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'Charleston, we have a problem'

• Crisis communications from across the country aided by 2 local companies

By **Dave Gustafson**

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Butch Evans' SoftWare Computer Group handles customer support for the WARN nationwide emergency-communications network.

Should a crisis erupt anywhere from New York's JFK Airport to, say, downtown Point Pleasant, it will be up to two Charleston companies to keep the lines of communication open.

SoftWare Computer Group Inc. and the Manahan Group have been landing ever-bigger contracts in the ever-more-critical field of crisis communications.

In April, SoftWare was selected as the national customer-support center for Wide Area Rapid Notification, a Tennessee-based communications network that lets officials share detailed information between agencies during a crisis.

Meanwhile, Manahan CEO George Manahan said he expects sales of his company's AirAlert system to swell this year, after successful trials at John F. Kennedy International Airport as well as San Diego International Airport and Charleston's Yeager Airport.

When an airport has an emergency, AirAlert provides a forum for emergency officials, the media and the public to share information. SoftWare's WARN does much the same for an array of emergency situations.

If a HAZMAT truck started leaking on an interstate in Kanawha County, for instance, 911 dispatchers could send a shelter-in-place warning via telephone to everyone who lives or works near its route within seconds — a process called "reverse 911" or "the ringdown system," said Metro 911 Director Carolyn Charnock.

Charnock said she was pleased that she could use WARN software to notify as many or as few people

at a moment's notice from the communications center, a cell phone or a landline. "We haven't had to use it" in a real situation, "but we know for a fact that we will," she said.

Other agencies around the state are interested in the system, Charnock said. "It's a lot more efficient and direct to communicate," she said. "As situations evolve, we'll be able to share the facts as we know them."

Metro 911 is one of many agencies across the country that will use the WARN customer support center based at SoftWare's Bigley Avenue headquarters, said SoftWare President Butch Evans.

WARN can send the same alert almost instantaneously to local, state and federal first responders. It also can be used to alert thousands of citizens within minutes via mobile and landline telephones, pagers, e-mail and other communication devices.

In an example of WARN's capabilities, Evans entered a reporter's cell phone number into a Web site that showed the text of the test message that would be read. After hitting send, the cell phone rang within seven seconds and a computerized voice read the example message. An emergency worker can even pick the language and accent used to deliver the message.

With the WARN customer support contract, SoftWare could quadruple from 10 to 40 employees in the next few years as more emergency responders adopt the system, Evans said.



This room at SoftWare's Bigley Avenue office soon could hold as many as 15 operators for the network, and up to 30 more could be hired before long.

The support center will handle questions from WARN users around the country — mostly 911 centers, school districts and other emergency officials, Evans said. SoftWare is looking for potential employees with computer, database and phone skills to outfit the call center, he said.

SoftWare has been in the information-technology support and consulting business since the 1970s. It provides support for the computer system for the state's magistrate and circuit courts.

WARN has several products other than reverse 911, Evans said:

- Care Calls sends an elderly or disabled person a phone call at specified times to see whether they

need help. If the recipient does not respond, a neighbor or caregiver is notified. If that doesn't work, local emergency officials will be alerted.

- Command Notification allows police, fire, public health and other officials to notify personnel at once of changes in emergency response, update equipment availability and ask workers in the field about their needs.
- WARN Schools allows schools to notify parents and students of closures, special events, emergencies and truancy.

Operators in Charleston will play a large role in emergencies across the country, Evans said. They will call Care Calls customers' local 911 center if they are unresponsive or send notification calls to parents if a superintendent that uses WARN Schools decides to close school.

SoftWare has backup communications and power systems to ensure emergency officials can get data they need at all times. The company has a natural gas generator in case the power goes out plus a backup Internet provider.

Mason County emergency officials bought the reverse 911 system about a year ago. In one test, the county phoned the same message to 13,000 residents in nine minutes, said Chuck Blake, the county's director of 911 and emergency services.

"This is the fastest way for us to contact a lot of folks," he said. "Of course, you don't catch all the residents at home. But for those who are able to answer the phone, they will benefit from this."

Bobby Boggess, a senior software developer at SoftWare, said the state Department of Health and Human Resources will use WARN to notify employees and health departments across the state of situations such as bioterrorism, pending weather disasters, flu shot availability and Centers for Disease Control and Prevention announcements.

As for AirAlert, its origins date back to an airport issues conference in Norfolk a few years ago that shook up Manahan and Yeager Airport Director Rick Atkinson.

"If we ever have something that happens at the airport," Atkinson said after one seminar, "we're not prepared at all to handle it."

On the drive back to Charleston, the two drafted an emergency communications plan that eventually became the Manahan Group's AirAlert product. Yeager became the beta site for the new system.

"Hopefully you'll never be the lead story on Fox News or CNN," Atkinson said. "But if you have an accident, you are going to be."

AirAlert allows an airport employee to click a mouse three times to send notification of an emergency to up to 10,000 people, Manahan said.

The employee would pull up the AirAlert Web page on a computer or a Web-enabled cell phone, punch in a password, select the type of incident, the level of severity and pick the recipients from pre-loaded databases. Within seconds, emergency officials are alerted via phone, pager, e-mail and other means, Manahan said.

The alert automatically creates a Web-based public and private forum at www.airalertus.com that lets emergency officials share information with each other, the media and the public.

If officials are making decisions from a remote area, they can view video and pictures from the incident site posted to a secure area on the Web. Reporters can also send officials questions and get responses via the site. AirAlert also logs the time and data of every communication for later review.

As the incident progresses, other affected groups can be notified, such as the airlines, rental car

agencies, local hotels, the American Red Cross, the families of airport workers and so on, Manahan said.

The contracts with JFK and San Diego were huge coups, Manahan said. With two large airports using AirAlert, other airports will be more likely to sign on, he said. There are also AirAlert distributors in Canada and the United Kingdom.

"This year's going to be the year it takes off," Manahan said.

AirAlert officials are in talks with the West Virginia Aeronautics Commission to buy the system for all airports in the state, Manahan said.

Manahan said he envisioned public transit, coal mining and law enforcement applications. "There are lots of ways it can be used that we haven't begun to market," he said.

For now, the company is focused on the airport industry, Manahan said. Every airport is required to have a crisis communication plan. The Federal Aviation Administration pays for most of that, so airports would not have to pay very much to implement AirAlert, he said.

"Because it's Web-based, you're not stuck with a software package that can't be updated," he said. "We're focused on how to get information to the right people in a crisis without interrupting the handling of the situation." AirAlert "can do as much or as little as you want it to do."

For more information on WARN and SoftWare, visit www.swcg-inc.com. For information on AirAlert, visit www.airalert

us.com.

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