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Wisconsin first responders use 3G for emergencies

Ambulance service connects in-vehicle network and hospitals via mobile

by Jim Barthold

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For Tri-State Ambulance in LaCrosse, Wis., Alltel's local 3G mobile wireless network is the ideal way to link its emergency vehicles with local hospitals. The ambulance service has deployed In Motion Technology's mobile gateway technology to connect its' in-vehicle local area networks with the wide area 3G mobile service provided by Alltel.

"The responsiveness of the units and the bandwidth that we have has been phenomenal," said Matt Zavadsky, director of Tri-State Ambulance, while qualifying that "we're not sending a whole bunch of graphic files through the IP connection and through the broadband connection."

The units cost about US\$2,500 each and Tri-State spends about US\$40 a month for Alltel text services to send files that, in some instances can be lifesavers.

"We can send any of the patient monitoring that we're doing ... to the hospital. Whatever monitoring we want to send to the hospital is captured in a series of data files and e-mailed real time ... to wherever it needs to go," he said.

While not quite as efficient—or dazzling, to be honest--as some services that link cameras within the emergency vehicles real time to hospital emergency rooms via muni Wi- Fi networks, Tri-State's operation achieves its purpose using more conventional 3G connections.

"If we know that a patient we're treating is 45 minutes away from the cardiac center and needs ... to go to the open hear surgery suite right away, we can take that patient's biologic assessment and e-mail it to 30 people at once-- the ER doctor, the cardiologist on call, the scrub nurse in the cath lab, our medical director ... literally at the touch of a screen," Zavadsky said.

The ambulance crew can then transport the patient to the correct set of specialists, he said.

It's not the kind of connection that they're getting in Tucson, Ariz., for instance, where city ambulances link to the hospital via the muni WiFi network.

"Wouldn't it b better to be on a fast network all the time? We totally agree and a number of customers that use our gateways are selecting the muni wireless network when it's there," said Kirk Moir, CEO of In Motion Technology.

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That, among other things, is the rub for Tri-State, said Zavadsky. The muni Wi-Fi network isn't there, although it's coming to LaCrosse.

"I've read way too much about the failure of the system," he said. "I'm actually quite surprised that our local community is embarking on such a project when in most of the community is about which I've read the system failed miserably."

Not in Tucson, apparently, where city fathers and the hospital staff are both pleased with the Wi-Fi connection.

Comparing Tri-State to Tucson, though, is apples and oranges, Zavadsky said.

"They have an Emergency Medical Services (EMS) system that does not respond outside the city of Tucson. Where you have a regional provider like we are, you really connect invest heavily in a technology you're only going to be able to use in a portion of your coverage area," he said. "We go into Minnesota and we go into Iowa and we carry that In Motion connectivity with us wherever we go."

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