

CASE STUDY

Niagara County Emergency Services



It's the middle of the night and there's a cloud coming out of a chemical plant. Jim Volkosh needs to know what chemicals are involved, their composition and properties, the layout of the building, where the nearest fire hydrant is, and, most importantly, the level of danger to his team and to the community. And he needs to know it *now*.

Volkosh is Director of Emergency Services for Niagara County Emergency Services (NCES), managing the region's hazmat operations, 911, emergency services, and fire coordination and investigation. His dedicated team of 12 employees and 85 volunteers handles everything from tanker rollovers to chemical plant fires in a jurisdiction that runs the gamut from urban to suburban to rural.

Key challenges.

Volkosh's job is all about making quick and informed decisions, with an emphasis on *informed*. Until recently, he and his team used cell phones, faxes, and UHF radio to communicate. For crucial technical information, they relied on bulky hazmat manuals that were a challenge to keep current and other printed materials that were not readily available in the field.

"Obtaining real-time information on the scene was difficult, if not impossible," Volkosh said. His team often had to wait for information to be faxed to the office and then driven to the site, a process not suited to the fast pace demanded by emergency services.

Solution.

Volkosh originally met with Verizon Wireless to upgrade the agency's two landlines to smartphones. During that discussion, it became clear that NCES would benefit from mobile, high-speed Internet access. Volkosh was offered a PC Card to trial with Verizon Wireless Mobile Broadband service. "Once we plugged it in, we were sold," he said. "It gave us unimaginable amounts of flexibility."

All NCES notebooks now contain PC Cards with Mobile Broadband service, providing the users with reliable high-speed access to the Internet, intranets, quick messaging, and email, and the change has been profound.

With Mobile Broadband service, said Volkosh, he can find out what his team is up against without using additional manpower, and provide them with the information they need in potentially risky situations. "We can log in to the e-plan of a building and find out what chemicals are stored there and where they're stored," he said. "We can get into the county system and find aerial shots, building plans, and 360-degree views. We can even communicate with people inside, without them being verbal, which could be very useful in emergency situations."

And, he adds, Verizon Wireless provides more reliable coverage than other wireless carriers. "We never have to worry about 'dead spots,'" he said.

NIAGARA COUNTY EMERGENCY SERVICES

Company description:

Niagara County Emergency Services (NCES) provides hazmat operations, 911, emergency services, and fire coordination and investigation to 225,000 residents in northwestern New York State.

Challenge:

- Needed a way to quickly access the Internet, email, and county intranet.
- Needed better, faster communication.
- Wanted to cut down on time and effort spent updating paper files.

Solution:

- Team members now have Verizon Wireless Mobile Broadband service on their notebooks, providing, high-speed access to the Internet, email, instant messaging, and county intranets.
- Crews no longer need to rely on paper-based information.

Results:

- Decreased emergency response time.
- Increased crew and public safety.
- Improved efficiency.
- Reduced paper use and clutter.



Results.

With high-speed wireless Internet access, Volkosh and his team can now get the information they need, on-site, in real-time, which has radically cut down their response time. "Analysis that took hours before is now cut down to minutes," he said.

The information they get is also more up to date, which means he can send his people into situations knowing exactly what they're facing. "And that's what hazmat is all about," said Volkosh, "knowing what you're facing."

Having access to maps and directory information has also boosted NCEs's efficiency by getting vehicles from point A to point B more quickly, and the addition of instant messaging and mobile email makes communication faster and easier.

And Volkosh is certain that NCEs's use of Mobile Broadband service will continue to expand. "We haven't even come close to discovering everything it can do for us," he said. "Use of this type of resource in the emergency service environment is only limited by the imagination of the user."

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**JIM VOLKOSH,
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