

Polk joins pilot program for new emergency warning system

By Donna Kelly, News Chief staff

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BARTOW - Polk County is participating in a pilot program that will eventually bring a new way for emergency management to communicate with the public during various types of emergencies.

Polk County is one of four counties - the others are Brevard, Orange and Pasco - selected to take part in the study funded by the State of Florida Division of Emergency Management. The Melbourne-based viaRadio Corporation, a developer and manufacturer of emergency communication equipment, was awarded the \$419,533 contract for a County Warning System Pilot Program.

"It's essentially a radio transmission that can be picked up on a home or site-based receiver that can provide scrolling text of what a specific event is," said Pete McNally, Polk County's emergency manager. "Information goes directly to the people's home or office."

According to a press release issued by viaRadio, the company will supply the state with more than 3,000 HEARO receivers as part of the pilot test contract.

"Officials will use the technology to communicate with county staff, emergency management team members and in some cases residents of each county on subjects ranging from urgent safety concerns to road and school closures," the release said.

Messages transmitted through the system may be generated through the county, state or the National Weather Service.

McNally said he is currently working with viaRadio to determine where receiver devices - which look similar to a large clock radio with text messages that scroll across the window where on clocks the time is shown digitally - will be placed during the study. Potential receiver test sites include, but are not limited to, fire and EMS stations, Sheriff's Office and schools. More than 500 receivers will be used during the study.

"We will keep these to a tightly held group," McNally said. "Being a pilot test program, we want to get some accurate data."

If the test pilot is successful and the system is implemented, the general public will be able to receive messages through the system.

"Like the weather radio, anyone can get one," McNally said. "These are a better radio with a better delivery platform than the weather radio."

McNally said the study is in the early stages with actual testing of the devices set to begin in approximately two weeks.

The county will keep all broadcast equipment and receivers provided by the state for the study.

"The impetus for this is to demonstrate that it can be successful and to allocate money state wide," McNally said.

The ultimate goal, McNally said, is the safety of residents.

"The important thing is that we think the best notification is something that is in people's home that will alert them at all times in case of an emergency," he said. "It will provide an early warning of haz-mat spills, tornadoes and other emergencies."

According to viaRadio, messages can be received through the HEARO receivers in English or Spanish through standard FM radio frequencies.

The drawback is that there isn't any way for emergency officials to know whether or not the broadcast is effective. In order for the system to be useful, the public must not only purchase a radio but keep it on at all times and heed the warnings that are transmitted.

McNally said the devices are as effective as those using them.

"People have to buy them, have to use them and have to be educated," he said.

According to McNally, this is the second time Polk County has been chosen for a test pilot program. The first was a telephone call down system that notified residents by phone of various situations happening in their area.

donna.kelly@newschief.com

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