Emergency Systems
MAGAZINE
December 2006 – January 2007 • Vol II, Edition 4

Mobile E9-1-1 System Bails Out Plaquemines Parish

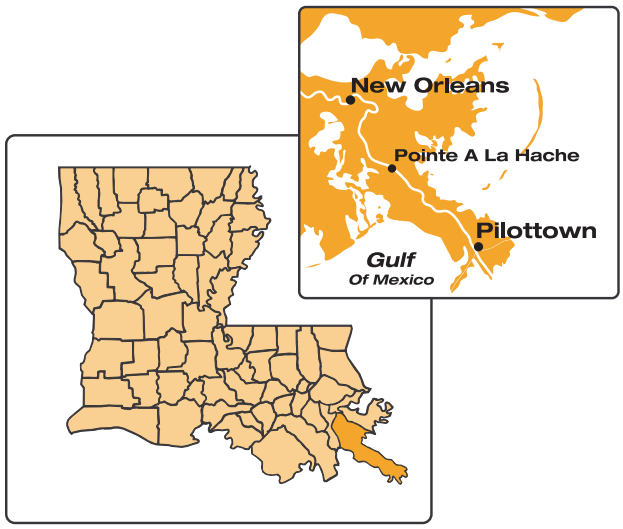
By David Bernard

Plaquemines, the largest Parish in Louisiana is located southeast of New Orleans. It is home to nearly 30,000 residents and the last 70 miles of the Mississippi River, where it empties into the Gulf of Mexico, except for the days during and after Hurricane Katrina (August 29, 2005), when the River and Gulf emptied into Plaquemines Parish.

With an average elevation of 3 feet above sea-level, the parish was almost completely underwater for weeks following the hurricane.

Parrish President Benny Rouselle ordered the evacuation of the Parish before Katrina struck. Most residents fled but some stayed to "ride it out." Not surprisingly, the building housing the Parish's E9-1-1 telecommunications center was completely destroyed. Even as the waters receded, residents were not allowed to return, because there was no way to reach any emergency responders.

In short, Plaquemines Parish faced the ultimate Catch 22. First, they could not allow people to return to the Parish without an E9-1-1 System. Second, they couldn't allow workers in to try to build a new E9-1-1 Center without an operational E9-1-1 center. Third, they couldn't afford to take the months necessary to build a new facility.



Facing this dilemma the Federal Emergency Management Administration contacted Siemens Communications and MicroAutomation, two of the leading companies in E9-1-1 automation. The request was simple and direct — Can you build a mobile E9-1-1 system capable of accepting telephone and radio transmission, drive it into Plaquemines Parish and hook it up to the phone system or what was left of it? Oh, and one more detail — Can you get it operational in three weeks?

"We were excited and energized by the challenge," stated Suresh Gursahaney, President of MicroAutomation headquartered in Manassas, VA. "After Katrina, the whole country wanted to help and, aside from sending money, didn't know how. Here we were in a perfect position to use our professional expertise to help people return to their homes and businesses safely, so they could start rebuilding their lives."

No one had ever attempted to build a mobile E9-1-1 system. "When you think about it, it makes perfect sense. If an area has a disaster, it's entirely likely that its emergency response system will be wiped out, just when it is needed most. We wanted to participate in the team that built the first mobile

E9-1-1 system," stated Rod Stauffer Siemens Corporation's project manager.

The team assembled in Atlanta, GA and got to work. They purchased a trailer and gutted it. They installed a complete E9-1-1 system ready to be plugged into the phone system and electrical supply. But the Siemens/MicroAutomation team knew they couldn't depend on standard electrical power so they outfitted the trailer with 48 car batteries and a generator. The trailer also included desks, chairs, computers, state-of-the-art telecommunications, radio, recording equipment and software. Working around the clock, the trailer was completely outfitted and operational in 5 days.

A convoy left on September 16 to deliver the trailer and arrived at the outskirts of Placquemines Parish on Louisiana State Route 39 only to be stopped by the National Guard. The Guard's orders were clear; no one could enter the Parish.

"With communications compromised, they hadn't gotten the word from FEMA to let us through," said Gursahaney. "We had some good local maps of the Parish, at least how it was before Katrina, and we found a back road where the authorities at the checkpoint were more accommodating. We sort of felt our way along among the debris and washed out roadways."

Within a few hours the team found the location where the mobile E9-1-1 system would be "hooked-up" to a building in Belle Chase, LA. But many more challenges lay ahead. Bell South was still trying to get enough lines operational to "plug" into the 9-1-1 system. On top of that MicroAutomation had been told to equip the trailer with PRI switching equipment and software. Bell South workers on site told MicroAutomation they would need Centralized Automatic Message Accounting Circuits (CAMA), instead.

This new compatibility conflict forced the team to make some on the fly "fixes" that would have made McGyver proud. "We called back to our offices in Virginia and had them configure a new computer with software that would be CAMA compatible," indicated Gursahaney. "They overnight expressed it to Baton Rouge, as that was the closest point anyone could deliver anything. We drove out, picked it up and brought it back to the trailer. After a number of hours of work and rewiring major portions of the system throughout the trailer, we were able to convert to CAMA."

On September 26, less than a month after the disaster, the system was put online and began taking emergency calls. Placquemines Parish residents and employees returned to begin their personal clean-ups. The mobile E9-1-1 trailer is still in use three months later and is as dependable as any permanent building system in the country.

Based on the success of the solution, FEMA is considering buying four additional mobile E9-1-1 trailers and deploying them around the country so they can be available on a moments notice to be transported to a disaster site. "If the trailer was already built-out and available when Katrina hit we probably would have been operational two weeks earlier, concluded Stauffer.

MicroAutomation
CUSTOMER CONTACT SOLUTIONS

MicroAutomation Sales and Marketing
10550 Linden Lake Plaza
Manassas, VA 20109

Telephone: 1-800-817-2771
Fax: 703-366-3850

Email: marketing@microaut.com
Website: www.microaut.com

Emergency Systems Magazine, December 2005