May 22, 2003

We've fallen and we can't get up!

It wasn't a heart attack. It wasn't an illness.

This time it was a terrorist attack, a chemical spill, a biological attack, or a radiological incident.

What now?

Welcome to the world of our First Responders. The people we look to for help and guidance in an emergency situation. Our fire fighters, police officers, and military that are the first to arrive on the scene of an unfolding drama. A drama that could unexpectedly turn deadly in a moments notice. A drama that requires incredible coordination and communication to keep things under control. Our First Responders need accurate information and they need it fast. They need to be able to make appropriate decisions that could save both your life and theirs. They need to keep the small events small and the large ones under control.

The fundamental methods of how we accomplish this are, in theory, quite simple. Our cell phones and wireless home/office network connections give us a tiny glimpse as to how this might be done. However, in designing such a system, our Emergency Responders don't have the time for the "can you hear me now?" test. The system must work, it must work well, and it must not suffer from the congestion problems that we had on 9/11.

First Responders use equipment that can be quite intimidating and time consuming in its setup and use. The decisions that determine which equipment to use are oftentimes based on limited information such as a radio call reporting a spill or suspicious fire. More often than not, no information has been given and only visual assessments are available. It is also possible the only information available is from the television news.

We are all witness to the wave of technological advancements in the computer and cell phone industry. The same can not be said for the safety and security industry. In many cases large, heavy, antiquated equipment is used or the responder must fall back on the use of time consuming raw science (chemistry or biology). Until recently, responders had to isolate affected areas, acquire samples, and/or physical evidence. Then they had to transport the evidence to a laboratory for evaluation, and wait for the results before proceeding. This process takes time and money to accomplish.

Prime examples of staggering investigation costs are the closing of postal facilities or airport terminal evacuations. These events can last anywhere from several hours to several days, and happen with alarming frequency. Whereas we might be able to get some idea as to costs associated with responders, (Fire, Police, HAZMAT, FBI and many others are typically involved in such an event), it is almost impossible to quantify the "cost" of the event with regards to the time and inconvenience of those affected both directly and indirectly.

Imagine yourself driving to work with coffee in hand when you see an over turned truck in the middle of the road. The first thing you notice is the Hazard Placard on the back of the vehicle. You see Liquid running out of the back, smell an odor coming through the vents of your car and feel your eyes starting to burn. You grab your cell phone and call 911 and try not to panic. You

know that when our first responders come everything will be alright. Will you be? Are our first responders equipped to handle this situation?

Now, welcome to the world of computer technology, sensors, detectors, wireless data, audio and video. Monitoring devices which are capable of keeping our First Responders safe, while at the same time making their jobs easier. These monitoring technologies could easily make the difference in a life or death situation. Whether this equipment is a hazardous material suit or a radiation detector, it all fits under the category of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). Personal protective equipment is equipment that gives responders a technological edge when assessing a threatening situation.

There exists today a cost effective, wireless solution that can provide our first responders with the security and communication abilities they need to be safe and effective. A system that can take information gathered from various monitoring devices like gas or radiation readings, pictures, or video and relay it immediately out to the proper agencies so that informed decisions can be made quickly. Giving our responders the ability to be proactive and not reactive. Life saving decisions made now.

Many say that if a problem exists, technology will find a way to repair it. Well, the technology does exist, and industry is producing it. Now it's time for the decision makers to use it. Our First Responders have the right to have the tools that saves lives, time and money. Technology has gone way beyond the old "canary in the coal mine" scenario. We must NOT allow our Military to use pigeons as monitoring devices. As that old cartoon featuring Dasturdly and Muttley stated we must "Stop that Pigeon". We must provide the people who are in charge of saving lives with more than just words. We must provide them with the necessary equipment to do so.

Richard A. Matthew
Associate Professor, School of Social Ecology, University of California Irvine
Director, The Center for Unconventional Security Affairs

Jonathan Hall
Officer LAPD Hazardous Materials Unit
Board of Experts for The Center for Unconventional Security Affairs

David M. Lamensdorf
President, Safe Environment Engineering, Inc
Member Advisory Committee, The Center for Unconventional Security Affairs