allow any public safety agency to say, 'We know this technology will work and it will accomplish the things we want it to do, and we're ready to go and hop on board.'"

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