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Red Cross Test Wireless Technology to Speed Relief to Disaster Victims

Story by Melanie Sanders

Tuesday, July 01, 2008 — In the wake of any disaster, getting accurate information about damage can't happen fast enough.

As Iowa families affected by tornadoes and floods begin to rebuild their lives, they are turning to the American Red Cross to give them the jumpstart they need. The Red Cross, in turn, is looking to technology to quickly identify where help is needed most.

Traditionally, trained Red Cross volunteers have driven through devastated areas, filling out paper "street sheets" by hand, recording the location and extent of disaster damage to homes.

In Iowa, one disaster assessment team is field-testing a paperless system. They are recording their findings on GPS-enabled handheld computers which automatically upload data and photos from the field straight into a central computer. The system eliminates time consuming data entry from paper sheets, and possible errors that can arise from illegible handwriting or misread maps.

When the system is fully operational, it will allow Red Cross workers to talk with disaster victims in a service center about their disaster-related needs while looking at digital pictures and information gathered just minutes earlier at the resident's address.

"This doesn't change the nature of the information we collect – that still depends on trained volunteers eyeballing every home and assessing the degree of disaster damage," said Mike Harman, a volunteer from Bolivar, Mo., who is heading the Red Cross disaster assessment effort in Iowa. "This lets us capture the information digitally and get it over to the (Red Cross) client casework folks immediately."

The system, from Global Relief Technologies in Portsmouth, N.H., will help the Red Cross give emergency assistance more quickly and tailored even more precisely to each family's needs.

"Earlier this week, I heard a caseworker talking to a woman who had been flooded out, but (the caseworker) wasn't certain how bad the flooding was," said Eddie Fitzgerald, project manager for Global Relief Technologies.



Red Cross volunteers test new technology to speed emergency assistance to disaster victims.
Photos by Virginia Webb

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"I was able to pull up the information on that house on the computer and show (the caseworker) a picture of this woman's home with four feet of water around it. That's all that was needed to help (provide) the woman with a place to stay for a few days until she could find a new place to live."

Fitzgerald demonstrated the technology by tapping a few screens with a stylus, choosing from pre-set menus of damage descriptions and then snapping a photo before hitting the "upload" button. A look at the laptop computer next to him showed the information popping up in the Web-based database a minute later. "It's as easy as that," Fitzgerald said.

Global Relief Technologies, which specializes in creating technology especially for emergency responders and humanitarian organizations, has been working with the Red Cross for about a year. The company assigned three staff to accompany the Red Cross volunteers as they field test and refine the system in eastern Iowa.

If all goes well, the Red Cross hopes to roll out the technology on disaster operations over the next year.

"We've definitely validated the concept here," said John Hansen, a Red Cross volunteer from the Triangle Area Chapter in Raleigh, N.C., who is leading the team trying out the new system.

"Universally, everyone on the team thinks this works great. We don't want to go back to the street sheets," he said. Next to him, a fellow volunteer clutched one of the handheld computers protectively and nodded vigorously in agreement.

About the American Red Cross:

The American Red Cross shelters, feeds and counsels victims of disasters; provides nearly half of the nation's blood supply; teaches lifesaving skills; and supports military members and their families. The Red Cross is a charitable organization – not a government agency – and depends on volunteers and the generosity of the American public to perform its humanitarian mission. For more information, please visit <http://www.redcross.org/> or join our blog at <http://www.redcrosschat.org/>.



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