



Wireless PA Fills the Gap in Emergency Response

Even mobile phones leave an emergency response security gap when absent or ignored. Wireless PA systems compatible with two-way radios can economically fill the gap.

"Between Hurricane Katrina and the Virginia Tech shootings, some of my security colleagues and I became concerned about how effectively we'd communicate with the community during emergencies," says Tom Carey, Director of Security and Campus Safety at Bates College, a four-year independent liberal arts and sciences college in Lewiston, Maine.

"If a security incident occurred on campus, students, staff, or visitors could walk straight into trouble if we couldn't get an emergency message to them in time," adds Carey, who's on the Domestic Preparedness committee of the International Association of Campus Law Enforcement Administrators (IACLEA), the leading voice of the campus public safety community. "While PDAs and cell phones are great, they leave a gap in emergency response for those not carrying or paying attention to them."

When natural or man-made disasters occur, from tornado warnings to domestic or international terrorism, PDAs, cell phones and email are of little help to those without them or ignoring them. To better protect school campuses and the wider community, wireless PA systems compatible with existing two-way radio systems are economically filling the emergency response-security gap at some of the nation's most pro-active campuses and municipalities.

Looking for Better Choices

Carey sought a fast, informative, comprehensive, and reliable emergency response system for Bates College, but was unsatisfied with the traditional choices.

Simply mounting civil defense sirens was not enough. "People hear sirens all the time, whether for police, fire, or ambulance and may have trouble distinguishing yet another siren," says Carey. "Sirens signal emergency, but don't tell people what to do or not do. That's when people flood security phone lines looking for clarification, which only makes the problem worse."

An emergency response phone, text, and email system was implemented at Bates College as part of a solution, but was not entirely sufficient by itself. "Contact by phone, cell phone, PDA, or PC is certainly helpful, but there's a lag time while someone composes a message and enters it in the system," says Carey. "From the onset of an incident to the last person reached can take 20 to 40 minutes or more if someone isn't checking their messages. The delay can be even longer for off-site hosted systems."

"If people are outside walking around campus, taking a run, or anything else that occupies their attention, they may not imme-

diately respond to an emergency alert even if they have an electronic device on them,” adds Carey. “For emergencies, we needed an effective way to reach a large number of such students, staff, faculty, and visitors in real-time.”

Eliminating an “Achilles Heel”

Carey’s research and the recommendation of Maine Radio, a Scarborough, ME-based reseller of wireless communications systems, led Bates College to a long-range wireless PA speaker system. The LoudMouth® wireless PA system by Ritron, Inc., a Carmel, IN-based designer and manufacturer of wireless electronic devices, enables personnel to use a portable two-way radio, base station or mobile radio to broadcast “live” voice messages over PA speakers from up to two miles away.

This is done via a VHF or UHF frequency LoudMouth radio receiver connected to one or more of the included indoor/outdoor horn speakers.

“We’ve eliminated the Achilles heel in our emergency response with an ability to wirelessly broadcast live, long-range messages to PA systems strategically placed across campus,” says Carey. “By piggybacking on our existing two-way radio operation, our Ritron wireless PA system enhances our emergency response and security without the cost or complexity of wired infrastructure.”

Maine Radio sales representative Dave Hubley, who installed the wireless PA system with campus-wide coverage in a couple of days, says, “The system is good anyplace you need to immediately inform many people about a situation, and there’s no need for trenching or extensive hardwiring.” Hubley, whose company has also installed a wireless PA system at the University of New England, a non-profit institution with two campuses in Maine, adds that the system’s flexibility is part of its appeal.

Though the system can work with repeaters for greater coverage, Carey finds it has sufficient range for Bates College’s 109-acre campus without one.

A Homeland Security Test

A recent Homeland Security grant to the city of Lewiston put the wireless PA system to the test in a live, large-scale training exercise involving Bates College, along with city police, fire fighters, and first responders.



Ritron’s LoudMouth® system shown here on top of the Carnegie Science Hall, near the center of campus at Bates College.

Photo credit: Phyllis Graber Jensen / Bates College.



Ritron’s LoudMouth system enables personnel to use a portable two-way radio, base station or mobile radio to broadcast “live” voice messages over PA speakers from up to 2 miles away.

In the emergency test scenario, the college was “ground zero” in a hypothetical ammonia-release at the campus hockey rink. “We had to warn students, faculty and visitors to stay away from the hockey rink, and inform those on campus to shelter in place,” says Carey.

“When we field tested the wireless PA system in the training exercise, it worked exactly as we hoped it would,” says Carey. “Its unique alert noise, distinct from police, fire, and ambulance sirens, got everyone’s attention. Then our communications officer delivered a live, loud and clear message to the campus areas where the most people gather. There they successfully sheltered in place until the situation was resolved.”

What was the benefit of a “live” message? “The real-time message got an immediate response from those who needed to hear it, and allowed us to issue ‘live’ updates as needed,” says Carey. “It helped with safety, coordination, and reduced the number of callers who otherwise would’ve flooded the phone lines asking questions.”

“The most basic law enforcement tool of schools and communities is the two-way radio system,” concludes Carey. “That’s how officers know what’s going on, communicate with each other, and are dispatched. As a simple, inexpensive add-on to this most basic unit of security, the Ritron wireless PA system makes sense when an immediate emergency response is needed from a large number of people.”

About Ritron Inc. - Founded in 1977, Ritron, Inc., is a privately held U.S. company specializing in the design and manufacture of RF wireless voice and data communication products. It offers wireless solutions for commercial, industrial, military, OEM and integrator markets. For more information call 800-872-1872 or visit our web site at www.ritron.com.

Del Williams is a technical writer based in Torrance, California.